

Open Yourself to the Words of Simon Wiesenthal

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In this world, prejudices are thriving between the ears of blindfolded people. Prejudice. A parasite that is only allowed to survive when it's host does not open its eyes and heart and really take a look at the big picture.

As a two-sided person by nature, it is not like me to stand on one side of an issue without a slight understanding about why I would ever stand on the other side. However, when it comes to the Holocaust my brain- or perhaps it is my heart- will not allow me to grasp the reality or rationale behind such a horrific time period. However, within the stories of the victims and survivors, gray areas arise.

At age 36, Simon Wiesenthal, a Jewish man, was released from the Mauthausen concentration camp. Though he was liberated, there was no stopping this man from fighting back. Up until his death on September 20, 2005, Wiesenthal hunted Nazi war criminals; the men and women responsible for the millions of Jews who were executed during the time of Hitler ("Simon Wiesenthal" 87).

Wiesenthal's life experiences are nothing short of extraordinary. In an excerpt from a writing called The Sunflower, published in the Literary Cavalcade in January 1998, he writes of one S.S. soldier's life-altering experience.

Hundreds of Jews were filed into a house of locked doors and stifling heat. With no way out, the soldiers, who were safe on the outside, threw live hand grenades through the windows. They watched as the innocent people on the inside met their fiery demise.

The S.S. soldier explains to Wiesenthal, "Behind the windows of the second floor, I saw a man with a small child in his arms. His clothes were alight. By his side stood a woman, doubtless the mother of the child. With his free hand the man covered the child's eyes... then he jumped into the street. Seconds later the mother followed. Then from the other windows fell burning bodies..." (Wiesenthal 20).

As I read the experiences of the people who were slaughtered, I became distressed because of the innocence that was lost. It is the least I can do to cry for those who have lived through what I can only imagine. Empathy is part of growth and understanding.

In Wiesenthal's story, the S.S. soldier, with his dying breath, begs Wiesenthal for his clemency. Wiesenthal, in his tattered rags (for he was only summoned from the concentration camp and was not yet free), stands over the bed and faces a decision. Should he forgive a man who murdered hundreds of people? A man who helped destroy nearly an entire population of people?

The soldier said, "In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him... without your answer I cannot die in peace" (Wiesenthal 23).

Wiesenthal's response was this, "Here was a dying man-a murderer who did not want to be a murderer but who had been made into a murderer by a murderous ideology. He was confessing his crime to man who perhaps tomorrow must die at the hands of these same murderers" (Wiesenthal 22).

"Two men who had never known each other had been brought together for a few hours by Fate. One asks the other for help. But the other was himself helpless and able to do nothing for him. (...) At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room" (Wiesenthal 30).

Wiesenthal abandoned the man's bedside that night without uttering any words of pardon; he left me with an intriguing question. In the same situation, what would I have done? It should be a black or white situation, right? But, the question still lingers in my brain.

My initial response was that, yes, I would have forgiven the man. He suffered. He knew that he did wrong. He deserved to die in peace.

Black.

That is when the other part of my brain came in. That S.S. soldier stood by and watched as people were burned alive in a house. He heard the screams. He was a murderer.

One man- Hitler- said, and made millions of people believe, that there were a "higher people." One man claimed that if you were of a certain religion, or had a certain skin color, you were a *subhuman*. I type the word and I have to clench my teeth. *Subhuman?!*

How could I ever forgive somebody for thinking in that way?

White.

Wiesenthal proved his moral courage by following his heart. He did not stray from his true beliefs and feelings, because he had a firm grasp on those concepts. I wish I could say the same about myself, but all I see is the gray.

My brain is fighting with my heart. I have no answer to Wiesenthal's question. I am of an upper-middle class, Caucasian, Catholic family, and I do not know what it is like for those who have been judged, cursed, spat on, and killed because of the things they could not help.

I am aware of it though; which brings me to my point. Being educated on subjects like the Holocaust is more important than what the history books imply. Reading the true stories, observing the real faces, and attempting to endure the real pain will help us better understand that racism and prejudices have the potential to awaken the killer the lies inside of any given person.

Moral courage dwells in the heart, but it develops with knowledge. This is why we have to take our hearts into our own hands and show it to our brain; so we can recognize when history is about to repeat itself. Black, white, gay, straight, Catholic, Jew... we are all people. We all are worthy to be looked at with open eyes and erudite minds. And those who disagree do not deserve to gaze upon the true beauty of equality.

Works Cited

Wiesenthal, Simon. "The Sunflower." *Literary Cavalcade* 50.4 (1998): 16-23,30.

"Simon Wiesenthal." *People*. 3 October 2005: 87.