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Witness Theater  
Writing Contest

### **I Learn Therefore I Am**

Maya's first words to me were, "I am not so comfortable with sharing my stories, but it's important for the students to know." In the beginning, it was hard for the students and Holocaust survivors in the Witness Theater program to connect. I did not realize that the survivors would be hesitant to share their stories and I was unsure how I would be able to relate to individuals who had suffered so much. That is, until I got to know Maya.

Maya, now 76 years old, was born in Odessa, Ukraine during the Holocaust. After battling and surviving religious discrimination, she immigrated to America in 1979 in search of a more peaceful life. Within a few years she mastered a new language, started a new career, and built a new life for her family. Maya took nothing for granted. She created meaningful experiences from what life offered her.

Maya is unique as a Holocaust survivor. She talks about her experience during the war with detail and passion, conveying what it meant to be a Jew during this horrifying, oppressive time. Amazingly, she has no personal recollection of any of its events. Only two years old at the start of the Holocaust, she and her brother survived together. Maya relies on her older brother's memories of those terrible years. Through the stories he continues to tell her, she has the words, images, and feelings to connect and make meaning of her experience. Precisely because she has an elder in a teaching role, Maya looks back at her Holocaust experience with clarity, as if she actually remembers it herself.

This understanding was an eye-opening realization for me. Maya learned at a young age, and taught me, that learning from an elder can have a powerful impact. For Maya, teaching isn't just a means to convey information; it's the process of transforming knowledge into experience. It's a bridge between teacher and student, past and present.

In the course of our many meetings, I began to appreciate how Maya embodies this lesson so completely throughout her life. She wanted to make a career of passing down knowledge to others, so she became an elementary school teacher in Odessa. Moreover, for the past 10 years, Maya has been a student at Kingsborough Community College. She told me that

for as long as she can, she will avoid graduating. Something that sounds so foreign to the average student makes absolute sense for Maya. Because learning gives special meaning to her life, she will continue to soak up knowledge for as long as she can.

Our relationship grows every week. I am amazed that our interests are so alike. I too have a passion for learning and I aspire to become a teacher. Speaking with Maya about teaching helps me define the role a teacher plays in a student's life. A teacher is not just someone older lecturing someone younger. She sees teaching as the passing of knowledge from one person to another in order to create new experiences. For her, knowledge is not a specific subject; it is about life, faith, love, and the world around us.

One day, as Maya addressed our group, she said, "I now have to thank my new teacher, Stephanie." It was then that I realized that I too have knowledge to share with Maya. Every time we talk, I teach Maya about my life and Judaism, and Maya teaches me about her past and love for the present. Knowledge is unselfish in its essence; it needs to be shared with the world. This insight gives me a profound perspective on my future as an educator.

I want to be a teacher who goes beyond the task of teaching a subject. I want to share with my students the lessons I learn from Maya. I want to help teenagers embrace knowledge and appreciate the lives they live. Teenagers constantly look towards the future. We rush through high school in anticipation of graduation, worry over which college we will attend, debate about what career we will pursue, and can't wait to "start" our lives. I want to help bring moments of clarity to these years—to take time slower and to follow Maya's example.

Maya did not find it easy to learn. She faced rampant discrimination in Odessa. Maya was rejected from university three times because of its Jewish quota, even though she knew nothing about Judaism. Nonetheless, Maya continued to apply year after year until she finally was admitted. Instead of giving up and taking a job that did not require a college degree, Maya persevered and did all she could to achieve her goal.

Maya understands the importance of learning. When she graduated, Maya spent years sharing knowledge with her students in Odessa. Her older brother gave her his memories of the Holocaust and she shares this knowledge with her family and Witness Theater. She opens up to me about her life, and I reciprocate. She is a learner and a teacher to this very day. It's a never-ending cycle that I wish to emulate, explore, and pass on to the students I hope to inspire, just like Maya inspires me.