

## 2017 Elie Wiesel Competition

2<sup>nd</sup> Place Junior Essay

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### Risk

The key strokes seemed to echo in his room with each letter as he logs in to his Instagram account. His hands feel heavy and numb as though each synapse between each neuron from his brain to his fingertips had been filled with molasses. His ears are ablaze as blood rushes to his head causing his cheeks to blush and scalp to crawl as hair follicles constrict bringing each hair to attention. His eyes dart side to side, frantically surveying the screen for what he has come to expect. Tachycardia sets in as his heart responds to the emotions it knows all too well. His dancing pupils come to rest on what has become a nightly ritual following dinner and homework time amongst his loving family. There is a new picture from school today. Each boy is smiling or laughing as they compete over a soccer ball in the courtyard...each boy except one. His face has been replaced with the headshot of notorious ISIS terrorist with a dialogue balloon that reads, "Give me the ball or I blow up your school you INFIDELS!". Saliva fills his mouth as sickness overcomes him and the blood drains from his face. His eyes quiver as water wells on the edge of his lower lids. Light is refracted through his tears, but he still sees the dark brown color of his flesh and is disgusted with himself. He looks at the picture again and sees that it already has 37 likes and has only been post for 30 minutes. He cannot bring himself to open and read the comments as those usually only dirties the wounds. Instead, he buries his face in his folded arms on his desk and weeps dreading having to face the next day.

Risk is an intriguing thing. Often, risk is associated with fear, negativity and the potential for undesirable results. Risk is often seen as the saboteur of safety and security. Why take a risk, especially if you already have what you need to sustain the current situation you are in? However, risk is vital to progress. Without risk, many of the greatest accomplishments in this world would have never occurred. Often times, it is also those who dare to risk their safety, security and comfort, that put an end to injustice and suffering.

The SS Officer and former schoolmate of Hanns Loewenbach that provided Hanns with a new passport put himself at great risk and possible personal peril by aiding his former schoolmate. That risk for the sake of humanity made Hanns feel like a human being again rather than a hunted animal. Hanns stated in the film that, "evil does not need your help, just your indifference." Even if the SS officer did not have the malice in his heart to turn Hanns in, it would not have made the difference that it did if he had just turned a blind eye and let Hanns continue to go on evading the Nazis. Hanns said, "That choice everybody has is to do something or nothing." That SS officer took action with great risk and changed the trajectory of the life of another human being in great suffering.

Even the simplest of gestures in the face of great risk can have lasting effects. In Elie Wiesel's book *Night*, Elie and his father are part of a working group that visits a factory warehouse where they are to count electrical parts. Elie's Kapo Idek is prone to fits of rage and beats Elie mercilessly one day while at the warehouse. There is a young French girl working in the factory at this time. She puts herself at great risk to give Elie a small piece of bread and tells him in German to not give up hope. This young girl, who had been hiding the fact that she was a German born Jew, risks her cover and therefore her life in order to offer a complete stranger words of hope in a time of great need. This small gesture

may have allowed Elie to endure and thus keep him on a trajectory of survival. Again, this young girl chose to do something rather than remaining indifferent and do nothing.

Risk is always based upon a choice to do something or do nothing. The Holocaust is in our past. It represents one of the most egregious examples of prejudice and crimes against humanity in history. Some may agree that an atrocity of such magnitude may never happen again, however, we now face new forms and means for prejudice, persecution, racism and injustice. The world has become a much smaller place with social media and all of its many platforms. Most individuals have some form of social media presence that is available to anyone on the internet. This presence is open to judgement and ridicule at all times in many clever ways. One may insult one another on Facebook and then anyone who sees this exchange can pile on by “liking” the insulting post. Photographs can be manipulated and made into embarrassing misrepresentations of people. People can easily be excluded from groups or categorized with the click of a mouse. Who will take a risk and go against the herd when it is moving towards injustice? Who will risk isolation for the group in order to counteract today’s cyberbullies? How far will social injustice go with the ease of technology allows people to judge, insult, exclude and attack. Will we remain indifferent or will we do something?

“Another messed up picture of Adnan,” I think to myself as I check my Instagram on my iPhone. I can feel my chest fill with fear, doubt and even a sense of selfish desire to fit in as I read the “LOL”s in the comments. The urge to just move on to the next meaningless post and leave Adnan to fend for himself drives my thumb to scroll on. It is so easy to do nothing. Indifference guarantees no consequences to myself. Hitler was a monster, however, many people stood by idly before things became out of control?

Me: Adnan, you around this weekend? Mark is sleeping over. You should come.

Adnan: Cool. I’ll ask my parents. Text me tomorrow.