Wiesel – may he live on in all his words

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A light has gone out.

Elie Wiesel was both our beacon of hope and our warning that even hope has its limits.

The light of his words illuminated one of the darkest times of history. He constantly warned us to never repeat that history.

Wiesel died July 2. He was 87.

As a Catholic in a small town with few Jews, I heard little about the Holocaust until I was assigned to read “The Diary of a Young Girl.”

Anne Frank started writing in her diary when she was 13. Her words of hope stuck with me: “In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

I’ve often wondered what she would have written had she survived the Holocaust. Her writing ended when the Nazis raided her hiding place and took her to a concentration camp when she was just 15.

Where her voice ended, Elie Wiesel’s voice began.

He was sent to Auschwitz when he was 15, and then to Buchenwald. He was 16 years old when that camp was liberated. We have the proof he was there: the black and white photo of living skeletons lying in a row. He was the seventh one from the left on the second bunk, his hollow face next to a vertical wood beam.

We have the proof in those sad eyes, those eyes that never stopped remembering what he saw there, never stopped remembering those he lost there, his father, his mother, his younger sister.

He became the spokesperson for the 6 million who perished. Once he started speaking up, he never stopped.

It all started with his book “Night,” which told the story of his struggle and survival. The book sold over 10 million copies and is in over 30 languages.

I first read “Night” nearly 40 years ago. These words still stalk my soul:

“Behind me, I heard the same man asking: ‘For God’s sake, where is God?’ And from within me, I heard a voice answer: ‘Where He is? This is where – hanging here from this gallows.”

What did Wiesel mean by that? That God was dead as surely as the man hanging? Or that God was alive and fully present right there in the worst that life had to offer us?

Wiesel spent his life speaking for those who couldn’t. For that, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal.

He spoke truth to power and never stopped. He spoke up to President Ronald Reagan during the presentation ceremony of his Congressional Gold Medal. Just days later, Reagan was to go to Germany and planned to lay a wreath in a cemetery in Bitburg where members of the SS were buried.

Before the whole world, during the live award ceremony, Wiesel said, “That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS.” Reagan went, but spent only 10 minutes at the cemetery and much longer at a concentration camp.

Wiesel spoke up to President Jimmy Carter when the president created the U.S. Commission on the Holocaust. Carter wanted a museum that would remember ALL victims of the Nazis; Wiesel insisted the memorial focus just on the eradication of the 6 million Jews. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., does just that. I believe it is the most powerful Holocaust museum in the world, and I’ve been to the one in Israel.

Wiesel urged President Bill Clinton to intervene in Bosnia, challenging the president at the 1993 opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum with these words: “We must do something to stop the bloodshed in that country. People fight each other and children die. Why? Something, anything, must be done.”

Wiesel challenged President Barack Obama to take a tougher stance against Iran and its nuclear program. Wiesel kept saying “Never again” even when it kept happening again, and again, and again, in Rwanda, Cambodia, Darfur and Sudan.

He said, “Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe.”

Wherever that place was, Wiesel made it the center of his universe.

Why?

“We must always take sides,” he said. “Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

To not remember wasn’t an option to Wiesel. “To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time,” he believed.

And now he is dead.

May he live on in all his words, words that will haunt us the rest of our lives.

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