Night in the Interdisciplinary Humanities Course: An Integrative Approach

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Introduction

Although no single underlying principle for teaching an interdisciplinary course exists, a primary rationale most assuredly involves *integration*— a combination or synthesis of parts, objects, ideas or themes that *cohere*. Carnegie Foundation reports on teaching and learning, for instance, routinely cite students' failure to make connections between their core curriculum courses and their major courses, and between knowledge gained in the classroom and challenges faced in life (home, community, or workplace). As a psychologist and teacher, I am convinced of one inescapable conclusion: the failure to integrate knowledge across disciplines and the perceptual gap between knowledge and life are inextricably interwoven. Because complex problems often demand solutions that cross traditional disciplinary boundaries, an inability to integrate knowledge from multiple perspectives hampers the ability to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and the concrete crucible that is everyday life.

In an interdisciplinary course entitled, "Science, Religion and the Quest for Meaning," I use Elie Wiesel's *Night* as one of eight texts; the other texts are selected from science, literature, philosophy, existentialism and existential psychology. The general overview of the course, as articulated in the course syllabus, reads:

> The scientific assault on religion accelerated in the 20th century. As we exited the heralded "scientific century," we need ask a number of questions. How are we to assess the damage done to religious faith by science in general, and social science in particular? Are we consigned to a choice between naive acceptance of religious tradition—with the risk of living a "healthy illusion," and a total rejection of any system of meaning that extends beyond confirmation of sensory experience—with the risk of living with an uneasy sense that "certainly there must be 'more' to life than 'this'?" Can a person dedicated to the highest standards of intellectual truth adhere to some tradition of faith? What are the dangers inherent in religious individuals who purposely reject the intellect in matters religious? Conversely, do the many "self help" books and admonitions of the social sciences really fill the void previously filled by faith in something or someone "sacred" (literally "set apart," i.e. something that transcends the "ordinary")?

In considering these (and other) questions, "Religion, Social Science, and the Quest for Meaning" is designed *to cross traditional disciplinary boundaries*. In fact, the very nature of the questions asked presupposes the crossing of intellectual boundaries, for what discipline can claim sole proprietorship of the human quest for meaning?

Identity: Personal Grounding of the Interdisciplinary Motif

We approach Wiesel's *Night* from the opening sentence: "They called him Moshe the Beadle, as though he had never had a surname in his life" (1960: 1). With no surname, a problem especially within Judaism, his "Identity" is in question. Indeed, it is as if he—like Wiesel and the countless other children of *Night* who were transformed into orphans—now has no identity. As Wiesel later writes in *Legends of our Time*, "My first friend was an orphan. . . . [Now I know] we all belong to a generation of orphans. . . . Sometimes I wonder if he [the orphan] did not have my face, my fate perhaps, and if he was not already what I was about to become" (1968: 37). Recognizing Wiesel's propensity for connecting the first sentence of a work to the last, I ask students to juxtapose the two sentences that conclude *Night* with the first: "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me" (1960: 109). A major theme has been introduced: the drama of *identity*, as it plays itself out through lived story.

The infusion of the identity theme at the outset of the course is not accidental. In the first place, identity as theme crosses a number of intellectual disciplines and perspectives. Simultaneously, it connects the central course theme, meaning, to the individual that seeks meaning: a sense of personal identity and a perception of life meaning are knotted together. In short, the identity theme demands that we cross disciplines as we struggle to integrate knowledge and life; it places the task of integration squarely before us. When we consider that many

students are within an age range that, developmentally, is centrally defined in terms of identity, then introduction of this theme is even more compelling.

By juxtaposition of passages, we enter *Night* by way of the end (just as, historically, much of the world learned of Auschwitz and other camps only after their liberation).   I ask students first to note that it is the corpse that looks back. Does this mean that Wiesel sees a part of himself (perhaps the most noble part?) as "dead?" What part of one's self, one's identity, can die? Under what circumstances? With what consequences for life thereafter and with what impact on our quest for meaning in life? As complex as these questions are, the issue becomes knottier when students consider another version of the ending that Wiesel might have chosen: the impulse to shatter the mirror.

This alternative would, of course, raise other issues. Were he to do so, is it the *mirror* that is shattered?   Or is the *image* in the mirror that is shattered? Must an identity that has been externally (*artificially*) forced upon a person by the Nazis be shattered in order to re-construct the pieces into a whole (i.e., that is *real*)? In deciding between these interpretive readings of the text, we must face squarely the elusive issue of identity.

The Puzzle of Identity and the Jigsaw Classroom

It is at this point that I bring an interdisciplinary frame to bear by using the jigsaw technique. The class is broken into four or five smaller groups. Each group is responsible for researching one piece of the identity puzzle. The following week each group presents its particular piece (15-20 minute duration). Then, for the remainder of that class, we attempt to put together the pieces and arrive at a patterned whole.

A wide range of disciplines may contribute to assembling the puzzle and understanding the pattern. I generally employ the following. First, one group examines the religious

component in general, and Hasidism in particular. Because I try to use concise, succinct sources (the class reading load is already a heavy one), a simple but adequate choice is the "Hasidism" entry of *Encyclopedia Judaica*: "Basic Hasidic philosophy is [characterized by] *hitlahavut*, 'burning enthusiasm,' in which the soul is aflame with ardor for God *whose presence is everywhere. . .*" (*EJ*: 1394*ff*). I encourage students to explore Hasidism in terms of its distinguishing features —charismatic leadership, ecstatic prayer, and panentheism—and within the broader context of Jewish mysticism (e.g., Scholem 1946). In teaching his own work, for example, Wiesel acknowledged that "Night is actually a work in Kabala literature" (*Literature of Memory* 1980).

A second group takes on a literary perspective, examining dimensions of Wiesel's identity by either exploring the role that a particular body of Judaic literature plays in defining Hasidism —speculative literature, expository pamphlets, and most importantly, tales and legends (story), or examining the issue of identity in literature as a whole. They then bring this literary perspective to bear on *Night*. For example, Wiesel has said that Night is also "a story of the son sacrificing the father," a reversal of the Biblical story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac (*Literature of Memory* 1980). "Don't give your ration of bread and soup to your old father. There's nothing you can do for him. And you're killing yourself" (1960: 105). Both paths that the literary group can take lead to a common destination: a crucial puzzle piece awaiting correct fitting into the whole. And both paths can be connected to a key facet of Wiesel's identity: He describes himself as a storyteller.

A third group explores the historical/political dimensions essential to understanding *Night*. They may pragmatically narrow the focus to the conclusion of World War I, the Versailles Treaty, and the interval between the World Wars. They often then analyze the

historical literature that attempts to document the escalation of Nazi persecution from the organized gang violence of Cristalnacht into Hitler's "Final Solution." In pursuing this line of investigation, the historical group begins at a crucial focal point: the knowledge that Wiesel originally proposed to title his work *And the World was Silent*. "How could it be possible for them to burn people, children, and for the world to keep silent? No, none of this could be true" (1960: 30).

In addition to the information regarding the original title and relevant quotations from *Night*, I also share with this group a historical incident and a statement from another of Wiesel's works: "At the risk of offending, it must be emphasized that the victims suffered more, and more profoundly, from the indifference of the onlookers than from the brutality of the executioner. The cruelty of the enemy would have been incapable of breaking the prisoner; it was the silence of those he believed to be his friends—cruelty more cowardly, more subtle— which broke his heart" (Wiesel 1968: 229). The incident stems from a visit to the White House in the late 1970's, when President Carter offers some reconnaissance photos of the concentration camps to Wiesel as a gift. Wiesel turned the photographs over and saw that their dates preceded the Nazi incursions into Eastern Europe, and Sighet (Romania). Wiesel declined to accept the photographs at this moment, countering that he and his community really needed the photographs in late 1943, or early 1944. (The Nazis did not enter Sighet until spring of 1944). Heartbroken, Wiesel asked President Carter why the allied forces, incontrovertible proof of the camps in hand, did not simply bomb the railroad tracks leading to the camps? Questions of this sort link the past and the present to the original title of the work and to one facet of the identity of its author.

A fourth group explores the psychological dimensions of identity, drawing on a rich, extensive literature on the development of the self. Because such identity theorists as Erik Erikson recognized the crucial role of life context in the formation of identity, students can already see that information from the religious, literary, and historical/political groups will inform their work as well. And yet, that is precisely the point: When the groups are later brought together to communicate their particular pieces of the puzzle, the excitement that is created as the pieces begin to mesh into a more integrated whole is palpable. Prior to assembling the puzzle, however, students must fully realize the importance and role of each individual piece. Just as the breadth of disciplines selected can by tailored according to instructor and to course (we could add sociology, philosophy, theology, economics, technology and more in approaching *Night*), so can the depth.

For example, say I choose to introduce another theme, loss, into the broader theme of identity: How does intense suffering and loss affect one's sense of identity, one's sense of self and meaning in life? As a graduate student in psychology (and interdisciplinary studies) enrolled in a seminar where Wiesel taught his own work (*Literature of Memory* 1980), I quickly sensed the importance of this question and suggested that the psychology group deepen its examination of two defining concepts: memory and melancholy. Both terms can serve as guiding concepts for the psychology group as they attempt to probe in greater depth a key theme in *Night*: loss. Let me illustrate briefly, keeping in mind that instructors of other disciplines would likely choose different groups or different concepts more suited to their (and their students') primary areas of interest.

In attempting to isolate why experiences of *loss* "hurt," psychologists often resort to a homeostatic explanation: Loss—whether personal, tangible, or symbolic—creates a gap between

what persons have, want, or expect in life and what they now (at the perceptual moment of loss) get out of life. Homeostatic models pervade social scientific theory and include "balance" motifs, models that focus on "congruity," theories that focus on "dissonance" (cf. Festinger 1957), and models of depression as "learned helplessness" (cf. Fredén 1982). Basically, the logic is this: To perceive oneself as helpless in the face of events is to perceive a gap between the challenges of life and one's abilities and resources to meet those challenges successfully. A major problem with homeostatic models, however, is that they assume that a person can always return to a balanced state. Is this assumption correct?   To explore incongruity models (and this very pointed question) in reference to Wiesel and *Night* is incredibly illuminating. In fact, I have authored works that propose refinement in the psychological literature on loss and death by relying on Wiesel, his Hasidic masters, and the concept of melancholy (Frost 1985, 1992; Frost & Frost 2002; Hulsey & Frost 1995). Although the particulars of melancholy as an alternative to depression remain outside the scope of the article, I will provide here a generalization: A psychological reading of *Night* brings us to the essential insight that certain life events occur such that balance may never be restored completely. In such circumstances, melancholy may be the only appropriate response with a view to survival.   The greater the gap between perceived opposites (like Hasidic fervor and friendship versus Holocaust horror), the more intense the struggle with melancholy.

By grounding life in the crucible of the concentration camp, one can see clearly that incongruity is not merely a cognitive dilemma or cognitive distortion in need of "correction" or amenable to "simple restoration." While psychologists generally consider incongruity a negative state of being inevitably in need of correction, the life and writing of Wiesel suggests that there are certain life experiences that are both tragic and incongruous. In such cases, an authentic and

accurate perception (and indelible memory) of the event is required even though it means sustaining the very incongruity that psychologists maintain must be avoided; that is, even though it entails melancholy.

As we see in *Night*, to avoid melancholy by giving way to false optimism can be a most dangerous path to tread: "At dawn, there was nothing left of this melancholy. We felt as though we were on holiday. People were saying: 'Who knows? Perhaps we are being deported for our own good'" (1960: 18). By the end of the story, however, we learn that we must be willing to look into the mirror and see accurately what is reflected therein. As Wiesel is to write later: "[T]ruth. . . must be sought. That's all. Assuming it is concealed in melancholy, is that any reason to seek elsewhere" (Wiesel 1972: 240)?

Assembling the Pieces: Coherence of a Gestalt

The oft-misquoted gestalt psychologists did not say that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. To the contrary, they argued that it is *not* that the whole is greater than the sum, but that the whole is *different than* the sum of the parts. These researchers were trying to bring us an understanding of the *qualitative* dimensions of human perception, a critical distinction as well for the interdisciplinary inquirer and the interdisciplinary instructor. You can have students hear a lecture from multiple perspectives or read assignments from different disciplines, but those multi-disciplinary sources do not come together on their own. For integration to occur, we must bring those pieces together and struggle to arrange them until a pattern begins to emerge of its own accord—until the assemblage of pieces coheres with such elegance that they meld into a gestalt (pattern) where individual components are scarcely noticed.

How is this coherence achieved? In my view, we integrate pieces by way of honest and open-ended *exploration*, dialogue, and debate. Freud provides an apt metaphor that might clarify

here. He argued that the relationship between patient and analyst (and, by analogy, student and teacher) is similar to that between a mountaineering guide and an explorer. To wit, when exploring a previously unknown place, the guide—though never having been to these exact mountains or faced these exact challenges—nonetheless brings his expertise to bear in such a way as to increase the likelihood of a successful expedition. The explorer determines the place to be explored and the nature of the expedition. The two together, by combining their willingness and expertise on a shared quest, discover something previously unknown to either.

In the classroom, no one, including the teacher, knows what pattern will finally emerge, or when; no algorithm for coherence (or meaning) in life exists. The best pedagogical method I have found is to follow the group presentation series with a discussion of the unifying theme (identity, in this case) and to move as carefully and critically as possible among the group insights and *Night*. Even the form of the group insights cannot be specified in advance: Although the use of language, of discourse, is a most common form, I have witnessed presentations that incorporate art, music, graphic imagery, film, and poetry to astonishing effect.

In addition to seminar exploration, I make use of course journals and thought papers: Students are asked to reflect individually on the core texts in terms of their own lives. Thus, while working in jigsaw groups from a specific frame, students are also required to reflect on the ways in which the insights gained from *Night* (and subsequent dialogue) have informed their own understandings of identity. In this way, students explicitly integrate knowledge and their own lives. By the time that we search for some common understandings (tentative though they may be), we are engaged in an intricate conversational interplay between the text, the jigsaw presentations, and personal explorations stimulated by journal writing.

As our conversation deepens and we progressively refine our understanding of the theme of identity embedded in *Night*, I also strive (as instructor) to connect this discussion to broader course issues: The nexus of religious faith and identity in juxtaposition to scientific portraits (natural and social science) of who we are; the knotty question of what constitutes "faith" versus "illusion" or "truth" versus "meaning," and the basis upon which we are to make such distinctions; and the overarching question of paths to a life of meaning. Having only explored one theme thus far, I can already report this result: Students who participate in this class, in the reading of the text and journal writing, in the jigsaw groups, and in the integrative dialogue emerge changed.   Having begun with the question of who was Moshe the Beadle and who was looking into (and from) the mirror, we reach the point of re-asking who am I (with a more seamless integration of the religious, literary, historical/political and psychological ingredients that define "self").

Additional Themes in Night: Continuing the Connections

To the extent that salient features of the pedagogical structure of this interdisciplinary course are clear, it makes sense to continue the discussion by identifying additional themes around which the use of the text may be structured. Put another way, an instructor may adopt the seminar format and jigsaw technique, but also choose from a wide range of possible themes from which to build a virtually unlimited number of interdisciplinary courses. As I hope is evident in this essay, Wiesel's *Night* reflects every characteristic of the "ideal" text for an interdisciplinary course:

- ❑ The text readily lends itself to interdisciplinary analysis.
- ❑ The text is accessible to a wide range of students.
- ❑ The text is intellectually engaging and compelling.

❏   The text is firmly entrenched in the crucible of life.

❏   An extensive body of literature exists to support careful analysis of the text.

What additional themes emerge in *Night* as readily as the theme of identity? Loss?

Language? Memory? Faith vs. reason? Madness? Mysticism? Individual versus collective?

Aggression and violence? Power? Well-being? Human nature? Current events: 9/11? Middle

East? Human destiny? Obedience to Authority? Anatomy of hatred? "Moral" justifications of

harm and cruelty (see Hulsey & Frost on "moral cruelty")? Although space limitations prevent

me from developing additional themes to the same degree of specificity as with identity, let me

at least offer some possible ways in which additional themes connect to *Night* and to the broader

corpus of Wiesel's work.

Memory. The identification of memory as a key theme is accomplished by way of one of

the most powerful narrative pieces in the book:

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life
> into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I
> forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose
> bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.
> 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 am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never" (1960: 32).

Although the writing itself conveys the potency of Wiesel's powerful declaration, I often play an

audiotape of Wiesel himself reading this passage. Memory can be explored in terms of our

initial theme, identity (both personal identity and collective identity), or examined as a separate

theme in itself. A dialectical tension exists between the storyteller and memory.

Madness. As a psychologist, I am captivated by the way in which Elie Wiesel embeds

this theme throughout the corpus of his work. He chose "night" as a symbol that contained and

conveyed all other symbols, not only to represent the concentration camp as disappearance of all light, but also to suggest the additional implications of dreams, nightmares, and utterly surreal experience of life in the camps. "I still don't believe that it happened" (*Literature of Memory* 1980). In this sense, "night" conveys a tension between the real and the unreal, between sanity and madness. And again the centrality of the theme is evident by its infusion (implicitly, by way of character) into the first sentence: "They called him Moshe the Beadle" (1960: 1). As Wiesel declared, "Moshe was a real person, and he really was mad" (*Literature of Memory* 1980). In *Night*, after Moshe has disappeared for several months and returned with stories of what he had seen, the people of Sighet respond: "'Poor fellow. He's gone mad'" (1960: 5). And when Moshe's "mad story" begins to unfold in reality, with the Jews of Sighet on a train headed for the camps, the theme is repeated by way of Madame Schächter.

> Madame Schächter had gone out of her mind. . . . [She began to cry hysterically.]
> Fire! I can see a fire! I can see a fire! . . .
> Powerless to still our own anguish, we tried to console ourselves:
> 'She's mad, poor soul. . . .'
> [Later] we had reached a station. . . . 'Auschwitz' (1960: 22-24).
>
> Suddenly, we heard terrible screams:
> 'Jews, look! Look through the window! Flames! Look!'
> And as the train stopped, we saw this time that flames were gushing out of a tall
> chimney into the black sky (1960: 25).

What does Wiesel mean by madness? For one thing, he certainly challenges humanity's view of sanity in the flickering, smoky torchlight of the camp. If those who perpetrated the camps are considered "sane," then humanity must, by definition, be "mad." In later writing on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, for example, Wiesel follows his remarks of Eichmann's seemingly "ordinary nature" with this statement: "It occurred to me that if he were sane, I should choose madness. It was he or I. For me, there could be no common ground with him. We could not inhabit the same universe, nor be governed by the same laws" (Wiesel 1965: 11).

Mysticism. A deeper level to the madness theme concerns not human madness, but

mystical madness. As mentioned above, a crucial context of Wiesel's work is the broader

literature of Jewish mysticism, the Kabala. An entire course could be constructed around the

theme of mysticism, featuring Wiesel's *Night* and his stories of the Hasidic masters. In tying this

theme to the religious perspective above, we can continue with the *Encyclopedia Judaica*

description of Hasidism: "The community of Hasidim becomes a necessary condition for the

individual's realization of the mystical experience. . . . Mystical personality. . . grows

dialectically out of otherwise disparate elements" (EJ: 1409). The potential richness of the

general theme (mysticism) and the particular theme (mystical madness) can be suggested, I hope,

by way of a particularly compelling (if enigmatic) story.

> "Once upon a time there was a king who knew that the next harvest would be cursed. Whosoever would eat from it would go mad. And so he ordered an enormous granary built and stored there all that remained from the last crop. He entrusted the key to his friend and this is what he told him: 'When my subjects and their king will have been struck with madness, you alone will have the right to enter the storehouse and eat uncontaminated food. Thus you will escape the malediction. But in exchange, your mission will be to cover the earth, going from country to country, from town to town, from one street to the other, from one man to the other, telling tales, ours—and you will shout, you will shout with all your might: Good people, do not forget! What is at stake is your life, your survival! Do not forget, do not forget!'"

> And the friend in question could not help but obey. He entered the legend with fiery shadows. And this legend encompasses all other legends. It is haunted by a creature that reigns over all others, and this creature is laughing, laughing and crying, laughing and singing, laughing and dreaming, laughing so as not to forget that he is alone and that the king is his friend, his friend gone mad—but the king, is he laugh-ing too? That is the question that contains all the others and gives life to its own tale, always the same tale, the tale of a king and of his friend separated by madness and united by laughter, fire and night (Wiesel 1972: 202).

Concluding Remarks

The specific themes that I identify and rely on in my interdisciplinary courses reflect, no doubt, my own sensibility. And yet that fact suggests the very potential of using Wiesel's *Night* as a text in the interdisciplinary classroom: Different explorers will discover different terrain and hence make distinct perceptual cuts into the text. We may do so even within remarkably different pedagogical contexts. In my own case, for instance, I incorporate *Night* into an introductory psychology course (indirectly), into an Honors course entitled "The Anatomy of Hatred in Life, Literature and Art," into the Honors course discussed in this article ("Science, Religion and the Quest for Meaning"), and into a graduate course entitled "Preventive Health and Psychological Well-being." Although the objectives of the courses diverge, the accompanying texts differ, the intellectual context is different, and student backgrounds vary, in each instance student learning outcomes and student evaluations document the successful incorporation of *Night*.

Why is Wiesel's text so effective? First, and simply, because the text is real: Students engage with a slice of life from which there is no escape, and to which they immediately and naively respond by way of questions. How and why could the events depicted in *Night* have occurred? How am I, situated afar in time and space, to understand the Holocaust? The very asking of these questions unveils the need to approach the work from multiple perspectives. Once confronted with questions of "why," students naturally set sights on multiple intellectual domains—historical, sociological, religious, political, psychological, philosophical and more—as they ask questions and probe for answers to those questions. A second reason for the power of the text, then, is that it inherently requires readers to move beyond a one-dimensional frame.

Third, the text sustains the voice of its author, Elie Wiesel. As we strive for understanding, we cannot take refuge in abstract pronouncements, but must continually ground our search for understanding within the concrete reality of a single human being. As we attempt to do so, the potential for integration increases. Put another way, as we attempt intellectually to combine insights gleaned from a variety of perspectives, we seek to combine those insights into some pattern or configuration that makes sense, that coheres, particularly from the vantage of the author. Thus, we are inevitably engaged in the task of connecting the concrete reality of a life with abstract ideas from multiple perspectives. The task of integration literally stares us in the face, so much so that we might reword the conclusion of *Night* as a conclusion for this essay: "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at [Wiesel]" (1960: 109). Having now read and studied the text, what was it that Wiesel could see? And as I—concluding *Night*—turn my gaze back onto my self and my world, what do I now *see*?

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