

The Importance of Embracing Questions

Summary

Grade Level

6-8

Companion Essay

[“Learning and Teaching from the Heart in Troubled Times,”](#) by Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger

Subjects

Art, English language arts, Social studies

Themes

Bearing witness, Curiosity, Literature as a mirror, Moral ferocity

What Students Will Uncover

The significance of embracing curiosity

Essential Questions

- What inspires curiosity?

- What is the difference between an answer and a response?
- How might we celebrate and value questions?

Lesson Overview

Students read quotes from an essay by Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger, “Learning and Teaching from the Heart in Troubled Times.” The essay explores moral courage, the importance of celebrating questions, and the ways in which to galvanize thoughtful and compassionate action during challenging times in our world. Students engage in group dialogue and learning activities, including writing and art exercises, to explore the themes of moral ferocity, curiosity, and literature as a mirror.

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 value of questions
- Learn how to use questions as a tool to gather new insights and information
- Learn how our own stories shape who we are

Materials

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

Standards & Frameworks

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

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.

“Teaching and Learning 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.

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.

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 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

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 amid 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. Tell students they will explore a cartoon titled [“Asking Questions”](#) by Grant Snider. Share the cartoon with students.
2. Ask students: which section of the cartoon do you most relate to? Why?
3. What happens when questions reveal mysteries rather than answers?

Engaging with the Story

Introduce students to the author Ariel Burger and organize students in small groups to explore quotes from Elie Wiesel.

1. Tell students that they will read quotes from an essay called “Learning and Teaching from the Heart in Troubled Times” by Ariel Burger. Explain that the essay explores the themes of moral ferocity and curiosity. *(Note to teachers: Introduce students to the work of Ariel Burger and Elie Wiesel, which can be found in the Background section.)*
2. Organize students into small groups. Assign each group one of Elie Wiesel’s quotes from the essay.
 - Group A. “Whatever you learn, remember: the learning must make you more, not less, human.”
 - Group B. “Questions connect us, while answers separate us. Questions open us, while answers close us. There is *quest* in question.”
 - Group C. “We must look in mirrors. And great literature can act as a mirror.”
3. Ask students to discuss the following.

- Group A. Describe a time when a story or an encounter allowed you to feel more connected to yourself and others.
- Group B. Describe three ways in which a question is a quest.
- Group C. How might literature help you to explore your values?

Delving Deeper: Learning Activities

Encourage students to examine the themes and issues raised in the quotes from Elie Wiesel.

As a class, explore the quotes and responses from Engaging with the Story. Ask students from each group to read the quotes they explored along with their group's ideas. What connections did they make?

1. Tell students they will be creating a poster as a visual representation of the quotes they explored in their groups.
 - Students can either create an illustration for the poster or use online design platforms such as Canva, Keynote, or Google Docs.
 - What images might students like to include to represent their quotes? Who would their audience be? Where would they want to display their posters? Why?
 - Share students' posters in a gallery walk or create a virtual gallery walk using Google Slides or other online platforms.
2. Ask students to reflect on the posters.
3. After participating in the gallery walk, share with students that at the center of Professor Wiesel's approach to learning and teaching 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?

Reflecting & Projecting

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

1. Examine the original illustration ([from the Yiddish folktale "Sara Chana at the Tip of the Church Tower"](#)) by Ariel Burger, which accompanies his essay. Respond to the following questions, which are part of a Visible Thinking Routine from Project Zero, designed to encourage exploration of a work of art. Take your time and list all of the ideas that come to mind.
 - What do you see?
 - What do you think about that?
 - What does it make you wonder?
2. Fred Rogers, also known as Mister Rogers in the television show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* said, "In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers." How might listening with our "ears and hearts" help others and ourselves? Why do you think questions are just as important as answers?

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 or for a week.
2. After participating in the visualization, take notice of how you feel. In what ways do you feel more connected to others, your surroundings, and yourself? Write your observations in a journal entry.

Take Action

with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

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. In his acceptance speech, he said, “There is so much to be done, there is so much that can be done. One person—a Raoul Wallenberg, an Albert Schweitzer, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—one person of integrity, can make a difference, a difference of life and death.” Ask students to conduct research to learn more about the lives of Raoul Wallenberg, Albert Schweitzer, or Martin Luther King Jr. In what ways do the actions of these individuals embrace courage, justice, and our shared humanity?
2. [Watch this short video](#) from Irshad Manji, the Moral Courage Project founder, by clicking on her photograph. Manji is a lecturer 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 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 you either took action or wished you had taken action against something you witnessed, that 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 describing your experience or write a short essay (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 (8th grade)
- *The Giver* by Lois Lowry

- *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki

Resources

- Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, 3 vols. (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985).
- [Ariel Burger.com](http://ArielBurger.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)
- Warren Berger, *Beautiful Questions in the Classroom* (Thousand Oaks; California: Corwin, 2020).
- "[Visible Thinking](#)." Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Connections to National Curriculum Standards & 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.3.6-8.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.
- **C3.D2.Civ.14.6-8.** Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies, and promoting the common good.

NCSS National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS) Themes

- **Theme 4.** Individual Development and Identity. Questions related to identity and development, which are important in psychology, sociology, and anthropology, are central to the understanding of who we are.
- **Theme 10.** Civic Ideals and Practices. Learning how to apply civic ideals as part of citizen action is essential to the exercise of democratic freedoms and the pursuit of the common good.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.4.** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1.** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.1.** Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

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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