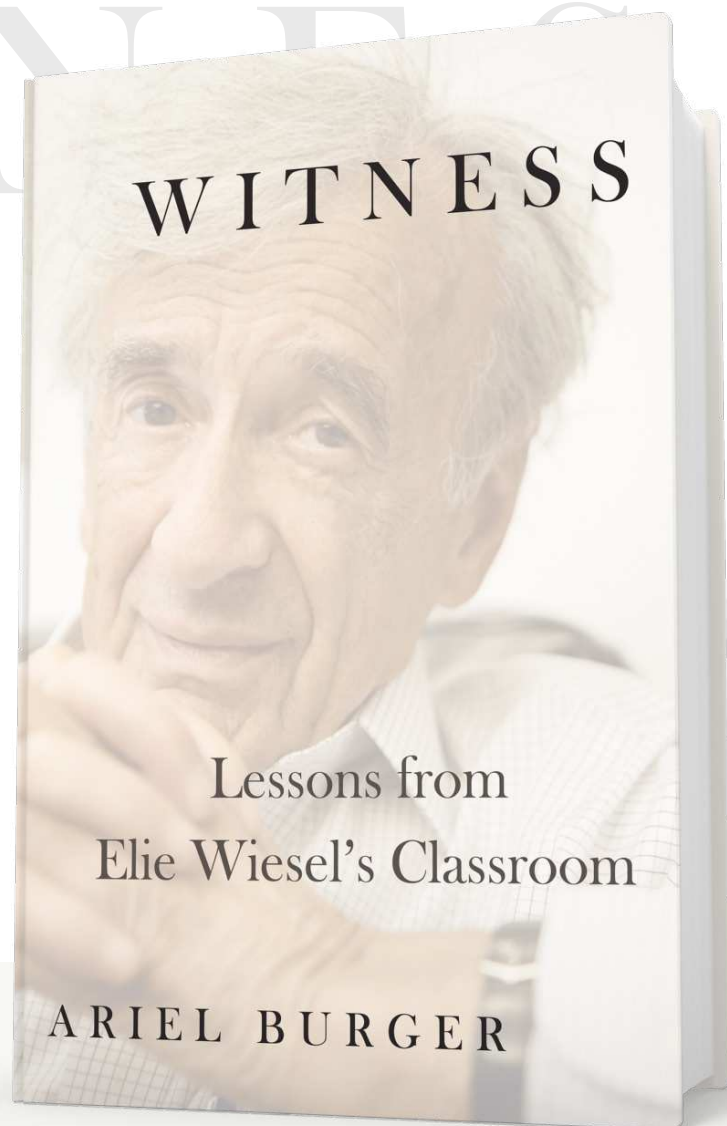


# WITNESS

## BOOK CLUB and EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



The world remembers Elie Wiesel—Nobel laureate, activist, and author of more than forty books, including Oprah’s Book Club Selection Night—as a great humanist. He passed away in July 2016. Ariel Burger first met Elie Wiesel at age fifteen. They studied and taught together. *Witness* chronicles the intimate conversations between these two men over decades, as Burger sought counsel on matters of intellect, spirituality, and faith, while navigating his own personal journey from boyhood to manhood, from student and assistant to rabbi and, in time, teacher. In this profoundly hopeful, thought-provoking, and inspiring book, Burger takes us into Elie Wiesel’s classroom, where the arts of listening and storytelling conspire to keep memory alive. As Wiesel’s teaching assistant, Burger gives us a front-row seat witnessing these remarkable exchanges in and out of the classroom. The act of listening, of sharing these stories, makes of us, the readers, witnesses.

ARIEL BURGER is a writer, artist, teacher, and rabbi whose work combines spirituality, creativity, and strategies for social change. A lifelong student of Elie Wiesel, he spent years studying the great wisdom traditions, and now applies those teachings to urgent contemporary questions.

If you are interested in Ariel Burger joining your book club, please visit [arielburger.com](http://arielburger.com) for more information.

## ON MEMORY:

*“Is the sign that can prevent madness’s ultimate victory . . . memory?”*  
(p.19)

### **Discussion question:**

What did Wiesel mean by this? How can memory serve to protect us from madness?

### **Workshop question:**

Share a memory that has shaped you with a partner. Talk about why and how this memory shaped you.

## ON OTHERNESS:

*“It is the otherness of the other that fascinates me...What can I learn from him? What does he see that I do not, cannot?”* (p. 51)

### **Discussion question:**

What is the difference between tolerating and respecting the other?

How does Wiesel’s approach differ from the ways we often talk about difference and commonality?

### **Workshop question:**

Wiesel believes that, rather than collapse the distance between us, between our worldviews and opinions, we need to sustain the gap. We need to celebrate difference. Discuss ways in which you can do this in your own life and community. How can we work to see the familiar as other?

## ON FAITH AND DOUBT:

*“Believe me, if I had not had faith, my life would have been much easier. My questions are questions only because of my faith. My argument with God is an argument only because of faith. Sometimes I have wished to renounce it, but I could not...I believe in a wounded faith. Only a wounded faith can exist after those events. Only a wounded faith is worthy of a silent God.”*  
(pp. 81–82)

### **Discussion question:**

What does Wiesel mean by a wounded faith?

### **Workshop question:**

What role does faith play in your life? What role does doubt play? How do you navigate the two? What might Wiesel’s approach to faith and doubt contribute to conversations today about the conflict of religion and secular life?

## ON MADNESS AND REBELLION:

*“One must be mad to believe that we can make the world better, that we can save humanity, or even a single life. It is unreasonable, irrational. But I am for that madness.”* (p. 114)

### **Discussion question:**

Discuss the connection between madness and resistance. What are the varieties of madness? And how does recognizing madness help us to become “sane”?

### **Workshop question:**

On pages 114–115, Burger offers us some of Wiesel’s examples of different types of madness. Can you think of other real-world examples—from history or from current headlines? Or from your own experiences?

## ON ACTIVISM:

*“As we have seen, to turn away from reality, to pretend that evil is not evil, has one result: to empower evil.”* (p. 186)

### **Discussion question:**

*“We know that evil is at its most dangerous when it hides itself and tries to appear as good”* (p. 180). Discuss what Wiesel means by this and discuss the ways in which we can work to cut through to the truth and call evil out for what it is.

### **Workshop question:**

Wiesel urges that we take action ourselves, even if they are small, modest acts. We cannot pass this off to someone else, and we cannot wait for someone to give us permission. What are steps that we as individuals can take to resist evil? What resources or skills do you have—that others may not—that could allow you to make change for the better good?

## BEYOND WORDS:

*“Sometimes, we must move beyond words...Teaching and learning do not happen only through the sharing of information; there must be an added element.”* (p. 190)

### **Discussion question:**

How does Wiesel transcend language? Why does he feel the need to do so? How does this help him communicate difficult ideas to his students?

### **Workshop question:**

Wiesel has a profound love of music and, when he cannot answer a question, he sings a song (p. 208). What are some of the ways that you move beyond words? And what inspires you? How might you share these gifts with others?

## ON BEING A WITNESS:

*“All I have is my words.”*

*“All I am is my words.”* (p. 244)

### **Discussion question:**

What does Wiesel mean by these two statements? Discuss the ending of the chapter when Burger writes, *“I know I will never be completely alone”* (p. 252).

### **Workshop question:**

Discuss what it means to be a witness. What are our duties as witnesses?

How might you take the knowledge gained from your own experiences and share with others?