

# Has Our Country Lost Its Moral Compass?

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## *From the church newsletter:*

Each year at our auction I offer the right to pick a sermon topic. Last March John Wing was the high bidder. He writes: “In 1978 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian dissident living in the United States, gave a speech at Harvard in which he castigated communism as a system of oppression. He also criticized the US for its focus on materialism instead of spiritual matters. His view was that humanism and rationalism had led to this falling away from the spiritual purpose of human beings. What is the response of Unitarians who value humanism and reason in our spiritual quest?”

## *The sermon:*

Alexander Solzhenitsyn is one of the great writers of our time. A Soviet literary magazine published *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, in November 1962. The book tells the story of a labor-camp inmate. It describes his struggle to maintain his dignity in the face of communist oppression. Its appearance was an extraordinary event in Soviet literary history—never before had such an account of Stalinist repression been openly distributed.

*The First Circle*, published in English translation in 1968, describes three days in the life of the occupants of a prison camp in the Moscow suburbs. The prisoners are scientists and engineers arrested during Stalin’s purges following the Second World War. The title is an allusion to Dante’s first circle of Hell in *The Divine Comedy*—wherein the Philosophers of Greece live in a walled green garden—unable to enter heaven, but enjoying a small space of relative freedom in the heart of Hell. The prisoners work on projects to help state security agencies. While most are aware of how much better off they are than “regular” prisoners, some are also conscious of the overwhelming moral dilemma of working to aid a system that is the cause of so much suffering. In Russia, the full text of the work has now been published, but only an edited version exists in English.

*The Cancer Ward* also published in English in 1968, is set in a hospital in Soviet Uzbekistan in the 1950s. The book examines the relationship of a group of patients in the cancer ward of a provincial Soviet hospital in 1955, two years after Stalin’s death.

For these three extraordinary novels, in 1970 Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. That year he could not receive the prize personally in Stockholm, since he was afraid that he would not be let back into Russia once he had left.

From 1969 until 1974 Solzhenitsyn lived in the Moscow home of Mstislav Rostropovich, the great Russian cellist who would later become the director of the National Symphony Orchestra. Today one of Solzhenitsyn’s sons is the principal conductor and the music director of the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia.

*The Gulag Archipelago*, a non fiction account of the Soviet forced labor and concentration camp system, was published in translation in the West in 1973. GULAG are the initials for the Russian words Chief Administration for Corrective Labor Camps, the

bureaucratic name of the Soviet concentration camp's main governing board. The word archipelago compares the system of labor camps spread across the Soviet Union with a vast chain of islands known only to those who were fated to visit them. Shortly after the appearance of the book in Europe and the United States, on February 13, 1974, Solzhenitsyn was deported from the Soviet Union to West Germany and stripped of his Soviet citizenship.

After a time in Switzerland, Solzhenitsyn was invited to Stanford University where he lived until moving his family to Vermont in 1976. He was given an honorary Literary Degree from Harvard University in 1978, and on June 8, 1978, he gave a Commencement Address at Harvard. In the address Solzhenitsyn was critical of the United States.

- He was critical of our focus on our legal system. He said that most of us base our actions on what the law permits instead of basing our actions on what is moral and ethical.
- He was critical of our focus on individual rights. He said: "Destructive and irresponsible freedom has been granted boundless space. Society appears to have little defense against the abyss of human decadence, such as, for example, misuse of liberty for . . . , motion pictures full of pornography, crime and horror."
- He was critical of the American news media. He said: "Without any censorship, in the West fashionable trends of thought and ideas are carefully separated from those which are not fashionable; nothing is forbidden, but what is not fashionable will hardly ever find its way into periodicals or books or be heard in colleges."
- He was critical of American popular culture. He said: "After the suffering of decades of violence and oppression,

the human soul longs for things higher, warmer and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits, introduced . . . by TV stupor and by intolerable music."

- He was critical of those who opposed the Vietnam War. Referring to the victory of communist governments in Vietnam and the killing fields of Cambodia, he said: "members of the U.S. antiwar movement wound up being involved in the betrayal of Far Eastern nations, in a genocide and in the suffering today imposed on thirty million people there."
- He was critical of those who focus on material positions instead of the spiritual life. He said "we turned our backs upon the Spirit and embraced all that is material with excessive and unwarranted zeal."

He said: "Two hundred or even fifty years ago, it would have seemed quite impossible, in America, that an individual could be granted boundless freedom simply for the satisfaction of his instincts or whims." But in 1978 he said "man's sense of responsibility to God and society grows dimmer and dimmer."

The Russian writer said that in the East the communist party destroyed the spiritual life. In the West the desire for material comfort suffocates our spiritual life. In 1978 Solzhenitsyn said: "The split in the world the true crisis, is not between communism and capitalism but between spirituality and materialism."

American conservatives applauded and embraced Solzhenitsyn. American liberals were not happy.

*The New York Times* editorial writers said: "Mr. Solzhenitsyn's world view seems to us far more dangerous than the easy-going spirit which he finds so exasperating. Life in a society run by

zealots like Mr. Solzhenitsyn is bound to be uncomfortable for those who do not share his vision or ascribe to his beliefs.” What he considered softness and weakness, the *New York Times* saw as “tolerance of many ideas, humility before the ultimate truth, a recognition of the responsibility imposed by our awful power. When our leaders have departed from these quiet virtues, as in Vietnam, the result has been terrible damage, to others and to ourselves.”

The 1978 Harvard speech proved that excellent, courageous writing about the Soviet Union did not make Solzhenitsyn an expert on the United States. His criticism of our legal system, of our focus on individual rights, of our news media, of our music and TV shows, of our withdrawal from Vietnam— all his criticisms were simplistic. The expert on Soviet prisons did not understand the complexities of our country.

Nor did he understand American humanism. Solzhenitsyn blamed humanism for replacing religion in the United States and giving birth to the greedy materialism he saw in America. But the materialism in our country, what Solzhenitsyn called our tendency to use our “boundless freedom simply for the satisfaction of . . . instincts or whims” is caused not by humanism but by our capitalist economy. Advertising gives us the illusion that the key to happiness is a better cell phone or a better car. Humanism plays a minor role in our nation where 75 percent of the population say they are members of a Christian Church.

After the Harvard address, Solzhenitsyn returned to his home in Vermont where he withdrew from the public arena and was rarely seen. On a typical day he rose between five and six in the morning, went for a swim in the pond, ate breakfast alone, then did some household chores or read until eight. At eight o’clock he began his writing day. He wrote in the guest house, a wooden cabin by the pond. Until five in the evening he wrote, usually without a break.

After five he would eat the evening meal with his family. In the evening he would read or visit with his wife and three sons. He was in bed by ten. Occasionally old friends like Rostropovich might come to visit. Microfilms and photo copies of historic documents needed for his writing would arrive periodically from university libraries such as Stanford. For fifteen years Solzhenitsyn devoted himself to writing virtually every day. The result was a series of massive books on World War I. They received respectful, but unenthusiastic reviews.

In 1985 Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union. He encouraged *glasnost*, or openness, and previously banned books started to be published. A presidential decree restored Solzhenitsyn’s Russian citizenship in July 1989. In October of 1989 the *Gulag Archipelago* first appeared in the Soviet Union. Russian bookstores sold seven million copies. At the end of 1993 a poll was taken. Eighteen percent of Russians wanted Boris Yeltsin to be president, while 48 percent wanted Alexander Solzhenitsyn as their president. In May of 1994 Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia.

This man who nearly died of stomach cancer fifty years ago is now eighty-eight years old and living in Moscow. Politically he appears to have been strongly influenced by the example of the New England Town meeting style of government that he saw in Vermont. In an interview about the future of Russia he said:

A healthy democratic system can only evolve on the grassroots level, from local associations, . . . a democratic system evolving from local government to Supreme Legislative Assembly is the healthiest for Russia and the most consonant with its traditional spirit.

When it comes to religion Solzhenitsyn is a conservative, a Russian Orthodox Christian. He said:

I believe that conservatism is a striving to preserve and uphold the best, the most humane and reasonable traditions that have justified themselves throughout centuries-old history.

Because of ongoing corruption among government officials and organized crime, some Russians feel nostalgia for communism and for Stalin. In a 2003 poll 36 percent of the respondents said that they believed that Stalin was more good than bad.

A year ago the first Russian film based on Solzhenitsyn's novel *The First Circle* was shown on Russian state television. The ten evening TV min-series showed the terror of the regime of Joseph Stalin, describing the Soviet Union as a huge prison camp. Solzhenitsyn wrote the script for the film and read a commentary behind the camera. When he first saw the film tears filled his eyes and he could not speak. Human rights groups hope that the screenplay of *The First Circle* will help the nation change its nostalgia for the past. Many Russians continue to view Solzhenitsyn as a hero for exposing the crimes of communism and the horrors of the forced labor camps.

However, we in the United States also can learn from his words. Condemning the crimes of others is easy. It is easy to read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and say "Oh those Russians. They suffered terribly under Stalin. We are lucky that we live in the good old USA." But we would do well to read carefully his writings about prison, for we have our prison islands, our own Archipelago spread across this nation.

Compared with other countries, more people are behind bars in the United States than any other country. As of 2006, a record seven million people were behind bars, on probation or on parole. Of the total, 2.2 million were incarcerated. China ranks second with 1.5 million followed by Russia with 870,000. The United States has 5

percent of the world's population and 25 percent of the world's incarcerated population. The United States' rate of incarcerating is three to eight times that of the Western European nations and Canada. In federal prison, 57 percent of those incarcerated were sentenced for drug offenses. Currently, considering local jails as well, almost a million of those incarcerated are in prison for nonviolent crime. In 2002 about 10.4 percent of all black males in the United States between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine were sentenced and in prison. *Ten percent.*

This is why we should read Solzhenitsyn. He is a genius when it comes to describing the experience of being a prisoner. While I hope all of us stay out of prison, I think it is wise for us to understand what that experience is like.

In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn speaks directly to those of us who take freedom for granted.

Do not pursue the illusion of property and position. It is enough if you don't freeze in the cold and if thirst and hunger don't claw at your insides. Rub your eyes and purify your heart and prize above all else in the world those who love you and wish you well. Do not hurt them or scold them, and never depart from them in anger. After all, you simply do not know: it might be your last act before your arrest, and that will be how you are imprinted in their memory.

So,

Rub your eyes and purify your heart and prize above all else in the world those who love you and wish you well. Do not hurt them or scold them, and never depart from them in anger.

