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Some insights in the words of Elie Wiesel

Nobel Peace laureate talks of 'toxic' politics, indifference and the need to be responsible.

By Tim Funk

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Elie Wiesel was in Charlotte for a speech and the premiere of "In the Footsteps of Elie Wiesel," a documentary of Wiesel and 12 Charlotte students who traveled to Europe.
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Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace laureate and Holocaust survivor, met Wednesday morning with a group of Observer reporters and editors.

He was in Charlotte for a Tuesday night event sponsored by the Echo Foundation, a group founded in 1997 to do projects that echo his message of standing up against indifference.

In an hourlong series of questions and answers, Wiesel spoke at the Observer about everything from his years as a foreign correspondent to his daily ritual as a writer of books to the "ugliness" of political discourse in the United States today.

Among other subjects covered: religion, helping others, "suicide terrorists," his shame upon visiting a legally segregated South in the 1950s and the inauguration of President Barack Obama as an example of America correcting its own past injustices.

Here's much of what Wiesel said:

On America's toxic political atmosphere: "I made a decision in my early life not to be involved in politics. It's not for me. ... But what I see in America now - not in the printed press, on radio: Rush Limbaugh, a certain Glenn Beck. The way they speak. To call Obama Hitler. Don't they



understand that analogy is a two-way street? If Obama is Hitler, then Hitler was nothing but Obama. Why do they do it? How can they get away with that? That's what I call ugly. Obscene. I don't belong to any political party. But I cannot take that. It's a falsification of history, it's a perversion of anything beautiful. ... If you're in the opposition, do your duty. But on a certain level. Don't go down to the gutter."

On good possibilities in the United States: "Obama invited me to the inauguration. It was one of the great days in my life. To be there ... Being in Washington, I had the feeling that history was trying to correct its own injustices. Now I think that, maybe one day, my son or grandson will come here for the same reason, the inauguration of the first Jewish president of the United States. If this (election of Obama, a black man) is possible, everything good is possible."

On why 'Night' has endured: "I don't know why (his 1958 book, 'Night,' has been so popular for so long). Maybe because it's so small. Also, times have changed. In the beginning, there were no courses. They didn't teach the Holocaust. ... Now, there are many books on the subject. The first books were theologians. Then psychologists and psychiatrists. Every discipline responded in its own way. Somehow "Night" - to me, it's a wonder why."

On his writing ritual: "I get up very early in the morning (to write). I write every day except Sabbath and the Jewish holidays. I write every book three times. The first (draft) is always long ... and I don't give up a manuscript until I begin another one."

On his credo: "I would like to appease those who are disturbed and disturb those are appeased."

On truth: "The smile of a child has more truth than all the books of all the philosophers in the world."

On faith: "(Children ask him) mainly about my faith. In 'Night,' I have harsh words with God. ... (Today), I go to a synagogue and I pray ... and why do I do that? That's what they want to know. ... I answer them: I had all the reasons in the world to abandon God, but I don't. I rebel against God from inside faith. I don't divorce God. ... I call it a wounded faith."

On the South: "(As a journalist visiting the South in the 1950s) I saw racism, not only functionally, but being the law. The law! For the first time in my life, I felt shame for being white. As a Jew, I had never felt shame. Later, I went to South Africa for a lecture, and saw apartheid. Same thing. ... And (now) here we are. We have Obama as president. America has done something to itself - correcting its own injustices. Does that mean there are no more racists? There are racists. But it's not the law."

On his reading choices: "I (read) the classics - to the distant past and the medieval past. Those books have survived. There was some reason for them to survive. So many didn't. ... So, I still try to search for the depth in Dostoyevsky, the quest for beauty in Tolstoy."

On the new warfare: "For years already, I've been waging a campaign against suicide terror. ... The suicide terrorist doesn't want to die. If that's what he wants, he can throw himself under a train or take an overdose. He wants to kill. He knows that to kill more, he kills himself. ... The

new war is suicide terror. ... Let's declare suicide terror a crime against humanity. It won't prevent suicide killings. But (it could indict) the accomplices. This is the worst crime. No statute of limitations. Mandatory extradition."

On fanaticism: "Fanaticism in the Middle Ages was religious. Then it became political, with the capital Moscow, the racial capital Berlin. Now we're going back to the Middle Ages again. Religious fanaticism. All the suicide terrorists come from religious background. Look, religion is like love: It depends what you do with it. It can be the noblest of all things; it can be the worst of all things."

On the need to educate: "In my view, journalists are educators. You take your missions seriously - I'm sure of that. Be educators. It's a noble profession."

On religions: "I never believed that the Jew is better than the Christian or the Muslim or the Buddhist."

On the need to quest: "Do you really know what you seek for yourself in life? Try to find out. What is really your inner goal in life? The quest in itself is important and beneficial. I like the word quest because there is quest in question."

On the need to be responsible for one another: "Sometimes I'm asked what do I see as the lesson from (the Holocaust), that period of total darkness. I say, 'Look, I don't know the response to these existential questions. But I do know one thing: There is response in responsibility. Whatever we do, we must feel responsible for one another.'"