



Original illustration from the Yiddish folktale “Sara Chana at the Tip of the Church Tower”. See more at [www.arielburger.com/art](http://www.arielburger.com/art).

It is quiet as I write this. It is so quiet that I can imagine the cries of those who suffer: the pangs of hunger in Yemen, the hundreds of Rohingya who continue to flee Myanmar to the world's largest refugee camp, children pining for their parents at the U.S. border, and so many more. Our earth cries out for relief as its trees burn

and its glaciers melt. News of yet another school shooting, this one in Santa Clarita, California, has just appeared on my newsfeed.

When I read the news, I am filled with frustration at the endless cycles in which we appear to be caught, and humanity's seeming inability to grow and change. Many of the structures of society appear to be organized to maintain the patterns of behavior that have led us to this mess. Hate is on the rise. National politics has not helped us solve the epidemic of gun violence in this country. International summits have not led to sufficient responses to the climate crisis. War is still a feature of human life in so many places, in spite of repeated and sustained attempts at negotiated solutions to conflicts.

**"Celebrate questions even when we do not have answers."**

The current moment calls for moral ferocity. We should not sleep well at night when we know others are suffering. We need to raise our voices with clarity and channel our anger into protest and resistance. Ferocity itself, though, holds danger. Let's not forget that some of the worst perpetrators of evil have often claimed to act in the name of the good, or God, or the national interest, or a future utopia. By claiming the moral high ground, and labeling our opponents misguided, we run the risk of doing great harm in the name of good.

I suggest that we balance our moral ferocity with humility and tenderness. First, we need the humility of consistent self-examination. This requires us to do something very countercultural: Celebrate questions even when we do not have answers. Our culture rewards certainty, confidence, and definitive answers. By celebrating questions, we increase the likelihood of identifying the potential harm we might do in the name of our values.

Every idea, no matter how well intentioned, casts a shadow and holds the potential for some harm. When we examine our assumptions and ask difficult questions about our beliefs and behaviors, when we practice humility, we can avoid the traps of demonizing others, which so many of us seem to fall into. When we balance ferocity with humility, we also may discover new, unforeseen responses to big issues.

Second, we need to cultivate something even more radical: tenderness. Tenderness allows us to open our hearts to our own pain and joy, as well as others'. It is so easy to close down in the face of suffering. But, when we practice tenderness, we

maintain and deepen connections across differences. We may even find compassion in the midst of our resistance.

I learned about the balance of ferocity, humility, and tenderness from Elie Wiesel. Holocaust survivor, author, activist, and Nobel Prize winner, Elie Wiesel was also a master teacher. He believed that education, when designed with a focus on morality and humanism, could change the course of human history. I spent years as his teaching assistant paying attention to the methods he used to do this. At the center of his approach was what he called *Memory*. He defined Memory as "the moral ingredient in education, which humanizes and sensitizes us to one another." His pedagogy was explicit and intentional in its focus on the goal of instilling Memory in his students.

As a teacher, Professor Wiesel believed in the power of literature, of the study of history and the history of ideas, to make a difference in the lives of students, and in the destiny of humankind. "My goal as a teacher", he often said, "is to humanize, to sensitize." He told his students, "Whatever you learn, remember: the learning must make you more, not less, human."

He also said, "I always teach with an open heart. Not just for moral reasons, but for pragmatic ones—a teacher's open heart makes it possible for students to open their hearts as well."

We need to read history through a moral lens, to draw out enduring lessons that can clarify our own choices in this moment. As Professor Wiesel often said, "It is not enough to know the facts. We must take things—history, current events—personally." When we do so, he taught, we explore and embrace new ways of thinking, learn new habits of questioning, and, ultimately, find a deeper sense of common humanity.

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At the beginning of every semester, Professor Wiesel gave a short speech to his students, in which he said, "We are here to learn together...As much as you will learn from me, I will learn from you." He saw education as a shared journey through literature and ideas, one driven by an immense thirst for knowledge. He saw himself as a fellow traveler, admittedly better read than many of his students, but alive and awake to new possibilities and insights. This is why he emphasized and celebrated questions.

"Questions connect us to one another, while answers separate us. Questions open us, while answers close us. There is *quest* in question."

Once he added, "Questions are a weapon in the battle against fanaticism. The fanatic believes he has all the answers, and has no questions. I *only* have questions, so I am their enemy. Questions can save us from the certainties that lead to fanaticism."

One of the challenges in questioning ourselves is that, when we are alone, it is almost impossible to see the invisible assumptions that drive us. How might we engage in self-examination to bring to the surface the invisible assumptions and frameworks that define our life together?

With our best secret weapon: *one another*.

Professor Wiesel said, "It is the *Otherness of the Other* which fascinates me." The Other is a person with a different set of assumptions, life experiences, and perspectives. It is only in the encounter with the Other that we become aware of our own ways of seeing. When we confront someone with radically different views and ways of approaching issues, the contrast between those views and our own renders our style and our assumptions visible.

For Professor Wiesel, meeting and engaging in sustained dialogue with people of different beliefs was essential. So was the encounter with great texts. "We must look in mirrors. And great literature can act as a mirror."

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Great books, like mirrors, can serve as tools of self-awareness. Through literature, we learn about ourselves, our psychological and ethical natures. Once, in a classroom lecture, Professor Wiesel remarked, "Although we usually think of ourselves as questioners of the text, today the text will question us." He meant that students must pay careful attention to their reactions and responses to literature, to the questions to which they return, to the characters that capture their imaginations. In this way *the books read them*, shedding light on their leanings and assumptions, raising their self-awareness.

I am talking about celebrating questions and engaging in self-interrogation. But what of the student who asks: *Questions alone aren't enough! After all, we need to know what to do, how to behave, and how best to address practical challenges.*

This is an important challenge to an approach that emphasizes questioning and humility. These moments often call for bold and creative responses. It is not enough to repeat the stories of the past; we must also write new ones. We must step off the page into our own situation, which is unmapped and unknown.

But there is a critical difference between an *answer* and a *response*. An answer is definitive and closes down conversation. Further, if my answer is opposed to yours, then the possibility of conflict becomes great. We live in a time of many answers, very little clarity, and increasing disconnection between people.

Unlike an answer, a response is an action. A response is defined by a question and provides meaning. It allows me to transform the urgency I feel about an issue into action. We need more responses to human suffering, and fewer definitive answers. We need moral action, boldness, ferocity; but we also need humility and tenderness if we are to hold ourselves together.

The challenge is great, and the role of teachers and students has never been more important. For it is the classroom and other spaces dedicated to learning, teaching, and formation that will shape the future. Will our students be equipped to face the suffering of the world without falling into despair? Will they find effective tools for growing their compassion and their courage, and for placing their courage in the service of compassion? Will they be empowered to act, rather than to submit to despair?

In times like these, it becomes clear that every teacher, by virtue of being a teacher, is also an activist. We are not merely transmitting information. When we are empowered, we can activate the moral power of our students.

In this encounter lies hope for the future. If we can educate new generations to balance ferocity with humility and tenderness, questions with responses, then our encounters with darkness, whether in the study of history or the daily news, can galvanize thoughtful, compassionate action. And maybe one day, when it is very quiet, we will hear, not the cries of the suffering, but laughter.