

Balancing Moral Ferocity with Self-Awareness

Grade Level: 9-12

Subjects

Art, English language arts, History, Philosophy, Sociology

Themes

Bearing witness, Curiosity, Moral ferocity, Self-awareness

What Students Will Uncover

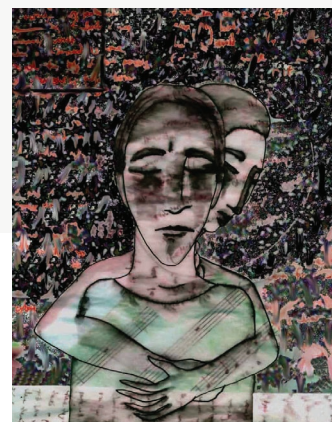
The significance of balancing moral ferocity with self-awareness

Essential Questions

- What inspires moral courage?
- How might we celebrate and value questions?
- How can we balance moral ferocity with self-awareness?

Lesson Overview

Students read an essay, “Learning and Teaching from the Heart in Troubled Times” by Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger, which explores moral courage, the importance of celebrating questions, and ways to galvanize compassionate action during challenging times in our world. Students engage in learning activities to explore the themes of moral ferocity, curiosity, and self-awareness.



COMPANION ESSAY

Learning and Teaching from the Heart in Troubled Times

Materials

- Online access to the essay “[Learning and Teaching from the Heart in Troubled Times](#)”
- [Note-taking sheet](#) (optional)

SDGs



Standards & Frameworks

- [SEL Competencies](#)
- [C3 Framework](#)
- [CCSS ELA Standards](#)

Key Issue

Questioning the world and ourselves can foster curiosity and the capacity to develop empathy and moral courage.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Understand the importance of valuing questions.
- Illustrate how literature can mirror society.
- Recognize how moral courage can become an applied value in one's life.

Background

Putting the Essay in Context

This section is intended for the educator and provides information about authors and educators Ariel Burger and Elie Wiesel.

“Learning and Teaching From the Heart in Troubled Times” is an essay by Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger, author, teacher, artist, and former apprentice to Elie Wiesel. Ideas for this essay originate from Ariel’s book, *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel’s Classroom*, which explores what it means to authentically participate in moral teaching and learning. The book serves “as a moral education in itself—a primer on educating against indifference, on the urgency of memory and individual responsibility, and on the role of literature, music, and art in making the world a more compassionate place.”^[1] Ariel weaves reflections and insights from Professor Wiesel’s classroom into the essay. Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, author, activist, and Nobel Prize winner, taught a course titled “Literature of Memory”^[2] at Boston University for close to four decades.

Wiesel was born in 1928 in Sighet, a town that is now part of Romania. During World War II, he was deported with his family to German concentration and extermination camps—including Auschwitz and Buchenwald—where his parents and his younger sister perished. Wiesel’s memory and experience of the war had a profound impact

1 Ariel Burger, *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel’s Classroom* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

2 “Elie Wiesel: Biographical.” From *Nobel Lectures, Peace 1981-1990*, Editor-in-Charge Tore Frängsmyr, Editor Irwin Abrams, World Scientific Publishing Co., Singapore, 1997. This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and first published in the book series *Les Prix Nobel*. It was later edited and republished in *Nobel Lectures*.

on his life.^[3] He said that “without the war, I would never have questioned any of my beliefs. I wouldn’t have been involved in action. The event made me realize the urgency of personal commitment.”^[4]

“...without the war, I would never have questioned any of my beliefs. I wouldn’t have been involved in action. The event made me realize the urgency of personal commitment.”

—Elie Wiesel

Wiesel was a human rights advocate who helped to establish the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. He wrote dozens of books and won the Nobel Peace Prize for speaking out against racism and injustice. His autobiography *Night* explores his experiences as a Jewish prisoner in the concentration camps. *Night* is read in classrooms around the world and engages “students’ minds, hearts, consciences,”^[5] deepens their historical understandings of the Holocaust, and fosters empathy and literacy skills.

In 2017, UNESCO released *Education about the Holocaust and Preventing Genocide*, a policy guide for education stakeholders. It describes how the Holocaust “teaches about human possibilities in extreme and desperate situations by considering the actions of perpetrators and victims as well as other people who, due to various motivations, may tolerate, ignore or act against hatred and violence. This can develop an awareness not only of how hate and violence take hold but also of the power of resistance, resilience and solidarity in local, national, and global contexts.”^[6]

Ariel’s essay encourages students to consider that amidst the suffering and injustices in the world, there are ways to embrace moral ferocity with self-awareness. An Orthodox-trained rabbi, he received a Ph.D. in Jewish Studies and Conflict Resolution under Elie Wiesel. The Witness Institute—founded in 2019 by Ariel and Elisha Wiesel, Wiesel’s son—is a project dedicated to continuing the work of Wiesel. The Institute, inspired by Wiesel’s life and legacy, empowers emerging leaders to create positive change in their communities to build a moral world.

3 Gabe Bullard, “[Elie Wiesel Taught the World How to Confront Atrocities.](#)” *National Geographic*, July 2, 2016.

4 Michiko Kakutani, “[Wiesel: No Answers, Only Questions.](#)” *The New York Times*, April 7, 1981.

5 “[Teaching Night.](#)” Facing History and Ourselves: Witnesses to History Series.

6 “[The Importance of Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust.](#)” UNESCO.

Lesson

Setting the Stage: Lesson Introduction

Before students read the essay, explore this exercise.

1. Explain to students that Ariel Burger, the author of the essay they will read, was a teaching assistant to Elie Wiesel. Elie Wiesel was a Humanities professor who taught a course titled “Literature as Memory” at Boston University for close to four decades. The course explored human interaction and understanding and used a range of literature from biblical texts to contemporary fiction. Literature that Professor Wiesel used in his teaching included *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Anne Frank, *The Plague* by Albert Camus, and *Night*, his autobiography. One of the themes that connect these pieces of literature is our shared humanity. Ask students: What other pieces of literature can you think of that explore the theme of our shared humanity?
2. Share the following quote from Ariel. Ask students: How might literature help us to learn about our own values?

“Great books, like mirrors, can serve as tools of self-awareness. Through literature, we learn about ourselves, our psychological and ethical natures.”

–Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger

Engaging with the Story

Introduce students to the essay and provide specific tasks of observation before reading the text.

1. Introduce the essay by telling students that they will read a piece called “Learning and Teaching from the Heart in Troubled Times” by Ariel Burger. The essay explores ways to embrace moral ferocity with self-awareness, amid the suffering and injustices taking place in the world.
2. Ask students to pay attention to the themes of curiosity and moral ferocity while reading the essay. How does Ariel explore these themes throughout the essay?
3. Ask students to read the essay, “Learning and Teaching from the Heart in Troubled Times.”

Delving Deeper: Discussion Questions

Encourage students to examine the themes and issues raised in the essay.

1. Use the following questions to help students unpack the essay:
 - In the beginning of the essay, Ariel shares some of the injustices taking place in the world at the time he wrote the essay. What injustices does he describe? In addition to these, what are some current injustices that you have witnessed in the news, either locally or globally?
 - Explain the reasons why Ariel is frustrated when he reads the news.
 - How does Ariel describe moral ferocity? Define moral ferocity in your own words.
 - “Can we fight against injustice with moral ferocity? And yet, keep our hearts open?” writes Ariel. How might it be possible to fight against injustice with your definition of moral ferocity? What might be the value of keeping your heart open amid this challenge?
2. Explore the theme of *Memory* with students with the following prompts:
 - Ask students to define Memory in their own words.
 - Professor Wiesel believed that “education, when designed with a focus on morality and humanism, could change the course of human history.” At the center of Wiesel’s approach was what he called Memory. He defined Memory as “the moral ingredient in education, which humanizes and sensitizes us to one another.” How might our own memories and stories shape us?
 - What stories do you carry that have changed you? Ask a few students to share a story that has shaped them. The story could be from their families, friends, from literature, or from another source.
 - What happens to us as individuals when we listen to each other’s stories?
 - Professor Wiesel believed in the importance of questions to deepen learning. According to Ariel, Wiesel was often asked by his mother as a child, “Did you ask a good question today?” At the beginning of each class, he would begin with students’ questions. “Questions connect us to one another, while answers separate us. Questions open us, while answers close us. There is *quest* in question,” wrote Wiesel. Describe three ways in which a question is a quest.
3. How might moral ferocity become balanced with self-awareness? Explore this question and the following prompts with students:
 - “It is not enough to know the facts. We must take things—history, current events—personally,” said Wiesel. When we do, writes Ariel, we can “embrace new ways of thinking, learn new habits of questioning, and ultimately, find a deeper sense of common humanity.” What do you think Wiesel means that we must take history “personally”?

- In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Elie Wiesel said, "Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere." What are some ways to actively involve yourself in what's happening in the world? How might you do so while fostering courage and compassion?
- "Whatever you learn, remember: the learning must make you more, not less, human," wrote Elie Wiesel. What does this statement mean to you? What might be the purpose of humanizing learning? Describe a time when a story or an encounter allowed you to feel more connected, responsible, and/or sensitive to others.

Reflecting and Projecting

Challenge students to consider the essay's broader implications and to integrate their knowledge and ideas from various points of view.

1. Ariel took a course with Professor Wiesel at Boston University titled "Literature of Memory: Faith and Destruction." Included in the course was Albert Camus's *The Plague*. According to Ariel, Camus wasn't just referencing a real virus or plague. He was addressing the political and moral situation during the 1940s, especially the German Occupation. Professor Wiesel shared with the class, "Camus does not want to make it too easy for us. Our task is to read literature both in its original context, as well as in our own." Read the following quote from *The Plague*: "What's true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves." What do you think Camus means by the plague helping "men to rise above themselves"? Describe your personal experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. In what ways have you witnessed an individual or community's actions be of service to a greater cause? (2-3 paragraphs)
2. Examine the original illustration ([from the Yiddish folktale "Sara Chana at the Tip of the Church Tower"](#)) by Ariel Burger which accompanies his essay. Describe what you notice. What components of the illustration are you drawn to? Why? In what ways is the illustration a good companion to Ariel's essay? Create your own illustration to accompany the themes (bearing witness, curiosity, moral ferocity, and self-awareness) represented in the essay. In what ways might your illustration communicate how to balance moral ferocity with self-awareness?
3. Students will pair up to share their earliest family stories. They will then report on their partners' stories. The story they share could be from parents, grandparents, or even further back in their family's history. It could be a full story, an image, or even a memory. Students will each take turns sharing their stories for 5-7 minutes and then report on the story. This is an exercise in bearing witness to one another, deep listening, and storytelling.

What's Happening Now

Provide students with follow-up activities.

1. In April 2020, shortly after the stay-at-home order during the global COVID-19 pandemic, Ariel wrote a visualization practice to help one of his students struggling with isolation and anxiety. [Access this short visualization](#) and try it a few times within a week.
2. After participating in the visualization, notice how you feel. In what ways do you feel more connected to others, your surroundings, and yourself? Write down your observations in a journal entry.



Take Action

with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

How will you become an advocate for moral ferocity?

The work of Elie Wiesel and Ariel Burger further the message of human dignity and moral courage.

1. In 1986, Elie Wiesel won the Nobel Peace Prize. According to the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Wiesel “emerged as one of the most important spiritual leaders and guides in an age when violence, repression, and racism continue to characterize the world. Wiesel is a messenger to mankind; his message is one of peace, atonement, and human dignity. His belief that the forces fighting evil in the world can be victorious is a hard-won belief. His message is based on his own personal experience of total humiliation and of the utter contempt for humanity shown in Hitler’s death camps. The message is in the form of a testimony, repeated and deepened through the works of a great author. Wiesel’s commitment, which originated in the sufferings of the Jewish people, has been widened to embrace all repressed peoples and races.” In his acceptance speech, Wiesel said, “There is so much to be done, there is so much that can be done. One person – a Raoul Wallenberg, an Albert Schweitzer, or Martin Luther King, Jr. – one person of integrity, can make a difference, a difference of life and death.” Conduct research to learn more about one of these individuals. In what ways do the actions of these individuals embrace justice and moral courage?
2. Watch this [short video from Irshad Manji](#), the founder of the Moral Courage Project, by clicking on her photograph. Manji lectures with Oxford University’s Initiative of Global Ethics and Human Rights. The Project describes moral courage as “doing the right thing in the face of your fears.” After watching the video, write down in a few sentences what Manji witnessed when she was in high school. What had she wished she had done? Manji describes at the end of the video, “Most of the time when I speak up, it is with the spirit of that moment in my conscience.”

Elie Wiesel wrote, “Being a witness makes you a witness.” Describe a situation in your life where either you took action or wished you had taken action against something you witnessed, which you felt was wrong. How might this moment plant a seed for ethical citizenship and the common good in your life and future? Record a short video or write a short essay describing your experience. (2-3 paragraphs)

SDG 16: *Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.*

Companion Texts

These texts are recommended by teachers who are currently using Ariel's essay in their classrooms.

- *Night* by Elie Wiesel
- *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom* by Ariel Burger
- *The Giver* by Lois Lowry
- *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki
- *Educated* by Tara Westover
- *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Anne Frank
- *The Plague* by Albert Camus

Resources

- Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, 3 vols. (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985).
- [Ariel Burger.com](#). (Website)
- Ariel Burger, *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).
- "[The Nobel Peace Prize for 1986](#)." Nobel Prize. (Organization)
- "[Teaching Night](#)." Facing History and Ourselves: Witnesses to History Series. (Organization)
- [Moral Courage](#). (Organization)
- "[Nobel Prize Speech](#)." The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity. (Organization)
- "[Turning to Face the Dark: A conversation between Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger and Parker Palmer](#)." Global Oneness Project. (Interview)
- Debbie Truong, "[In a time of divisiveness, lessons on listening at a Virginia school](#)." *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2018.
- Rick Hanson, "[Just One Thing: Recognize Suffering in Others](#)." *Greater Good Magazine*, April 2, 2014.
- Susan Sachs, "[Teaching Tolerance to Students; Wiesel Gives Personal Account of Holocaust's Horrors](#)." *The New York Times*, June 5, 1998.

Connections to National Curriculum Standards and Frameworks

SEL Competencies (CASEL)

- **Self-awareness.** The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.
- **Social awareness.** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior.

- **Relationship skills.** The ability to establish and maintain health and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

- **C3.D2.His.3.9-12.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.
- **C3.D2.His.7.9-12.** Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9 and W.11-12.9.** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1.** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 [or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5.** Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understandings of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1.** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1.** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

We Want to Hear From You

We'd love to hear how you integrate (or plan to integrate) this lesson into your classroom. What were your favorite takeaways and student responses?

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