

Discussion Prompt: Talking About Indifference



Duration: 30 - 45 minutes

SLOs: Students will analyze and compare two forms of text on the topic of indifference, draw evidence from primary sources to inform analysis and opinion, analyze individual perspectives to gain insight about the personal impact of events, and participate in discussion on the topic of indifference.

Step 1

Overview: This activity addressed indifference and involves critical analysis and discussion.

Discuss: Open the discussion by asking students to define indifference and identify what it means to them. Then move on to the reading excerpt and video clip to offer two additional perspectives.

If relevant, offer the below sentence starters as possible prompts:

- *I think this means...*
- *I agree with ____ because...*
- *My ideas are similar to ____ because...*
- *I hear what ____ is saying, but I disagree because...*
- *My idea is different than ____ because...*

Step 2

Overview: In this section, students will analyze an excerpt from a speech given by a survivor of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel (if students are unfamiliar with Elie Wiesel, offer them a brief biography – see the Note to the Instructor for a web link that includes a bio along with text and audio of the speech they will analyze) and the testimony of rescuer Edith Reiss. The Holocaust offers us an example of the consequences of indifference. Ensure students have background knowledge on the Holocaust (For more information, view the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s “Introduction to the Holocaust” at: <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143>)

Speech Excerpt: Next, have the students read the excerpt from Elie Wiesel’s “The Perils of Indifference” Speech found on page 3.

Discuss: Ask students to share their interpretation of the excerpt. To what extent do they agree or disagree with the statement? Remind them of the suggested sentence starters.

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Step 3

Testimony Clip: Next, students will be introduced to another primary source: testimony. First, display Edith Reiss's bio (included on page 4). Then show students Edith's clip of testimony to gain a different perspective on indifference; this time, the perspective will come from a Holocaust rescuer who tells of her experience in an audiovisual testimony.

Discuss: Ask students to share their interpretation of Edith's testimony, using questions and a format similar to Elie Wiesel's speech discussion.

Step 4

Discuss: Again ask students "What is indifference?" This time they should respond referencing Wiesel's excerpt, Edith's clip of testimony, and their own experience.

Optional: Have students write their responses in preparation for a final discussion.

Step 5

Discuss: Facilitate a discussion among your students based on their responses. Encourage students not only to share their own thoughts, but to react to the responses of their classmates. Encourage students to share their ideas and reactions, and to support their claims with specific evidence from the texts. Guide them to ask new questions that relate the conversation to broader themes and ideas.

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Excerpts from Elie Wiesel's "The Perils of Indifference" Speech:

What is indifference? Etymologically, the word means "no difference." A strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil.

What are its courses and inescapable consequences? Is it a philosophy? Is there a philosophy of indifference conceivable? Can one possibly view indifference as a virtue? Is it necessary at times to practice it simply to keep one's sanity, live normally, enjoy a fine meal and a glass of wine, as the world around us experiences harrowing upheavals?

Of course, indifference can be tempting -- more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away from victims. It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair. Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor are of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the other to an abstraction....

In a way, to be indifferent to that suffering is what makes the human being inhuman. Indifference, after all, is more dangerous than anger and hatred. Anger can at times be creative. One writes a great poem, a great symphony, one does something special for the sake of humanity because one is angry at the injustice that one witnesses. But indifference is never creative. Even hatred at times may elicit a response. You fight it. You denounce it. You disarm it. Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response.

Indifference is not a beginning, it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor -- never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees -- not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity we betray our own.

Indifference, then, is not only a sin, it is a punishment. And this is one of the most important lessons of this outgoing century's wide-ranging experiments in good and evil.

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Edith Reiss Biography

Edith Reiss was born in Bolton, England in 1916, the second of four daughters. She was raised by a working mother and a father who had been blinded by a work accident. She learned about the world's troubles at a young age as her father had her read the daily newspaper to him. She had a knack for language and learned German in school. When unrest began on the continent, she worked to settle German-Jewish refugees in her home town. Edith went to university in London to study physiology but her studies were soon disrupted. She took a class trip to Germany in 1939, and was horrified by the treatment of the Jews. Only three days after she returned to England, war broke out.

Edith was trained as a Welfare Officer in the British army, and stationed in a British Military Hospital in Rome. She remembers treating both wounded Allied Soldiers as well as German Prisoners of War, who expressed gratitude for her kind treatment of them. As the war came to a close, Edith's story was far from over. She witnessed the hanging of Mussolini in Milan, and soon after she was sent to Dachau to help liberate the camp survivors. Her day at the camp marked her forever. On her way back through Rome, she had the chance to meet the Pope, and she shared her experience in the camp with him. Before returning to England, she spent time helping recovering soldiers, and there she met an American army doctor who would become her husband. She moved to the United States to be with him soon after they were married. In the United States, she finally finished her bachelors, and went on to get a masters in Gerontology. After her retirement she became involved in a Holocaust memorial foundation where she shared her war experience with students.

Her interview took place in Coral Gables, FL in 1998.

Note to Instructor

Background information about Elie Wiesel: Elie Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 and was the author of the memoir *Night*. He delivered his speech on April 12, 1999 at the White House. You can access "The Perils of Indifference" transcript and audio at:

<http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/wiesel.htm>