Night- Lecture Series

Section one-Religion and Beliefs.

In the beginning of the memoir*, Night,* we see Elie as a deeply religious young man. “Why do I pray? Why do I breath?” We can infer that Elie believes strongly in Judaism. However, many of us know that it is easy to believe in something when it stands unopposed. The real challenge comes when conflict is introduced into a situation. Only then, can our true beliefs and values bubble to the surface. For example, you may preach to your friends the importance of not bullying others in and out of school. This is all good. However, your true worth or your true beliefs are shown in a more practical situation. What happens if your best friend is tormenting a student you do not know? Do you step in and correct the situation or do you go along with friend, for the sake of friendship? If you choose to go along with the situation you can accurately assess that you do not have that strong of beliefs in anti-bullying….It is like the athlete who wants the glory, yet will not put in any extra time in the gym.

Follow Elie throughout the memoir. How does he struggle with his God, with his religion? Would it be difficult to believe in a higher power when babies are being thrown into fires? Many believe in a higher power because it gives order and purpose to what we do here on Earth. We can make sense of things using religion to guide us. For example, the 10 commandments handed down by Moses on Mt. Sinai. The commandments are found in the book of Exodus, which is one of the books studied by the Jewish people in the Old Testament. #6 You Shall Not Murder, #7 You Shall Not Commit Adultery, #8 You Shall Not Steal. These rules or laws help us make sense of our world. They can guide us. They give us rationale for the choices we make. But what sense can we make of such chaos, such evil as found in *Night*? How can there be a God when pure evil is everywhere? What sense can we make of that? Elie is presented with a spiritual crisis. The belief in God as the almighty ruler had never been questioned until now. These new reflections on God are an inversion of what Elie thought to be his reality.

Stylistic Choices.

Elie, uses short, simple, stylistic choices. He has dwindled the memoir down from thousands of pages. The effect this has on us, the reader, is that Elie has not wasted any breath, any effort in his choices. We are glued to the book and his life. Wiesel also utilizes juxtaposition. That is, placing two things side by side that are not normally compared. For example, “An open tomb…A summer sun” (pg. 17). By doing this, Elie evokes dark, dangerous images in a rather normal day, a normal life. We must remember that the holocaust did not happen in some apocalyptic era where snakes ruled the world. Rather, it happened just like any other day happened. This makes it even harder to stomach. Really, it could happen again.

The people of Sighet have many opportunities to leave the town before they are deported. Yet, they choose not to leave. Naivety plays a huge factor in their decisions, for they really did not know what lay ahead. Indeed, it would be difficult to believe that humans were capable of such cruelties. (Burning bodies, shooting babies, clubbing old woman and cripples) These all seem so un-human to us. As Elie puts it, “the ghetto was neither ruled by German or Jew: It was ruled by delusion” (DELUSION: The belief in something despite contradictory events or reality.)

“At last, at one o’clock in the afternoon came the signal to leave. There was joy, yes, joy. People must have thought there could be no greater torment in God’s hell than that of being stranded here, on the sidewalk, among the bundles, in the middle of the street under a blazing sun. Anything seemed preferable to that.” Our reality is shaped by our circumstance. Often our circumstance is not within our choice but is rather pre-determined. My friends and I often like to joke each other about our ‘first world problems’. Perhaps my meal was slightly cold at the restaurant, perhaps I was stuck in traffic for ten minutes, or perhaps scraping the windshield of my car due to frost in the morning. These are issues of circumstance. Our reality is based upon our situation. Follow Elie Wiesels reality and how it is changed and shaped as Eli’s circumstances change from bad to worse to dire. How does he cope with these changes? How would you cope with these changes? Things to keep in mind as we continue the memoir.

“Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my god and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I condemned to live as long as God himself. Never.

Section 3- After Elie and his father have just survived the first selection at Birkenau.

**Wiesel introduces the theme of spiritual crisis and loss of faith in God. This, of course, contrasts between Elie as a boy in Sighet. “Why do I pray…why do I breath?” Elie’s life in Sighet was one of deep religious reflection and prayer-it just was- is a sort of way of describing Elie in his boyhood. The belief in God as the almighty ruler had never been questioned until now. These new reflections on God are an inversion of what Elie thought to be his reality.**

How can God exist when there is so much cruelty and destruction in the world?

Wiesel struggles with this as he witnesses the young boy hanging from a rope, struggling for survival for 30 minutes until his body goes lifeless and limp. How can God exist in these times?

What are the implications of a Godless world?

People will become selfish. The idea of survival on this world, this life, becomes the main concern. It is essentially all that matters. We can see this at various moments throughout the novel…the march to Gleiwitz where if you stopped running you would be trampled to death, without any concern, the concern being that of survival.

Fear. Fear in the uncontrollable. This life is all that matters. Yet, without believe, faith, hope we begin to fear the end. We can start to make poor or evil decisions simply based on the here and now. The implications for evil are no longer bound to a higher power. If a selfish decision is made it is made because there is advantages to that decision…not because it is helping someone else. The immediate now becomes the essential and only thing that is precious.

However, despite this spiritual crisis, Elie cannot fully abandon his God. “To live as long as God himself” Just as Elie can never forget that night in Birkenau HE CANNOT forget his God.

Human nature can normalize the ‘unnormal’. That is, what can seem like an extremely tragic circumstance can become ‘part of our routine’ easily. For example, a teenager who is physically abused at home. This can be done for years and is now the expected behavior. To contrast, a teenager who is beaten for the first time; this could prove to be extremely unusual and even more demoralizing. In Night, we can see the Holocaust being normalized. Eating very little, shoveling the dead into the crematoriums, sleeping 3 in a bunk-these are the now normal behaviors of holocaust victims. What does this tell us about human nature? Are we so selfish for survival that we will rationalize anything in order to survive? Are we so pathetic that we cannot or will not stand up to those that control/dominate us? Or rather, is our human spirit so strong that it takes a great deal of stress to break us?