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Commencement Address

Eli Wiesel

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Commencement Address

Cover Page Footnote

Eli Wiesel, honored by the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, is Professor in the Humanities and University Professor at Boston University.

ELIE WIESEL

*Sacred Heart University
Commencement Address
May 21, 1995*

President Cernera, Bishop Egan, rabbis, distinguished members of the faculty of this University, parents and friends, and, above all, the graduating students, I know you have been waiting for four years for this moment – not for me.

In fact. Between the four years and your degree, there is only one person who stands in between and that's me – it's my address. In order to curtail and to terminate your agony, I will try to make it short. I will simply thank you young and younger students for allowing me to be one of your colleagues now. I congratulate you! To be young today is not easy. To be a young *student* isn't easy either. And to be a graduating student surely has challenges and problems – all kinds of problems that you will have to solve.

This University is special, and this day is special to me. First, why is this University special? Because as I see from the student body and from the distinguished members of the faculty, you have succeeded, thanks to the wise direction of your President, to bring together young and younger boys and girls (all colors, all origins, all affiliations) into one community. And because this University has become now a kind of national center which works for Jewish and Christian relations, I think it is doubly special.

I will tell you a story. The very first Jewish philosopher working for Jewish-Christian relations was a philosopher whom I hope you have studied – Martin Buber. He wrote a great book on philosophy called *I and Thou*. He wrote books about Hasidism telling many stories. And once he attended an ecumenical gathering and he spoke to hundreds and hundreds of Christian theologians. This is what he said:

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Between you and me, what is the difference? All of us believe in the Messiah. Except you think that He has come already and will come again. We Jews believe He hasn't come yet. So I propose to you: Let's wait together and when He does come we shall simply ask Him, ``Have You been here before?" [And Buber added] I hope at that moment I will stand behind Him, and I will whisper in His ear, ``Do not answer!"

I do believe that we are all children of the same Father. I do believe that in God's eyes all of us are equally privileged and equally burdened to spread His Word and to make this world a better world. I have seen humankind at its lowest – it's true, you have heard from the President. I have seen that. I have seen what human beings are capable of, but I have also seen the victims. And if the killers move me to despair, the victims moved me to compassion. If I glorify the victims, it is because something in their tragedy must continue to move all of us – not to anger but to solidarity.

What have I learned? Fifty years separate me from my liberation. Fifty-one years ago, almost to the day, in my little town in Transylvania we were 15,000 Jews, and I belonged to the last transport. We were getting ready to leave that town and to board the sealed wagons and go to a place that was unknown to us. At that time many people in the world were convinced it was only Jews, and therefore they didn't care, and they were wrong.

It was not a tragedy that affected the Jews alone, although we were victims of a very special and singular kind. But I have learned since that whenever a community is threatened, all are affected. Whenever a single human being is humiliated, the human image is cheapened. Whenever a person suffers for whatever reason and no one is there to offer a hand, a smile, a word, a present, a gift, a memory, a smile again: when that happens, something is wrong with society at large.

What have you learned here? First, to be together with your teachers. I hope that you share the passion that I have that keeps me going: the passion for study, the passion for learning, and the subordinate tenderness I feel on one hand towards my students and on the other towards my teachers – those who were and those who are

– for I see in every human being a teacher. I can learn from everyone and anyone.

What else have I learned? I hope you have too! That racism is not only unjust, it is stupid, it is ugly, it is inhuman. To say that a person because of his or her color or ethnic affiliation or national origin or religion is *less* than I am makes me unworthy of saying that I was created in God's image. I have learned that when I see anyone whom I have not known yet, that person is not my enemy; that person is not an adversary; that person is to me a fellow companion, a fellow student, and we are all walking towards light.

In conclusion, I am not a pessimist. Neither am I an optimist. Albert Camus used to say that the choice is ours between a smiling pessimist and a weeping optimist. I prefer to be a smiling optimist. When I see you young students – your youth, your faith in study and the future, and your faith in each other – you give me reasons to smile, and then I say to myself what an ancient philosopher used to say: “Life is not made of years, life is made of moments.”

Thank you for allowing me to share this moment.