Oprah Talks to Elie Wiesel

He's a man who's lived through hell without ever hating. Who's been exposed to the most depraved aspects of human nature but still manages to find love, to believe in God, to experience joy.

He's one of the people I most respect: Elie Wiesel. After I first read his memoir *Night* seven years ago, I was not the same—you can't be the same after hearing how Elie, at age 15, survived the horror of the Holocaust death camps. Through his eyes, we witness the depths of both human cruelty and human grace—and we're left grappling with what remains of Elie, a teenage boy caught between the two. I gain courage from his courage.

The story—and especially that number, six million—numbs us: A Jew hater named Adolf Hitler rises to power in Germany, the world goes to war in 1939, and when the showdown is over six years later, the tyrant has slaughtered six million Jews. *Six million*. Inconceivable. We see footage of the concentration camps, the gas chambers, the gallows. Yet words like *Holocaust* and *Auschwitz* are still abstractions—seemingly impossible until we see photos of someone who was there. A face. Eyes. Hair. Prison numbers tattooed into an arm. A real person like Elie Wiesel who, 55 years ago, made it through the atrocity.

"How could you live through the Holocaust and not be bitter?" I ask Elie. At 72, he emanates quiet strength; with his strong handgrip, it's as if he's saying, "I assure you—I am alive." We sit across from each other at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Manhattan, where hundreds come to see evidence of what happened to the Jewish people. Thousands already know Elie Wiesel's name—he is a prolific writer, a professor at Boston University and an activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986—but I want him to take me back to the time when living to tell the story was the last thing that mattered to him. I wanted to know:

"What does it take to be normal again, after having your humanity stripped away by the Nazis?"

"What is abnormal is that I am normal," he says. "That I survived the Holocaust and went on to love beautiful girls, to talk, to write, to have toast and tea and live my life—that is what is abnormal."

"Why didn't you go insane?"

"To this day," he says, "that is a mystery to me."

And a miracle. In 1944, during World War II, Elie, his parents, his three sisters—and his 15,000 Jewish neighbors in Sighet, Hungary—were captured by the Nazis, put into cattle cars and shipped off to concentration camps at Auschwitz, Buna, Birkenau and Buchenwald. Within an hour of walking through the gates of Auschwitz, Elie was separated from his mother and sisters—but he held close to his father. "I had one thought," Elie writes in his memoir *Night*. "Not to lose him. Not to be left alone." He wasn't. In the coming months, Elie and his father survived together—they witnessed the hangings, escaped the human ovens and endured the hatred of the Nazis. The horror of the camps was unreal. On his first night in Auschwitz, Elie saw German soldiers throwing Jewish babies into a fire, then pinched his face to be sure that he wasn't dreaming. "For a long time," he says, "I wondered, Did I see that? I sometimes doubt my own eyes. In the concentration camps, we discovered this whole universe where everyone had his place. The killer came to kill, and the victims came to die."

And so began some hard questions for his God: "Where are you now? How can you let this happen?" In 1945, when he witnessed his father's death from dysentery and starvation, he questioned God's silence again—and he decided that he no longer wanted to live.

Yet he did, and in retrospect, he doesn't know why. After he was liberated from Buchenwald in 1945, he and other orphans were sent to France. There, he lived in an orphanage, then later supported himself as a tutor.
and choir director—and he decided that he wanted to live again. He studied literature, philosophy and psychology at the Sorbonne, and in 1952 he became a reporter for a newspaper in Tel Aviv. For ten years after his release, he vowed not to speak of his experience. "I wanted to be sure that the words I was going to use about this event were the proper words," he has said. With the publication of his memoir *Night*, which was translated from French to English in 1960, Elie finally broke his silence. He has since written more than 40 books.

You can’t hear Elie’s story without wondering: “Can he live through that kind of hate and not become a hater? Can he still be capable of love? Can he find any reason to be grateful?” When I talk with Elie about these things, he tells me that he has few answers and many, many questions—yet even in his questions, I hear hope that the human spirit can survive anything. *Anything.*

In our time together, Elie and I talk about how it is possible that he can still believe in the sovereignty of a force bigger than himself, why he has no explanation for his survival in the death camps, and what, five decades after Auschwitz, brings him what he calls real joy.

**Oprah:** There may be no better person than you to speak about living with gratitude. Despite all the tragedy you’ve witnessed, do you still have a place inside you for gratefulness?

**Elie:** Absolutely. Right after the war, I went around telling people, “Thank you just for living, for being human.” And to this day, the words that come most frequently from my lips are thank you. When a person doesn’t have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude.

**Oprah:** Does having seen the worst of humanity make you more grateful for ordinary occurrences?

**Elie:** For me, every hour is grace. And I feel gratitude in my heart each time I can meet someone and look at his or her smile.

**Oprah:** Did you ever hate your oppressors?

**Elie:** I had anger but never hate. Before the war, I was too busy studying [the Bible and the Cabala] to hate. After the war, I thought, "What's the use?" To hate would be to reduce myself.

**Oprah:** In your memoir *Night*, you write of the Hungarian soldiers who drove you from your homes, "It was from that moment that I began to hate them, and that hate is still the only link between us today."

**Elie:** I wrote that, but I didn’t hate. I just felt terribly angry and humiliated. At that point, our disappointment was not with the Germans but with the Hungarians. They had been our neighbors [before they joined forces with the Nazis and captured us]. The moment we left our homes, they became vultures. They came into our house and robbed us of everything. And I was terribly disappointed. I used the word hate because that was the strongest feeling I could imagine having. But when I think about it now, there was no hate in me. I grew up learning that hate destroys the hater as much as its victim. I didn’t hate the Germans, so how can I hate the Hungarians?

**Oprah:** So you don’t hate the Germans?
Elie: I do not hate them. I don’t believe in collective guilt. The children of killers are not killers, but children. And they deserve my affection, my efforts to make them human, to give them a world that is worthy of them. Occasionally, I have students from Germany in my classes, and they are the best students I could have. They go back to Germany, and they become leaders who teach their generation the perils of hatred and the danger of indifference. In any society, fanatics who hate don’t hate only me—they hate you too. They hate everybody. Someone who hates one group will end up hating everyone—and, ultimately, hating himself or herself.

Oprah: On your first night in the camp, you saw babies being thrown into the flames. Can you ever forgive those who killed the children?

Elie: Who am I to forgive? Only the children themselves could forgive. If I forgive, I should do it in their name. Otherwise, it is arrogant.

Oprah: Do Holocaust-like events continue to take place in our world?

Elie: I don’t like to compare one atrocity to another. That would be demeaning to both.

Oprah: It’s an insult to all those who were involved and sacrificed their lives.

Elie: It’s an insult. Every tragedy is unique, just as every human is unique. When a person loses someone dear to her, who am I to say that my tragedy was greater? I have no right. For that person, her tragedy is the greatest in the world—and she is right in thinking so.

Oprah: By becoming a voice for those who are suffering, are you doing what the world did not do for Jews during the Holocaust?

Elie: I’ve gone everywhere, trying to stop so many atrocities: Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia. The least I can do is show the victims that they are not alone. When I went to Cambodia, journalists asked me, "What are you doing here? This is not a Jewish tragedy." I answered, "When I needed people to come, they didn’t. That’s why I am here."

Oprah: Is it our indifference and arrogance that makes us Americans feel that we are the center of the universe—that a mother’s pain after losing her child in Bosnia or Nigeria isn’t as important as our own pain?

Elie: I wouldn’t generalize. There are people in America who are so sensitive. Whenever I meet young Americans abroad, they are there to help. A doctor in New York read a quote of mine that sparked her involvement. Somebody had asked me, "What is the most important commandment in the Bible?" and I said, "Thou shalt not stand idly by." So she packed up her office and went to Macedonia—I met her there.... We cannot free all the prisoners in the world or save all the victims of AIDS, but we can at least show them that we are with them. There is one thing that moves me to anger: the hunger of children. During every minute that you and I talk, Oprah, a child dies of starvation or disease or violence. While we talk!
Oprah: Is children's suffering what makes you the angriest?

Elie: Always—particularly the humiliation of children. That is the worst sin. When somebody humiliates a person or group, it breaks me—I become angry. In my tradition, humiliation is equivalent to murder.

Oprah: That reminds me of the story in your book about how your father was beaten down in the camp.

Elie: The very first night—an hour after our arrival.

Oprah: And isn't it true that to begin with, those who hate others really hate themselves?

Elie: Yes. They need to hate in order to feel superior.

Oprah: Part of what you were feeling was his humiliation, right?

Elie: I was humiliated because my father was helpless. After they beat him, he told me, "It didn't hurt." I should have thrown myself at his tormentor.

Oprah: You would be dead.

Elie: I should have done it anyway. But we were already conditioned not to fight back. In the camps, we discovered this whole universe where everyone had his place. The killer came to kill, and the victim came to die. This universe had its own language, culture, hierarchy, its own princes and madmen. Yet even in all of that, I was grateful to see my father every day. If someone smiled at me, I was grateful. Even in there!

Oprah: What kept you from losing your mind in the camps?

Elie: To this day, that is a mystery to me. After the war, I studied psychiatry, and I still don't know why I didn't lose my mind. I was thinking to myself one day, "Why didn't I go mad?" And when I say I, I mean all of us. In the camps, you could only make it if you were stronger than the others.

Oprah: In Night, you explain that on your first night in the camp when you saw babies being thrown into the flames, you touched your face and thought, "Am I alive? Is this real?"

Elie: For a long time, I wondered, "Did I see that?" Even today, I ask this of myself. I sometimes doubt my own eyes. Years after the war, I checked with friends who had arrived at the camps in those times, and they also saw what I did. But Oprah, there are many things that remain hidden inside you—it takes a special key to open them. For instance, I've been asking myself for the past few months, "What was the worst part of my experience in the camps?" And I realized that it was when my father, who was sick, called out to me—and I didn't respond, because I was afraid to be beaten up. I let him die. That day, my father got his portion of bread, and somebody who saw that he was dying stole his bread. My father wanted me to protect him, but I
couldn't. To this day, I think, "How can a person go through this and not lose his mind?"

Oprah: You and the others in the camp were forced to march by three people who were hanged. And somebody behind you whispered, "Where is God?"

Elie: A voice in me said, "God is there."

Oprah: Where are you and God with each other these days?

Elie: We still have a few problems! But even in the camps, I never divorced God. After the war, I went on praying to God. I was angry. I protested. I'm still protesting—and occasionally, I'm still angry. But it's not because of the past, but the present. When I see victims of a tragedy—and especially children—I say to God, "Don't tell me that you have nothing to do with this. You are everywhere—you are God."

Oprah: Do you think that God lives in the people—and the people stand by and watch the children suffer?

Elie: The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference.

Oprah: Because indifference allows the world to stand by and watch?

Elie: Indifference creates evil.

Oprah: Doesn't hatred create evil?

Elie: Hatred is evil itself. Indifference is what allows evil to be strong, what gives it power.

Oprah: Did you come out of the horror of the Holocaust with your ability to love intact?

Elie: After my liberation, I fell in love with every girl—consecutively. But I would never dare tell a girl that I loved her, because I was timid—and afraid of rejection. I missed so many opportunities because I was afraid to say what I felt. I needed to love more than I needed to be loved. I needed to know that I could love—that after all I had seen, there was love in my heart.

Oprah: Do you remember the day you were released from the camp?

Elie: April 11, 1945. The Americans were close by, and a few days before that, on April 5, the Germans had decided to evacuate all the Jews. Every day, they would evacuate thousands—and most were killed upon leaving. I was in a children's block with other adolescents, and we were left until the end. [But every day we marched to the gate anyway.] I was near the gate more than five times before I was released, and each time, the gate closed just before I came to it.

Oprah: How do you explain that you survived the camps?
Elie: I have no explanation.

Oprah: You—someone who has studied the Talmud, the Cabala—have no explanation?

Elie: Believe me, I have tried to know, but I do not. If it is God, I have problems with that. If he bothered to save me, why couldn't he have saved all the others? There were people worthier than I.

Oprah: Don't you think your survival has something to do with who you've become and what you've said to the world about the Holocaust?

Elie: No, no, no. The price is too high. Because I survived, I must do everything possible to help others.

Oprah: After you were liberated, what did you do?

Elie: The first thing many of us did was reassemble to say a prayer for the dead. Then I went to an orphanage in France. That's when I began to live again. I was reunited with my two sisters by accident. [Wiesel was reunited with his sister Hilda in 1945 in Paris, and then Bea several months later in Antwerp, Belgium.]

Oprah: Did you know your sisters were alive?

Elie: No. When I was still in Buchenwald, I studied the lists of survivors, and my sisters' names were not there. That's why I went to France—otherwise I would have gone back to my hometown of Sighet. In France, a clerk in an office at the orphanage told me that he had talked with my sister, who was looking for me. "That's impossible!" I told him. "How would she even know I am in France?" But he insisted that she'd told him that she would be waiting for me in Paris the next day. I didn't sleep that night. The next day, I went to Paris—and there was my older sister! After our liberation, she had gotten engaged and gone to France, because she thought I was dead too. Then one day she opened the paper and saw my picture [a journalist had come to the orphanage to take pictures and write a story]. If it hadn't been for that, it may have been years before we met. My other sister had gone back to our hometown after our release, thinking that I might be there. It took almost a year [after meeting my other sister] for us to meet again.

Oprah: After living through such an atrocity, was it possible for you to be normal again—to go on with your life?

Elie: What is abnormal is that I am normal. That I survived the Holocaust and went on to love beautiful girls, to talk, to write, to have toast and tea and live my life—that is what is abnormal.

Oprah: How did what you experienced affect the way you reared your son?

Elie: I let my son choose the moment when we would speak about what happened to me. I didn't want to impose—I let him develop his own curiosity. When I traveled, I often took him with me [so he could see what my work was about]. And one day he came to me and said he wanted to go back with me [to my hometown
and the camps.

**Oprah:** How old was your son then?

**Elie:** He had just finished college. I took him and one of my nephews back home to my little town, and I showed them my house. Then we went to Birkenau. That trip was a defining moment in our lives.

**Oprah:** How so?

**Elie:** My son and I talk differently to each other now. It deepened our relationship.

**Oprah:** Because he knows a part of you he hadn't known?

**Elie:** Not because he knows it. He saw it.

**Oprah:** And reading a book could not have helped him see it?

**Elie:** Not even reading my book.

**Oprah:** If a person were to take a train to Auschwitz, would he or she ever be the same after seeing the camp?

**Elie:** You cannot be the same.

**Oprah:** And just by seeing the camps, can any of us ever really know what the Holocaust was like?

**Elie:** I don't think so. Only those who were there know. But we can take you in with us, and you would know more. You would come to the gate, and you would know a lot. But when you've actually experienced it, every cell of your being is different. What we lived through is beyond language. If you and I were to go to the camps right now, you would come out a different person—wounded from seeing and being with someone who was there. At once wounded and enriched.

**Oprah:** And is every person who did survive proof that the human spirit can triumph over anything?

**Elie:** It's hard to say. Some people survived because they wanted to, Oprah. I did not [want to survive]. As long as my father was alive, I wanted to live—but only because of him. After he died, between the end of January and April [of the year we were released], I didn't really live.

**Oprah:** So you became a nonperson?

**Elie:** We were all nonpersons. I wish I could say that I wanted to live to tell the tale. But it wasn't important then.
Oprah: You have no answer for why you went on living?

Elie: I have no answer for anything, really. I have shelves and shelves of books in my apartment, but none of them has answers—only questions. I teach my students how to ask questions. In the word question, there is a beautiful word—quest. I love that word. We are all partners in a quest.

Oprah: And is there an answer for every question?

Elie: The essential questions have no answers. You are my question, and I am yours—and then there is dialogue. The moment we have answers, there is no dialogue. Questions unite people, answers divide them. So why have answers when you can live without them?

Oprah: Elie, do you think all experiences are meant to teach us about ourselves?

Elie: Absolutely.

Oprah: Do you have any regrets about the way you've chosen to live?

Elie: Not doing enough. For example, I wish I had done more for the Palestinian refugees. I regret that.

Oprah: What brings you the greatest joy?

Elie: Besides my family? Seeing a student understand what I say. Real joy is when you can help somebody in need.

Oprah: Do you think that each of us is here to serve others?

Elie: Yes, always. My humanity derives from my efforts with others. If I come close to a beggar, I come closer to God.

Oprah: On the last page in the magazine, I write a column called "What I Know for Sure." Elie, what is it that you know for sure, that you have no doubt about?

Elie: I have no doubt that we are here for a purpose. I have no doubt that the purpose is not only to bring God closer to his creations, but to bring his creations close to one another. I have no doubt that a human being is human simply because he or she is human—and we have no right to say that a poor person is of less value to society than someone who is rich.

Oprah: Yes—simply being born is what gives us worth. This is gooood!

Elie: I have no doubt that education is good for the soul, not only for the mind. I have no doubt that questions have their own magic, their own charm and their own immortality. I have no doubt that faith is only pure when it does not negate the faith of another. I have no doubt that evil can be fought and that
indifference is no option. I have no doubt that fanaticism is dangerous. And of all the books in the world on life, I have no doubt that the life of one person weighs more than them all.