Why do I teach literature?

While going over my student work samples for a demonstration for the EKU Writing Project, Dr. Gil Hunter commented, “ I’m wondering where this is going. I’m sure this constructed response is not the final product of the study of Night.” At the time, I didn’t know what to say. The constructed response served as the final assessment for the memoir unit. I had always thought it a good place to leave their reading of Night, offering my students a chance to reflect on the significance, relevance, and value of the work they had just finished. To that extent, it ended the book study. But he is right; it is not the final product. I think of it as the first product rather than the final. My thoughts coalesced recently by a comment of a former student. He dates my daughter, so I see him often. He picked up the copy of Night setting on my desk and said, “I remember that book. It may have been the only book I actually finished.” He set it down, his fingers lingering for a moment on the cover. *I remember*--the final product of the study of Night. Wiesel comments that he wrote Night, “to bear witness” to the atrocities of the Holocaust so that we all remember.

My students have never crammed stinking cattle cars, smelled burning flesh, fought starvation, neither have I, but we remember. We remember things we have never experienced, yet they shape who we are. They influence choices, for good and for the Good. They, we, have seen where minor violence such as words like “fag,” “nigger,” “bitch” can lead. What happens once you start to think of your fellow humans as something less than that, less than you believe yourself to be? However, Initiating dehumanization is not required for culpability. Culpability rises from doing…nothing. We have considered the inherent danger in standing by and giving even tacit approval by not objecting to the dehumanization of others, not objecting to becoming less human ourselves.

I guess the answer to Dr. Hunter’s question, “what is the final product of their reading of Night?” would be: students standing up for each other, for what it means to be human, the kid who refuses to laugh at the expense of others, the one who puts themselves between their angry parent and their sibling, every one of them who decides that he/she will make a difference. I would go on, but I can hear the choir music starting to warm up in the background too, and I dislike pretentious sanctimony. So, many appropriate quotes come streaming to my mind right now, but the one that best summarizes my position and answers the title comes from G.K Chesterton. “Fairytales do not tell children there are dragons; Children already know there are dragons. Fairytales tell children that dragons can be slain.” I teach to tell children that their dragons can be slain, must be slain, will be slain by us all working together.