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In the Footsteps of Elie Wiesel

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Growing up, my Jewish father and Catholic mother never lost the chance to impress upon me and my siblings the importance of tolerance, and of speaking up in situations where we witnessed discrimination or injustice. When I first heard about the Holocaust, I was horrified, and that feeling only increased every time I heard the emotion in my parents’ voices as they spoke of the six million Jewish deaths. But even for a self described compassionate and sensitive teenager, it took traveling over the Atlantic Ocean to Europe for me to finally understand what it means to leave six million stories untold.

Over Thanksgiving break of 2006, I rushed to complete my application and essay for the program “In the Footsteps of Elie Wiesel,” sponsored by the Echo Foundation of Charlotte. Two months and one interview later, I received a letter saying that I had been chosen as one of twelve student ambassadors to participate in this extraordinary program.

I was overwhelmed. The prospect of meeting Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, author of *Night* and countless other works, and a survivor of the concentration camps, was daunting. Then there was my excitement at the fact that I would be embarking on a twelve-day journey through Europe to see places that were crucial in Wiesel's life and in the story of the Holocaust.

In March, I met Elie Wiesel in Charlotte. I shook hands with him, and with the eleven other ambassadors, I asked him questions and listened to his answers. His voice resonated as he responded, each time saying something so poignant and profound that it was impossible not to pay attention with every fiber. But we had only begun our journey.

Less than three months later, in mid-July, we took off from Charlotte-Douglas International Airport. Sitting on the plane that day, I tried to imagine what I would feel on this journey. I knew what I, in all my naïveté, wanted: to see the world through the eyes of Wiesel, to feel his pain and to cry his tears. Perhaps I thought that if I were to suffer as he had, I could take away all of that grief from him and from all of the victims. At the same time, I was grounded by reality: How could I even hope to comprehend the enormity of such a tragedy?

We arrived in Europe with a carefully devised itinerary. We would visit Sighet, Romania, where Wiesel was born; Krakow, our gateway for a bus ride to Auschwitz-Birkenau; Paris, where Wiesel spent time after World War II; and finally Berlin, to see the synagogues and memorials that represent the survival and the revival of the Jewish faith. I was prepared to cry at Auschwitz, and I had my journal and pen ready to record my emotions. But when those feelings actually hit me, they were like merciless waves, crashing down when I least expected it.

The first time it happened – the first time I was hit by the power that is emotion,

pure and unanticipated – I was sitting on a bench in the garden of Wiesel's childhood home. We had finished touring his house, and we paused to reflect and write in our journals. Sitting amidst the serenity of this garden, separated from the car engines and city voices by a wall enclosing the area, I realized what Wiesel had lost.

In one room, near the window, there was a large radio set atop a smaller table. Our tour guide told us that, unlike some other pieces of furniture in the house, both of these items were the exact same ones that had been in Elie Wiesel's home so many years ago. Standing in this room, I could see Wiesel and his family gathered around the radio. I could see all six of them -- Wiesel, his parents, and his three sisters -- with remarkable clarity. They were huddled close together, anxiously awaiting news about events abroad and even within Sighet. And with every piece of information that they could hear through the static, I saw them alternately rejoicing and sighing with equal passion.

I define myself in large part by my family, by my friends, by my community – their beliefs and their guidance, their encouragement and their reproaches. But for Wiesel, none of this was allowed to exist after Sighet. Life itself did not exist beyond the subjection enforced by uniformed men, and the number that was a feeble attempt at replacing a name.

Only a few days later, we visited Auschwitz-Birkenau, which triggered emotions I had not known before. Even now, the camps seem to mock us, for there is no way to express the emotion of such a place through words. Standing on the railroad tracks which led so many to their deaths, staring at the rows of barracks, I could not comprehend my own feelings. My only choice was to walk, to put one foot in front of the other, until I was far enough away from everyone that I could finally cry uncontrollably, for the lives that were lost and the lives that were ruined, for those who died as well as those who had to face the fact that they lived.

But after I had experienced so much sadness, I was able to rejoice also. There was an attempt to extinguish the Jews, and so many others as well. It was a massive failure. The Jewish faith, as much now as ever, possesses richness and intrigue and strength. The Jewish people today embody spirit and life. And while nothing will ever bear sufficient witness to this tragedy, countless memorials and memoirs recall what has happened.

On my journey, I learned one lesson that surpasses all else. It was a simple lesson, one Wiesel has preached over and over again, yet one I had to experience to truly learn: "We must remember." Memory is, after all, the first step in avoiding the cyclical nature of history. Only our collective memory of the past has the potential to ensure that no such crime against humanity can ever be committed again.

Memory, however, is only the beginning of the process. Memory combined with apathy or a sense of complacency is nothing, or worse. But memory with action is powerful. As people, we are condemned if we know the horrors brought about by our collective indifference and yet continue in our passivity. After learning about the events caused by our failure to act, it is only right that we should seize the opportunity to spread this awareness to others.

Even as a high school student, I can teach. I can write, I can speak, I can listen, and I can offer to help even when it is inconvenient for me. I can show my own commitment to preventing and combating injustice through both what I do and what I avoid doing, what I say and the words that I leave unspoken. And yet, even with so many ways to bring about the change that I envision, it is a difficult and daunting task.

My rational side tells me that it is impossible for me to do anything of note. In my

mind, an older, worldlier version of myself stands next to me, beating in the fact that I am only one person. I don't have the ability to make a difference. Perhaps I don't even have the right.

But then, the five-year-old me, a radiant and optimistic girl, fantasies of rainbows and bluebirds in her mind, rises up on my other side. Untainted by the evil of injustice and suffering, she spins around in circles, reminding me of a different vision of the world.

And while change might start with one person, it never ends with one. Rather, change, and the desire and will to cause it, can become inevitable. I know, because through my experiences with The Echo Foundation, I have been imbued with an undying and almost compulsive aspiration to fight injustice.

For now, I do not expect to see the results of my actions, catalogued and concrete. Instead, all I want is to share what I have seen and cause a few others to feel what I feel.

I want to keep alive that little girl in me – who believes in a better world and the power of one person to make a difference.