

Solzhenitsyn in Confession

by

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Abstract

One vital thread of *The Gulag Archipelago* is Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's rediscovery of his Christian roots. This rediscovery is predicated upon suffering, which, according to Solzhenitsyn, serves as a lever for spiritual growth. Solzhenitsyn's experiences of war, prison camps, and cancer shape his moral vision.

However, due to Cold War realities, upon *The Gulag Archipelago's* publication, most critics emphasized its political significance. Only later was his Christianity underlined, mostly unfavourably.

The intent of this paper is to track Solzhenitsyn's spiritual rebirth following his arrest for expressing anti-Stalinist views. My introductory chapter documents how Solzhenitsyn radically challenged my worldview. *Chapter Two: A Difficult Encounter with Self* is a personal response to Solzhenitsyn's confession. With a certain level of discomfort, I have chosen two years in Nigeria to highlight a shameful lack of moral discernment. *Chapter Three: A Difficult Birth* chronicles the journey to publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*. The final chapter, *Solzhenitsyn in Confession* illuminates Solzhenitsyn's confrontation with his moral deficiencies.

Key Words: Alexandr Solzhenitsyn; dissidents; Anna Akhmatova; Gulag; confession; remorse; spirituality; Judeo-Christian inheritance

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Frederick Fogg, my grandfather, who instilled in his eldest daughter, Shirley Hardy, a love of reading. To Ralph Hardy who taught the value of hard work on a daily basis. To Jimei, Fiona, and Jane who give me a reason to come home at night. My love and my thanks.

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The revelation here is that our true being resides neither within us encoded in some special psychological destiny, nor high above us in abstract revolutionary ideals, but rather all around us, perpetually at hand in our families, our pasts, our public and private lives, our rites and our works, and in our possibilities and responsibilities. For it is in these concrete, particular matters that the world addresses us, asks us who we are, and calls upon us to recollect our origins with gratitude and a resolute love of life.

From *The Ignorant Perfection of Ordinary People* by R Inchausti

Chapter One:

A Difficult Encounter with Authentic Heroism

On June 4th, 2001 my daughter-in-law and I were in a car accident in which I suffered whiplash with multiple specific areas of irritation and injury in the cervical and thoracic spines. In addition, I experienced some minor trauma. Treatment consisted of physiotherapy, a gym - based rehabilitation program, chiropractic visits and a good three months off work. Thus, I found myself at home with much unstructured time which, with some difficulty due to chronic pain, I converted into reading.

One of the first books I undertook was *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: a century in his life* by D.M. Thomas. As a teenager I had read Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a slender novel set in a 1950s Soviet labour camp. But my real interest in the Solzhenitsyn biography was at that stage due less to Solzhenitsyn than to D.M. Thomas, his biographer. For me, Thomas' *The White Hotel*, which I had first read in 1978, represented a stunning literary achievement: electric eroticism, Freudian analysis, and the Babi Yar holocaust. Over a 25 year period I had read and re-read most of Thomas' novels and much of his poetry. However for me, his greatest gift was introducing me to Alexandr Solzhenitsyn.

But this gift came with a challenge, especially for someone shaped by the secular countercultural norms of the 1960s: a distrust of authority, experimentation with drugs, a less formal approach to sexual relationships, and a flirtation with Marxism. Hence, on first reading, Solzhenitsyn's Christian version of the human drama was terribly un-chic; his concepts of good and evil, anachronistic; and his reduction of the horrors of the last century to "Men have forgotten God" (*Templeton Address*) simplistic. Especially foreign was his promoting self-fulfillment through self-denial. Although Solzhenitsyn's worldview appeared antiquated, it was not easy to disregard a man who took on a state

responsible for the deaths of over 60 million of its own citizens, a writer who gave voice to those without voice, including fifteen million peasants:

But peasants are silent people, without literary voice, nor do they write complaints or memoirs. No interrogators sweated out the night with them, nor did they bother to draw up formal indictments ... It is as if they had not even scarred the Russian conscience.¹

Equally provoking was Solzhenitsyn's contempt for my much admired counterculture icons, such as Daniel Ellsberg, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. For example, in *The Oak and the Calf*, Solzhenitsyn's memoirs, he describes Sartre and de Beauvoir's 1966 trip to Russia where they attempt to set up a meeting with him. Lena Zoninav, their interpreter, is sent to meet him at the Mayakovsky Square with the intent of arranging dinner at the Peking Hotel in Moscow. Solzhenitsyn, much to my astonishment, refuses. When pressed by the interpreter, Solzhenitsyn conveys that meeting Sartre "would be unbearably painful."² Later, Solzhenitsyn wondered whether Sartre had "discerned in my refusal the depth of our aversion to him."³ Solzhenitsyn's use of the personal pronoun *our* to modify *aversion* conveyed a consensus of disdain on the part of the whole of Russia's dissident population for Sartre and his Left Bank entourage. They saw Sartre as Stalin's cheerleader. Furthermore, Sartre's canvassing for the Nobel Prize for M. A. Sholokhov was for Solzhenitsyn "the most hurtful insult imaginable on Russian literature."⁴

For the dissidents, Russia was being brutalized by an inhuman social experiment called communism for which Sholokhov and Sartre were both apologists. Sartre's support for Sholokhov and Stalin was seen as an endorsement of political incarceration, forced

¹ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago 1918 – 1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation – Volume One*. (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 24.

² Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. *The Oak and the Calf*. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), 119.

³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴ *Ibid.*

labour camps, the dislocation of millions, and murder. Of course, for the Soviet authorities, Sholokhov's 1965 winning of the Nobel Prize was gratifying, a literary affirmation of state policies; for the dissidents, sanction for the foul rot of a foul regime.

This was not the case however in October of 1958 when, following the publication in the west of *Doctor Zhivago*, the Nobel Prize was awarded to Boris Pasternak. The very next day the state hounds were unleashed. The Union of Soviet Writers voted en masse to expel the nearly seventy-year old writer. *Pravda* declared Pasternak "a weed in the garden of socialism"⁵ while the First Secretary of the Komsomol compared Pasternak unfavourably with a pig since he "fouled the spot where he ate and cast filth on those by whose labour he lives and breathes."⁶ Truly, the whole apparatus of the state came down hard. In fact, the Soviet backlash against Pasternak, even after he had renounced the prize, was fanatically intense. As *Doctor Zhivago* did not strike me as an overtly political work, I was puzzled. But, as I was learning, in the Cold War context every page of *Doctor Zhivago* represented a hostile act to the Soviet authorities in that it "asserted a fidelity to something infinitely greater and more truthful than any political system."⁷

Through Thomas and Solzhenitsyn I was accessing the worlds of Boris Pasternak, Alexander Blok, Marina Tsvetayeva, Osip Mandelstam, and especially Anna Akhmatova, whose poem *Requiem* along with Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* was essential for my understanding the Stalinist Terror. Both works stand as testimony to truth, as Poetry of Witness; and both these writers, witnesses to evil and victims of state terror, derived their courage to endure from the Judeo-Christian inheritance, an inheritance to which I had, at best, been indifferent, or more frequently, belittled. Now it was an inheritance whose values I was reevaluating.

⁵ D.M. Thomas. *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: A Century in his Life*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 251.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

But for a brief respite during World War II, from 1925 to 1952 Akhmatova's work was banned. In August, 1921 her first husband, the founder of the Acmeist movement in poetry, Nikolai Gumilev, was executed by the Bolsheviks on allegation that he was a counterrevolutionary. Max Hayward in his introduction to *Poems of Akhmatova* states that Gumilev's murder, "which profoundly shocked and frightened the Russian intelligentsia, was a stigma on Akhmatova and their son, Lev Gumilev, particularly in the later Stalin years."⁸ In the 1950s Akhmatova published poems eulogizing Joseph Stalin. They were designed to gain freedom for her son, who, in 1949, had been exiled to Siberia. It was his third arrest. According to Hayward:

The main point in arresting him in 1949 was to use him as a hostage, eventually bringing irresistible pressure to bear on her. The worst punishment Stalin inflicted on poets was not to kill and imprison them, but to make them praise him.⁹

In *Requiem* Akhmatova chronicles the suffering of her "partners in ... dread"¹⁰, the women who stood outside Kresty Prison for days, hoping for word about their loved ones, hoping to deliver a hat or a pair of salvaged gloves or shoes, hoping for one last glimpse before the inevitable sentence of death or exile for a beloved son or husband. The poem opens with "one of the common lot"¹¹ emerging from the endless queue outside of prison to issue a direct plea to Akhmatova:

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):

"Can you describe this?"

⁸ Anna Akhmatova. *Poems of Akhmatova*. (Boston – Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 15 –16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24 – 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

And I said: "I can."

Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.¹²

Thus, *Requiem* was conceived, and from 1935 - 1940 the muted grief of thousands took on literary form. Considered too dangerous to be written down, *Requiem* was instead kept alive in the memory of Akhmatova and a few trusted friends. Astonishingly, her story of preserving truth was far from unique. Many writers, their families, and networks of supporters risked much to bear witness. More were crushed than survived under the jackboot of state terrorism. In Solzhenitsyn's case, during his incarceration, to protect his writing, his informants, and himself from extinction, he resorted to mnemonic devices:

In prisons the composition and polishing of verses had to be done in my head. Then I started breaking matches into little pieces and arranging them on my cigarette case in two rows [of ten each, one representing units and the other tens]. As I recited the verses to myself, I displaced one bit of broken match from the units row for every line. When I had shifted ten units I displaced one of the "tens." [Even this work had to be done circumspectly: such innocent match games, accompanied by whispering movements of the lips or an unusual facial expression, would have aroused the suspicion of stool pigeons. I tried to look as if I was switching the matches around quite absent-mindedly.] Every fiftieth and every hundredth line I memorized with special care, to help me keep count. Once a month I recited all that I had written. If the wrong line came out in place of one of the hundreds or fifties, I went over it all again and again until I caught the slippery fugitives.¹³

By the end of Solzhenitsyn's sentence he had accumulated some 12,000 lines of verse, including his epic poem, *Prussian Nights*.

Games such as this *innocent match game* were deadly serious. As Thomas P. Whitney reveals in his Translator's Notes in *The Gulag Archipelago Volume One*:

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago 1918 – 1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation – Volume Three*. (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 100.

The author's decision to publish this work was triggered by a tragedy of August, 1973: A Leningrad woman to whom the author had entrusted a portion of his manuscript for safekeeping broke down after 120 sleepless hours of intense questioning by Soviet Security officers and revealed where she had hidden it – enabling them to seize it. Thereupon, in her desperation and depression, she committed suicide.¹⁴

I will discuss this tragic event in greater detail in Chapter 3: A Difficult Birth.

* * * * *

Beyond question, Solzhenitsyn was at work on me. Not only the events of his life, but also *The Gulag Archipelago*, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *Cancer Ward*, *First Circle*, the numerous poems, short stories, prayers, and public addresses were chiseling away at my own values, exposing a moral shabbiness. In *Volume One* of *The Gulag Archipelago* Solzhenitsyn affirms that “[a] coward tries to find a spot where things are easy, soft, and safe,”¹⁵ an apt banner under which I had been leading my life. His own remarkable story as well as those of his informants bullied me out of a world of coziness and booted me into grim dehumanizing environments: forced labour camps and cancer clinics.

But beyond the heroic, something else profoundly enigmatic haunted me. After I had finished an abridged version of *The Gulag Archipelago*, I felt that I had been living ignorantly within history, unconscious of a larger drama. I felt I had shortchanged Solzhenitsyn and the multitude of victims of state terror: the victims of torture and shootings and mass executions and organized famine. So I immediately purchased the complete three-volume set and began a slower, more thorough read. Although my time was now restricted by a heavy workload and the demands of a young family, I committed myself to reading a minimum of 10 pages every morning before the household awoke.

¹⁴ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume One*, 617.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

After completing the three volumes, I went back to review and catalogue the sections that I had highlighted with a yellow fluorescent marker, sections that had resonated at a more personal level. Finally it came to me. I now knew why for the last two years his writings would not leave me alone.

Amidst the mountains of state-sponsored death, my yellow markings had ensnared a confession. They encircled a sinner named Solzhenitsyn. And this sinner is convinced that he is a superior human being until he is snagged by a trifle and dragged deep into the Gulag slime. And in this nether world he relentlessly attempts to exploit his former position as an officer to distance himself from the rank and file. He has other prisoners carry his suitcase; he feels no remorse. And even in his “lice-laden, bedbug- infested lock-up ... without ventilation,”¹⁶ he adheres to this perverse sense of entitlement. And besides his bolted insistence on being held in esteem, Solzhenitsyn, by his own admission, was:

... committed to that world outlook which is incapable of admitting any new fact or evaluating any new opinion before a label has been found for it from the already available stock: be it “hesitant duplicity of the petty bourgeoisie,” or the “militant nihilism of the déclassé intelligentsia.”¹⁷

Yet remarkably prison serves to save him from himself. In fact, Solzhenitsyn comes to experiences prison not as “an abyss ..., but the most important turning point in [his] life.”¹⁸ Prison, he asserts, is the midwife for “the birth within you;”¹⁹ the tabernacle where “your soul would heal.”²⁰ He embraces as purgative that from which I recoil: pain and suffering. I was the coward who bowed before the “easy, soft, and safe.”²¹

¹⁶ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume One*, 180.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 613.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 255

For both Solzhenitsyn and Akhmatova life outside the camps was an extension of inside foulness. In *Requiem* Akhmatova evokes disease and futility, the imminent rupture of a small tube-shaped organ that spews toxic bacteria through its dying walls:

And Leningrad city swayed like

A needless appendix to its prisons.

It was then that the railway-yards

Were asylums of the mad;²²

The 'railway-yards' were loading areas for human cargo en route to the Gulag.

Solzhenitsyn provides his reader with the equally nauseous analogy of putrification to convey the transmission of filth across arbitrary borders:

Like a piece of rotten meat which not only stinks right on its own surface but also surrounds itself with a stinking molecular cloud of stink, so, too, each island of the Archipelago created and supported a zone of stink around itself. This zone, more extensive than the Archipelago itself, was the intermediate transmission zone between the small zone of each individual island and the Big Zone - Big Camp Compound – comprising the entire country.

Everything of the most infectious nature in the Archipelago – in human relations, morals, views, and language – in compliance with the universal law of osmosis in plant and animal tissue, seeped first into this transmission zone and then dispersed through the entire country.²³

²² Anna Akhmatova. *Requiem and Poem without a Hero*. (London: Eleks Book Limited, 1976),25.

²³ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago 1918 – 1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation – Volume Two*. (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 564.

Gagging on mouthfuls of infected Gulag air, I was now rethinking my life.

Solzhenitsyn's self-indictment in a setting where he could have claimed victim status shamed and challenged me. Gradually, writers and spiritual activists such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lech Walesa, Elie Wiesel, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Vaclav Havel, who affirm the values of traditional religious mythologies, were on my reading list and gaining credibility. And for me these individuals were a far cry from "the metaphysics of darkness, Blake's dreaded priesthood, the pharisaic assault upon human solidarity made in the name of some privileged truth, method, or idea."²⁴ Instead, they, along with Solzhenitsyn and Akhmatova, came to represent authentic heroism whose quest was that of moral discernment and moral obligation, realms where my much-traveled passport had never been stamped.

And like Akhmatova in *Poem Without a Hero*, an obsessional work of repentance for the amorality of artists before the Revolution, I was conjuring up a parade of specters who, till that point, had shaped my morals and worldview: Sartre, de Beauvoir, Fanon, Sontag, Russell, Rubin, Cleaver, and Leary. They were being called into presence to be reevaluated. And more importantly, episodes in my own life were stirring like maggots under a diaphanous skin.

I had in my life many chapters about which I could write. However, what did emerge when I sat down to write were my two years in West Africa, two years where the world addressed me and asked who I was.

²⁴ Robert Inchausti. *The Ignorant Perfection of Ordinary People*. (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1991), 2.

Chapter Two: A Difficult Encounter with Self

At 7:05 a.m. on the 5th of July 5, 1981 the Devonshire Hotel in Vancouver was brought down by a controlled explosion. The collapse took but 6.5 seconds. Hundreds of onlookers crowding the adjacent streets and the windows of the nearby Vancouver and Georgia Hotels cheered as the seven-storey landmark fell inwards. A cloud of white dust rose up and quickly settled.

I wasn't there. I was far away on another continent where for months on end the dust doesn't settle. Instead, it infects the landscape and masks the sun. It coats the teeth and tongue, it defiles nostrils and eyelids. It burdens memory.

But some 15 months earlier I was at the Devonshire. I cannot recall the time of the interview, the hotel entrance or the room where the interview took place. I do, however, recall the three black men and one woman, all brightly draped in African cloth, and the limp handshakes that outlasted my comfort zone. And I clearly remember the interview.

Once we were seated Marie was asked how many children we had. "Two boys," she replied. The large man conducting the interview beamed, "You must be proud!" The others nodded enthusiastically. Only two other questions were directed her way: "Are you having more children?" and "Do you intend to work in Nigeria?" And that was it. Her Master's in Linguistics, her thesis on Baudelaire and her three years of teaching French to federal employees counted for nothing. For the next 40 minutes she stewed while her husband with less education and teaching experience and absolutely no interest in a West African rural posting held court.

On our way back to our East End basement- suite apartment, she clung to her sullenness. Teaching in Nigeria had been her idea. She had detected the ad in the classified section of

the *Vancouver Sun*, cut it out, and presented it to me. Her uncle had been an officer in the French Foreign Legion. He had been posted in French West Africa and French Indochina. The exotic knickknacks and tales that he brought back as presents soothed a sour childhood; her bookshelves were graced by exotic carvings, allies guarding the spines of her second-hand university texts: Gide, Valéry, de Saussure, Barthes, Levi-Straus. Tombouctou, Ouagadougou, and Bamako were potent syllables whose distilled fumes whispered escape.

Until the interview, I had been indifferent. I had not sabotaged her African dream. I had just hoped her initiative, on its own accord, would go away like a bad mood or a tiresome guest. I was just happy with my life. For six of the last eight years we had been transient. Ken Kesey was the parade marshal; Jack Kerouac led the band. And I, a now weary prankster, had tired of the rootless routine.

* * * * *

Two backpackers – one from Winnipeg, Canada, the other from Rouen, France – met by chance in Pompeii, hitchhiked through Europe and North America. A baby boom in 1974 meant only that our Lonely Planet thumbs were succeeded by a 1969 Ford Econoline van. The Oregon Coast, California, the Yucatan Peninsula, and Guatemala awaited. Neil Young's *On the Beach* and Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* on eight-track tagged along for the ride.

Back then, a single Canadian dollar blossomed into a colourful bouquet of third-world currencies. Three weeks of minimum wage as a shipper/receiver in some Winnipeg warehouse or as a landscape/gardener easily procured a three or four month hiatus in Central America or the Yucatan. Construction at Cancun was just a rumour; Tulum, a dollar-a-day carefree beach with a thatched hut and three lazy hammocks. A Mayan temple for the worship of the Descending God dominated a blue sea. Renting a house in Antigua, Guatemala cost nothing. Our alarm clock – our neighbour, a wrinkled senora slapping corn flour into tortillas. She baked them for a few centavos and brought them

steaming hot to our door. Volcan de Agua lazily puffed away in the background. Life was easy. Mortgages, hydro bills, and indexed pension plans were not part of the rucksack wanderers' creed. And unlike my dad's generation, I didn't need a war to escape the tedium of the Canadian prairies.

But one always comes back. Going with the flow wasn't securing me meaningful work. While Marie was scoring good jobs through the federal government's language training programs for civil servants, this dharma bum with a B.A from the University of Manitoba was proudly launching his lucrative career as a minimum - wage shipper/receiver. So in the spring of 1978, I applied for and was accepted into a 12-month teacher certification program at Simon Fraser University.

On Day One of orientation, I latched onto a band of reformed gypsies: Leo had just returned from a two-year stint in rural Ghana; Jadzia had just stepped off an Amazon steamer, while Donna's credentials were forged in Hungary. We, the counter-culture with our shirts tucked in, became allies.

Within weeks of graduating, I was offered a teaching position at a private high school in South Vancouver, which I gratefully accepted. Telling people, "I'm teaching English 12 and French 11" felt great. I no longer had to rely on my 'I've-been-everywhere' refrain for ego gratification. So unlike past adventures, West Africa would cost me something. I now had something to lose.

* * * * *

I could have ended it right then and there in the van. I could have exploited Marie's misgivings. They were well-founded. If educated Nigerians discounted her qualifications and saw her only as a child bearer, what other discourtesies awaited? Sadly, I would provide the rest.

Within 6 weeks of our arrival in Northern Nigeria, one-third of the 30 Canadian teachers and their families had resigned and returned home to Canada. Things had gone downhill from Heathrow Airport where Nigerian passengers, oblivious to an existing line-up, placed themselves at the front of the Nigerian Airline check-in counter. Apparently queuing was not part of their British colonial inheritance, an inflated sense of entitlement was. In-flight hospitality was marked by rudeness and indifference. Ten minutes after take-off, an airline stewardess ignored a Canadian mother's repeated requests for warm water to prepare baby formula. An ugly confrontation ensued resolving the situation to no one's satisfaction, sullenness on one side, disbelief on the other – a hostile pattern I would see played out in various forms over the next two years. The party was just starting and I wanted to stay. Was this some post-colonial hangover? Did these ladies miss a few core modules of their hospitality course? My mind was scrambling to put it all together. And the weirder it got, the more I was hooked. It was a puzzle I needed to understand.

And it got crazier: chaos at Kano Airport, assault rifles at the road blocks on the chartered bus ride from Kano to Jos, a grating chorus of lepers outside the stores frequented by whites, ludicrous bargaining for essentials, and Kafkaesque banking. And what about the orientation put on by the Plateau State Ministry of Education even though we hadn't slept since we left London some 17 hours ago? I rejoiced in the weirdness of it all.

Predictably, our first month salary had not arrived, so our group leader summoned us from our remote postings back to the Ministry of Education in Jos, the state capital. Forms had to be signed in order to release our monthly salaries. Male teachers were to sign for their working spouses. We arrived at the Ministry by bush taxi from all over Plateau State. It was the dry season and the pot-holed roads coughed up a reddish dust. Teachers, both local and expatriate, were swarming the Ministry corridors like frenzied ants in search of the right office or signature. Scraps of information were shared as we passed our baturis – Hausa for whites – brothers. Only a name and a signature without I.D. were required to be handed a fat wad of cash.

A fat wad of cash for downtime. Familiar territory. I was being paid although I hadn't taught for 6 weeks. The Nasarawa River which flows through the shantytown and yam fields during the wet season was now bone dry and would be for another month. My Form One class of 55 students was recruited to haul sludgy well water through the sunburned bush to the dust-choked boarding school kitchen twice daily. While they laboured, I befriended inertia.

But for most of the Canadians, this burden of time would prove to be the great stressor – greater than malaria, 100 degree temperatures, the austerity of bush life, or suicidal taxi drivers. Though surrounded by primitive village compounds of copper-coloured mud walls and thatched roofs, these teachers wanted to be on Toronto time. Unlike me, they craved densely packed work lives; they were mismatched with village rhythms of mortar and pestle, rites of passages forged by different gods. And these educators would never get drunk on palm wine or *kaikai*. And unlike me, they would never visit the local girls and explore their firm muscles – muscles sculpted by the pounding of yams in a welcoming mortar, the endless search for kindling, or the care of female crops. They would never extract the dampness between the willing thighs of the local girls or have the yeasty froth of their post-coital penises wiped with a florid cotton wraparound.

But they weren't staying. More and more were leaving. In the last week four more Canadian families had bailed.

* * * * *

Tony had been living in a cushy hotel in Jos for the last seven weeks because his accommodations weren't ready. He had chanced upon a couple of clubs, *Rainbow Corner* and the *Havana Club*, where both waitresses and locals were accommodating. Later he would unearth *Scheherazade's* which drew barflies from all over West Africa. I soon acquired an affinity for the French speaking girls from the former French colonies: Niger, Benin, la Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, and Togo. My university French courses – a silk scarf over indiscretions - were not to be wasted.

I allotted Baudelaire the role of Virgil. He served to soften the sting of conscience as I sank into worldly pleasures. As an affront to bourgeois propriety, Baudelaire would select the most outlandish whores, whores with their hair dyed green. Real party ice-breakers. I know this because Marie told me. I learned much from her for which I am truly grateful. Perhaps my real education in life began with her. In fact, her very thesis was an endorsement of the unconventional. In the realms of poetry, politics, and painting I deferred to her. And who really wanted Gauguin to stay in banking? What would we know of Paul today if he had stuck it out with Mette and the five kids?

Sadly Paul is disappointed in Tahiti. The travel agent lied. Those naked Eves he so longed to paint are now decked out in Mother Hubbard dresses. The missionaries hit town early and ended the party. They hid the chips and emptied the ashtrays. So Paul moves on. (We all do) Deserting the ordinary, he flees some 800 miles to the village of Atuona in the Marguesas Islands. There, he builds his last dwelling, which, in large letters, he christens: Maison du Jouis – House of Pleasure. Undoubtedly Paul knew that repressed sexuality comes back as pornography and child abuse. So wasting no time, he takes as his vahine, the fourteen-year old Marie-Rose, who has been a boarder in the Catholic mission school. Sure the local nuns and missionaries aren't too pleased. And when Paul dies, he gets hit with a most uncharitable epitaph. The local bishop labels him an enemy of God.

And maybe the bishop was right. Contact with Europeans, painters or priests, was bad news all around. Diseases brought by Europeans reduced a population of 100,000 to just over 2000 when Paul died in 1903.

But fashions change. The old constraints loosen. We learn to relax a little. Repentance is now retro; moral discrimination, drab; and pleasure, paramount. Oscar Wilde is in; Matthew Arnold, out. Chastity, poverty, and obedience cut it only in Calcutta. And new saints are spewed out to shelter the spirit of a new age. In some cozy Left Bank sidewalk café, Sartre, our secular pope, distills quantities of wisdom and distributes it to the

devotees. He beatifies a cunning homosexual thief, Saint Genet of the Gutter, endorses self-liberation through murder in his preface to Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre*, and promotes a strict regime of travel, polygamy, and transparency. Simone, the patron saint of the feminist movement, buys into it big time. She generously procures her own students for him. Soon her teaching license is revoked. The authorities have no sense of humour.

* * * * *

So after securing our first fat wad of naira from the Ministry of Education, three of us settle into one of the taxis heading for the Rainbow Corner. The first indiscretion beckons. Curiosity is partially overriding guilt because guilt, I assure myself, is just a tool of social control.

Still an obscure senses of guilt of remains. I tell myself that I haven't done anything yet. I am staying safely on the sidelines. But I know what I really want. I've been stuck in a stale marriage for seven years. I crave novelty. My only infidelity, two years before, hasn't cured me. While Marie was visiting family in France, I was having a go with a visiting professor from Montreal. I was close to tossing the marriage, but I couldn't. Part of me had still loved Marie, and the two boys were just babies. These memories scatter as the taxi pulls up to our destination.

Tony has arrived before us and secured a table for seven. He gestures welcome. One of the Canadian teachers, Alan, a married man with a wife and two daughters, is chatting up a big village girl, the physical inverse of his petite wife. They have come to Nigeria to heal a wounded marriage. His wife's affair with his best buddy stabbed him to the core. He's still waiting for the scar tissue. Yet tonight he has checked his pain at the door. I've never seen him so happy.

Am I the only conflicted member of our party? The others are all paired up with some barfly. They exult over their plunder. I hesitate. They tease. They assume I'm being

selective. Selective – I appreciate the positive spin. I don't want them to think I'm a prude. But the sidelines are getting less comfortable. Pressure is mounting to head back to the Mission Guest House. Tony has already negotiated a couple of taxis.

I am silent in the back of the taxi as thoughts of my boys, aged 6 and 2, taint any expectation of pleasure. And Marie has yet to be consigned to insignificance. I struggle to suffocate conscience. Fortunately, a challenge claims my attentions ... How are we to smuggle the girls past the guard at the Mission Guest House?

Ah ... the Mission Guest House ... clean, comfortably furnished, reasonably priced, especially if shared by two. They sprang up some 40 years ago to serve the traveling missionaries. As teaching is viewed as an extension of missionary work, we are granted access. In the taxi we joke that there is no missionary clause in our two-year contract. I am grateful for the laughter behind which I hide shame. I clutch my companion's hand.

I direct the driver to stop a block from the Guest House. Alan and I enter the room first. Luckily, Joseph, the night watchman, is absent. Ten minutes later the ladies arrive undetected. When I find myself alone with the young girl, whose blackness stands out against the white cotton bed sheets, all moral considerations dissolve. Under the folds of layered mosquito netting through which candlelight seeps I take in her flesh. What I have coveted so long, my eager hands and mouth possess and play with at my frenzied leisure. And when the feverish exchange subsides, I probe the mysteries of her world, her tribe, her village. She reveals her age to be 15 and I am freshly aroused. A new world is opening up to which I greedily succumb.

On the way back to Nasarawa, Alan and I both acknowledge guilt. Fortunately, the four – hour taxi ride allows us time to distance ourselves from our indiscretions. A series of police roadblocks – Nigeria's finest are fishing for bribes – and a near traffic accident remove us further from the remorse. By the time we arrive at our boarding school compound, we are ready for the predictable rhythms of family life. Welcomed warmly by our wives and excited children, we easily slide into the domestic fold.

But memories of our carnal exploits won't submit to extinction. They sizzle beneath the surface of ordinary life. In the shadows they whisper. They provide a seedy filter through which we now view all women – our students, the village women, our neighbour's wives. They suggest that we are here to experience all, and the unlived life is the greatest sin. Our one-sided infidelities are a gift, a compensation for the tedium of domesticity and commitment. And the sleazy plots metastasize. Why be satisfied with one woman at a time?

* * * * *

After some 16 months I weary of deception. Failing to compartmentalize my sordid extracurricular activities, I make a commitment to myself. I will be faithful to Marie. I will reclaim the solid virtues of a husband: steadfastness, decency, and responsibility. And surprisingly I draw strength from my resolve. In the very cool of the morning when the layer of evening sweat yields to the faint rumour of a breeze, I wake beside Marie. She is my wife again. Remorse no longer gnaws at my soul.

And I stop seeing Constance, my mistress with a feather soft voice from the Cameroons, whose breasts like ripened plantains curve up toward Heaven, whose dark chocolate nipples cleanse my greedy lips, my thin lips caked with powdery dust, the fine powdery harmattan dust whose sickly yellowish pallor blots out the Nigerian sun from October to May. Like the harmattan wind laden with fine powdery sand and dust from the Sahara, I blot out my infidelities.

* * * * *

A few months later Alan and I traveled to Kaduna, a city north of Jos. The reason for this venture is cloudy, but as it took place towards the end of our teaching contracts, it might be related to shipping our possessions back to Canada or making international telephone calls.

But these memories are blurry because a few weeks before the trip we score some *goof*, epic weed whose potency exceeds anything I had inhaled in Canada. Nigerians nicknamed it *goof* because they believe its consumption leads to insanity. Of course, we brought some with us to smooth out the long trip to Kaduna.

And in Kaduna things get a little twisted. We're stoned out of our skulls and stumble upon this movie theatre. It must have been at the American Consulate because an Africa movie theatre would have registered, even on a wasted brain. And remember – we've been living in the bush for nearly two years, so a movie's a big deal. We would have watched anything.

But we weren't prepared for *Scarecrow*, a dark story about two scruffy drifters on a strange and confused journey. The opening shot is of a wire fence that hugs a desolate two-lane asphalt highway. Grey sky. Howling wind. It could have been Plateau State during the dry season. But it's not. It's California.

The Pacino character, Francis, a soft spoken transient, uses comedy to deal with the shit life spews at him. Hackman's character, Max, a get-the-fuck-out-of-my-face ex-con, wears extra layers of clothing to keep the world away. These guys are damaged big time, and I'm wishing I weren't stoned. At some level Max and Francis connect, but not in a Hope and Crosby sort of way.

Their journey is to recapture something essential that was stolen or broken. Francis is seeking a child he abandoned during the mother's pregnancy. Max plans to pour the prison savings he hoarded into a Pittsburg carwash.

And the laughs are your ticket to anguish. Sometimes Francis and Max morph into Lennie and George from *Mice and Men* – the American Dream in a *Midnight Cowboy* landscape; now they're Vladimir and Estragon from *Waiting for Godot*. Life's punishing them for their dreams. And the shit gets pretty thick – a prison rape scene and a

psychological meltdown. To stay human, to be present for each other, they flush their dreams down the toilet and retreat into solitude or madness. I'm coming apart like some gooey jelly. I'm drool dribbling down the hard wooden back of a clammy movie theatre seat. I have no shell. The *goof* won't let me reframe things into something I can handle, something safe. I leave the theatre fucked up.

Now we're heading to a night club with Patrick, an expat buddy who's working for ITT. How we met up with him, I haven't a clue. We're all wired and listening to the Kinks on cassette. I can now breathe and feel the rumour of a spine somewhere between neck and tailbone. *Girl I want to be with you all of the time. All day and all of the night. All day and all of the night.* A troop of baboons with a regal sense of authority is crossing Ahmadu Bello Way. We're forced to stop. It's weird.

"Who the fuck is Ahmadu Bello?" Patrick mutters indifferently. No one replies. We're all zoning out. I'm still dealing with the baboons.

Levity reigns as we enter the Costain Club, an upgrade from what we're used to in Jos, Keffi, Wamba, or Nasarawa. The whole club, fueled by highlife music, throbs like a dick gorged on blood. A lightshow and no goat heads in the bucket next to the kitchen are pluses. Black guys are dancing with each other - they call it bone-to-bone. No fag tag. You see this at the bush dances all the time. Yeah - in the bush, it's 90 percent guys. Dancing with a woman is bone -to - cheek. I've gone bush in many ways, but I'm still a committed bone- to cheek man.

The pussy parade here is solid. Alan and Patrick have already secured evening entertainment. They're ready to head out. I'm hanging tight with my recent resolve. But as I leave the dance floor and hit the lobby, this stunning belle from *la Cote D'Ivoire* comes on to me. My resolve is melting like a puny ice-cube under a pitiless sun. Her voice is sugar cane and her big brown eyes are a testimony to creation. How I summon the will just to make it to the parking lot solo is beyond me. Shit, am I going to regret this? What if this fidelity thing is just some Victorian hangover? What's so uplifting

about spending the night on the sofa sans mosquito netting while Alan and Patrick are fucking their brains out with locals?

We hit Patrick's compound. His accommodations, contract, remittance are all better than ours. Shit, this guy has a cook, a gardener, and a security guard. Alan and I were to share the guest room. Now I am awkwardly prowling around for bedding for the living room sofa. I'm glad the windows are screened because malaria sucks. I need to crash. Patrick and a Ghanaian lady disappear into a puff of giggles.

Alan's lady has alternate plans for our evening entertainment. She wants the three of us to jiggy jiggy. She's planning to score a few more naira. Alan, bless his unselfish heart, is open to anything and he appreciates his enchantress's entrepreneurial skills. Like a good hostess, she feigns indignation when I indicate that Patrick's sofa is my destination of choice.

"Dis will never do," she pouts. She puts on some highlife music and launches into this racy striptease laced with raw tribal dancing. Man, there's liquid fire in this cocktail. Burlesque meets the bush and John's head is destined for the platter because Salome is now calling the tunes. Mister Steadfast Husbands is at her breasts. Alan seeks savour way down south.

"She's got a clit like a hardboiled egg," he testifies as he comes up for air. Herodias snickers on the sidelines, her gaze upon us.

The middle of the night finds me drenched in self-loathing. Remorse is splattered on my soul like blood on a butcher's apron. All the sawdust on the abattoir floor won't soak it up. If only I could have stayed in a stupor till morning, I could have distanced myself from my own squalor. In four or five hours they'll be getting up. Naked bodies will be clothed. Alan will avoid eye contact. I know him. He too will feel shame when the morning comes. We'll just need some time.

In a few hours we'll reframe this experience. We can make it palatable. A little time will dissolve this canopy of shame. Down the line there'll be a good pub story. In a few years we'll chuckle as we talk of our education in the world. In front of our future wives we'll speak a secret language, a language of codes, euphemisms: "We had some rich experiences in West Africa," Alan will acknowledge to my second wife while glancing at me.

A few extra nairas will satisfy the girl. She leaves without fuss. We can be home real soon. We just need some time. Some time to make sense of this. Some time to reframe this. The potholed road that coughs up reddish dust will help blur memory. In the afternoon we'll be holding our children with soiled hands.

Chapter Three:

A Difficult Birth: The Tones and Textures of Cold War

Intrigue

In a 1976 interview with Nikita Struve, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn describes how he became “the accredited chronicler of labor camp life, one to whom people brought the whole truth.” A large part of the truth he painfully acquired first hand through eleven years of camp experience and exile; another equally significant part followed from the publication and success of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*:

Ivan Denisovich put me in an extraordinary position. Hundreds of people sent me their personal recollection of life in the camps. I had to listen to them, assemble all this material, and rework it. That is when I began putting *Gulag* together.¹

And in putting together the torrent of raw material, Solzhenitsyn adhered to the one principle which characterizes all his major works:

This is a principle of mine: a single man, with his personal viewpoint and attitudes, cannot convey the whole course of events and their significance. It is essential that even the main leading characters, the author’s favorites, should run into dozens, with a cast of hundreds in all.²

Hence, in all his major work, both fictional and non-fictional, Solzhenitsyn provides his reader with a rich polyphonic landscape, which, unlike a monological text, does not depend on the centrality of a single authoritative voice. And from this multi-voiced narrative construction, he extracts Russia’s tortured soul. Specifically, in the case of *The Gulag Archipelago*, 227 voices, living and dead, accord Solzhenitsyn the right to serve as medium. And these voices are not restricted to those victims whose political or religious

¹ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. “An Interview on Literary Themes with Nikita Struve, March 1976.” *Solzhenitsyn in Exile*, eds. John B. Dunlop, Richard S. Haugh, and Michael Nicholson. (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1985), 300.

² *Ibid.*, 312.

perspectives resonate with Solzhenitsyn's core values. In fact, administrators, guards, thieves, Bolsheviks and Trotskyites, and many others who brought forth, endorsed and/or benefited from state terror provide viewpoints, personal reminiscences, and political commentary. But from all these crowded testimonies of victims and perpetrators, I stalk but one voice – that of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn who, while confronting his own dark potential, strived to remain human.

But to stalk Solzhenitsyn's spiritual journey on its forced pilgrimage through a pained landscape of arrest, transit prison, forced labour camps, prison scientific research institutes, cancer, and exile introduced challenges. Besides being polyphonic, the text is complex, non-chronological, and cast in thematic macro-metaphors such as *The History of Our Sewage Disposal System*, *The Slave Caravans*, *The Ships of the Archipelago*, and *The Archipelago Metastasizes*. Together with the constant zigzagging back and forth of time and the extreme metaphorization, a variety of lexical registers abound, as well as narrative and stylistic perspectives. In "Lexical Peculiarities of Solzhenitsyn's Language", Vera Carpovich draws attention to "colloquial and popular speech, Old Slavisms and criminal slang ... Sovietisms, the official language of the party and the Soviet Press."³ Elisabeth Markstein in her "Observations on the Narrative Structure" addresses the different narrative perspectives and styles "found even within the confines of a single page"⁴ and the translation difficulties that they pose. And to compound the difficulties, due to constant KGB surveillance and for reasons of his own security and that of his sources, Solzhenitsyn never allowed himself the luxury of having the entire *The Gulag Archipelago* manuscript with him at the same time. Instead, he secreted out various sections of the manuscript to trusted friends in and around Moscow. As John Dunlop underlines in his *Alternative to Ideology*, *The Gulag Archipelago*, where

³ Vera Carpovich "Lexical Peculiarities of Solzhenitsyn's Language" *Solzhenitsyn in Exile*, 177.

⁴ Elisabeth Markstein, "Observations on the Narrative Structure" *Ibid.*, 180.

Solzhenitsyn lays bare the architecture of the Gulag, “was written in the shadow of death, and this should not be forgotten.”⁵

Death, in fact, not its shadow, figured prominently in the timing of *The Gulag Archipelago*'s publication. Solzhenitsyn had concern not only for his sources within the Gulag but the dissident community on the outside who served him in his campaign against the state. In fact, not to place his clandestine army in danger, Solzhenitsyn withheld from publication for 16 years, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, *Invisible Allies*, his tribute to these dedicated warriors. Michael Scammell's January 7, 1996 New York Times review of *Invisible Allies* summarizes the substance and perplexity of their work:

Typing and microfilming had to be done in deepest secrecy. Typescripts (or microfilms) were glued into false book bindings; hidden in trick boxes; buried in bottles, backyards or the forest; concealed in a phonograph lid; stored in closets; stashed in basements, attics and barns; carried about in shopping bags; and on at least four occasions burned. It was an amazing undertaking for an informal network operating in one of the most closely controlled societies in the world.⁶ Michael Scammell. *The New York Times* on the web, January 7, 1996

Of the more than a hundred accomplices of this informal network that Solzhenitsyn lauds in *Invisible Allies*, none is more tragic than Elizaveta Voronyanskaya, a retired Leningrad librarian. Voronyanskaya had typed *The Gulag Archipelago* (parts of it twice or even thrice), *The First Circle* and *August 1914* as well as many shorter works. In the fall of 1973, for reasons of security, Solzhenitsyn requested that she burn her copy of *The Gulag Archipelago*. However, because Voronyanskaya had developed a devotional attachment to this monumental work, she was incapable of carrying out his request. Assuring Solzhenitsyn that her copy was destroyed, she instead hid it in the flat of a co-conspirator, Leonid Samutin. In September 1973, the KGB detained Voronyanskaya. After five days

⁵ John Dunlop “Alternative to Ideology,” *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶ Michael Scammell. *The New York Times* on the web, January 7, 1996

of interrogation, she broke down and revealed Samutin's name who in his turn disclosed the hiding place of the work. Casting herself as a Judas who had not only betrayed but also imperiled Solzhenitsyn, his clandestine network, labour camp prisoners and their relatives, and *The Gulag Archipelago* itself, Voronyanskaya plummeted into a suicidal despair:

Released from interrogation, she returned to her dark, Dostoyevskian flat in Romenskaya Street. She tried to commit suicide but was prevented. In hospital she explained that she had tried to take her life because of giving testimony against Solzhenitsyn. As soon as she was discharged from the hospital on 23 August, she hanged herself.⁷

With the KGB having seized a copy of the manuscript of *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn feared for himself, his family, and his informants. He also recognized that the KGB would use sections of the document out of context to discredit him and, by extension, the whole project to which he had dedicated over a decade of his life. The KGB's time-honored method of slander and personal vilification was well-known. Conversely, the KGB rightly feared that copies already existed in the West which, if published, would embarrass the government and endanger détente, the prevailing policy pioneered by President Nixon's National Security Advisor, Dr. Henry Kissinger. Both the Americans and the Soviet Union had pressing reasons to seek relaxation in tensions. The Soviet Union leadership felt the economic burden of the nuclear arms race was unsustainable; the American economy was also in financial trouble with the Viet Nam war draining government finances. Yet for Solzhenitsyn, détente meant only one thing: the strengthening of state terror within the Soviet Union.

The KGB was also determined to suppress *The Gulag Archipelago* because Solzhenitsyn's documentation painstakingly asserted that the practical and legal framework for a slave labour economy and concentration camp system were rooted in decrees issued by the venerated V.I. Lenin and not a deviation perpetrated by Stalin. This documentation was significant because in the seventies most Western left-wing movements or Socialist or Communist parties tended to view the Soviet concentration

⁷ Thomas, 398.

camp system as a Stalinist aberration, rather than an intrinsic component of the Soviet system. Now, with the pending publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*, Lenin's historical and political legacy would become problematic, especially for Western communist parties who still based economic and ideological policies on Lenin's writings. Obviously, the Soviet Union wished to avoid rupture within its ranks. Equally damning was Solzhenitsyn's assertion that the Soviet economy depended on the manpower provided by the forced labour camps, especially insofar as the development and construction of public works and infrastructure were concerned.

Decidedly, the sheer volume of firsthand testimony and primary documentation that Solzhenitsyn managed to assemble in *The Gulag Archipelago* would make discrediting his work most difficult. The Soviet authorities were also well aware that in the advent of an untimely death, Solzhenitsyn had made arrangements for his works to be published in the West. Abruptly, they "tried to offer him an inducement through his ex-wife."⁸ In exchange for not activating the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* in the West, the Soviet Union offered to expedite the domestic publication of *Cancer Ward*, an autobiographical novel whose publication had been held up for six years due to a drastic shift in the Soviet Union's political climate following Khrushchev's 1964 deposal. In an open letter to the Fourth Soviet Writers' Congress dated May 16th, 1967 Solzhenitsyn conveyed his frustration with the on-going publishing delays of *Cancer Ward*:

I am of course confident that I will fulfill my duty as a writer in all circumstances – from the grave even more successfully and more irrefutably than in my lifetime. No one can bar the road to truth, and to advance its cause I am prepared to accept even death.⁹

To their credit, the neo-Stalinist hardliners were reading Solzhenitsyn correctly; his worldview was alien to theirs. *Cancer Ward*'s pejorative allegorical references to the Soviet Union were far from muffled. Oleg Kostoglotov, the main protagonist, suffering

⁸ Ibid., 400.

⁹ Leopold Labedz. *Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record*. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972), 112.

from stomach cancer and exiled in perpetuity in Ush Terek, compares cancer overtaking a patient with the police state overtaking Russia: “A man dies from a tumour, so how can a country survive with growths like labour camps and exiles?”¹⁰ Also embedded in the novel are Tolstoy’s collection of short stories, *What Men Live By* with its profound spiritual questions categorically abhorrent to an atheist state. And it must be remembered that this was the same Soviet Writers’ Union that voted to expel Boris Pasternak even after his renouncing the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958. The authorities’ view of Solzhenitsyn was even less flattering. When on September 22, 1967, the Soviet Writers’ Union met to discuss *Cancer Ward*, one member commented:

“the works of Solzhenitsyn are more dangerous to us than those of Pasternak; Pasternak was a man divorced from life, while Solzhenitsyn, with his animated, militant, ideological temperament, is a man of principle.”¹¹

Of course, for Solzhenitsyn and the dissident community, the Soviet Writers’ Union was a “veritable Sodom and Gomorrah. ... which in its day had refused membership to Tsvetayeva, anathematized Zamyatin, treated Bulgakov with contempt, ostracized Akhmatova and Pasternak.”¹²

Still, Solzhenitsyn longed to be published and read in his own land far more than in the West:

Through most of the sixties, he was still struggling to have his fiction published in the Soviet Union. He was still hoping to speak, even if in slightly muted terms, to his countrymen. *The Gulag Archipelago* was to be released posthumously. He did not want his searing indictment of the prison camps to interfere with the possibility of his publishing his novels.¹³

¹⁰ Alexandr. Solzhenitsyn. *Cancer Ward*. (London:Vintage Random House, 2003), 556.

¹¹ Edward Ericson Jr. *Solzhenitsyn: The Moral Vision*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 89.

¹² Solzhenitsyn. *The Oak and the Calf*. 9.

To his credit, and in spite of threats to his family and his desire to be read by his own people, Solzhenitsyn refused the bribe. He would not mute the voices of those who did not survive the camps. He and Natalya Svetlova, his soon-to-be second wife and mother of his three sons, were resolute that “[o]ur children were no dearer to us than the memory of the millions done to death, and nothing could make us stop that book.”¹⁴ Instead, by means of a coded out-of-town call to Swedish journalist Stig Fredrikson, he activated publication. By doing so, he chose to honour the memory of 66 million victims of state terror and undermine both Marxism and Soviet legitimacy in the eyes of the West.

Fredrikson had served as one of Solzhenitsyn’s secret couriers since April, 1972. In fact, it was Fredrikson to whom Solzhenitsyn entrusted to smuggle his Nobel Speech out of Moscow. In his 2004 memoir, *How I Helped Alexandr Solzhenitsyn Smuggle His Nobel Lecture from the USSR*, Fredrikson details the secretive tones and textures of Cold War intrigue:

That evening in late April 1972 was when my career as a secret courier to Solzhenitsyn started. It was to last for almost two years, until Solzhenitsyn was arrested and deported into exile in February 1974. During that time I had some twenty secret meetings with him when he handed over material destined for the West, while I gave him letters sent to him mostly from his lawyer Fritz Heeb in Zürich. On a couple of occasions Ingrid met, in addition, with Natalya. They strolled along a boulevard with their baby carriages, and when they bent down to look at the babies, they also exchanged small packages.

When I came back to the apartment after that first meeting I looked at what Solzhenitsyn had given me. He had photographed the manuscript of his Nobel Lecture; I had received nine black and white negatives wrapped in a paper envelope. I took a small transistor radio, unscrewed the back, took out the batteries, and in the empty space I placed the negatives. I had cut the negatives into strips, wrapped them up in plastic and put the roll in an empty tube of headache tablets. The tin tube fitted nicely in the battery space. I put the radio in my suitcase and took the train to Helsinki for a conference with my editors. Everything went smoothly at the border, and

¹³ Ericson, Jr., 148.

¹⁴ Solzhenitsyn. *The Oak and the Calf*, 349.

in Helsinki I could tell my editor Hans Björkegren that “I have mail for you from Moscow.”¹⁵

While political intrigue is the midwife of the publication and its timing, Solzhenitsyn’s first-person voice in *The Gulag Archipelago* is not only autobiographically recounting his life, but, more to the point, confessing his sins. From arrest to exile, he wrestles with morally charged situations, while confronting the shadow of his own motivation and remorse.

¹⁵ Stig Fredrikson. *How I Helped Alexandr Solzhenitsyn Smuggle His Nobel Lecture from the USSR*, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/articles/fredrikson/index.html, 22 February 2006.

Chapter Four: Solzhenitsyn in Confession

For Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, by his own admission, it was “necessary to be dropped into the depths of camp in order to understand [his] own squalor.”¹ This “being dropped into the depths of camp” constitutes an initiation into the mystery of suffering, the lever for spiritual growth; the “squalor” he confronts is his own moral deficiency: intellectual arrogance and lust for personal power, which in the Christian theological tradition figure in as components of hubris, a Greek word commonly translated “pride.” For the ancient Greeks, hubris, as defined by Aristotle, for the most part, referred to infractions by mortals against other mortals whereby the aggressor causes shame to the victim not for revenge, but merely for his own gratification. As for the pleasure in hubris, the aggressor thinks that by ill-treating others, he demonstrates his own superiority. Although hubris against the gods represents a smaller proportion of occurrences in Greek literature, this smaller strain where arrogance or excessive self-confidence meets divine retribution is very much in accord with basic Judeo-Christian interpretations. For Marcus J. Borg, “[h]ubris means exceeding one’s proper limits; it means giving to one’s self the place that belongs to God.”² Solzhenitsyn’s confessional writing clearly interprets his *Gulag* experience and his critique of secular humanism from within this Christian framework. Accordingly, he explicitly warns “the reader who expects this book to be a political expose slam its cover shut right now.”³

Although it is neither possible nor desirable to ignore the political content of Solzhenitsyn’s writing, I focus on Solzhenitsyn’s rejection of Marxism and its inherent

¹ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Two*, 194.

² Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 78-79

³ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume One*, 168.

atheism and his return to the foundational values of his childhood. In a rare 1989 interview with David Aikman, Solzhenitsyn characterizes these values as being essentially Christian: “I was raised by my elders in the spirit of Christianity, and almost through my school years, up to 17 or 18, I was in opposition to Soviet education.”⁴

Scattered throughout the *Gulag Archipelago* are bits and pieces of testimonies and tributes to those believers - Jews, Christians, and Chechen Muslims - who influenced Solzhenitsyn’s reaffirmation of his Judeo-Christian roots. Dr. Boris Kornfeld, Boris Gammerov, and various devout Baptists especially come to mind. In the Aikman interview, Solzhenitsyn states explicitly that his move to Christianity was “a return to what I had thought before.”⁵

Solzhenitsyn’s language of *exile* and *return* suggests a powerful religious metaphor that is firmly rooted in the Jewish experience of exile in the sixth century BCE. Borg depicts the problems facing the Jewish Community in 539 BCE when return from exile became politically possible. The solution, of course, for the exile is the return home:

The Jewish exiles were a weakened community – weakened in power, wealth, identity, and spirit. Most of them had been born in exile in Babylon. Only a few were still alive who remembered Jerusalem and Zion. For most, life in the promised land was a faint and secondhand memory. They had put down roots, even if the roots were in Babylon. Moreover, the journey would be long and difficult: about a thousand miles through a mostly empty semidesert landscape. It would be on foot.⁶

Solzhenitsyn’s path of return begins after his June 1945 arrest for expressing views critical of Stalin in personal correspondence with childhood friend Nikolai Vitkevich. Both Solzhenitsyn and Vitkevich blamed Stalin for the lack of preparedness of the Soviet

⁴ David Aikman. “Russia’s Prophet in Exile,” Interview with Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *Time*, (24 July 1989), 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁶ Borg, 133

Union to defend itself against the Nazi German invasion. For this crime, Vitkevich got ten years without exile; Solzhenitsyn, eight years and permanent exile. I choose, however, to begin our story four years earlier.

On June 22nd, 1941 the blitzkrieg troops surge into Soviet Union shattering Stalin and Hitler's 1939 nonaggression pact. The Soviet Union is caught totally unprepared. In fact, German troops "were amazed to see Russian trains still heading west, bringing them supplies."⁷ A twenty-three-year old Solzhenitsyn rushes to a recruitment office only to be refused because he does not have his draft card. Impatiently he returns to Rostov to enlist, but again his way is barred because of an abdominal defect. He craves firsthand experience, sustenance for his literary ambitions. Toward Lenin, he feels reverence; toward literature, he envisions grandiose projects – *Love the Revolution!* and *The Sixth Course* – epics that extol the October Revolution. Frustrated, he complains to Natalya, his young wife: "One cannot become a great Russian writer, living in the Russia ... without having been at the front."⁸

Reluctantly, Solzhenitsyn settles into teaching mathematics and astronomy to village children at the Cossack settlement of Morozovsk. By October, 1941 panic and looting are gripping Moscow; Goebbels boasts to the foreign press in Berlin that the war is over. Finally, a now desperate and less selective recruiting office mobilizes Solzhenitsyn; his entrance into the fray, however, is far from significant; he finds himself "mucking out stables, in a camp 150 miles northwest of Stalingrad, with a crowd of elderly and sometimes sickly."⁹ Yet soon the course and direction of his life are to change. In the

⁷ Thomas, 93

⁸ Natalya Reshetovskaya. Trans. Elena Ivanoff. *Sanya: My Life with Alexander Solzhenitsyn*. (London: Hart-Davis, 1977), 21

⁹ Thomas, 96.

spring of 1942 Solzhenitsyn is given a battery commander course in Semyonov. In May he enters the Third Leningrad Artillery School at Kostroma, 180 miles northeast of Moscow. Here, without any combat experience, Solzhenitsyn is promoted to lieutenant. Fervently, he declares to Natalya that “[h]e is willing ... to die for Leninism.”¹⁰

In April, 1943 Battery Commander Solzhenitsyn is moved to the river Neruch as part of the build up for the planned attack on Orel. There, he encounters his secondary school friend, Nikolai Vitkevich, and they recklessly share candid political discussions critical of Stalin’s conduct of the war:

These two young officers, after days of discussion, astonishingly drew up a program for change, entitled “Resolution No. 1.” They argued that the Soviet regime stifled economic development, literature, culture, and everyday life; a new organization was needed to fight to put things right.¹¹

These discussions were not cynical, but resonate with ideological ardour and zealous patriotism. Solzhenitsyn heedlessly stores “Resolution No. 1” in his map case. In nineteen months, it, along with copies of all correspondence between himself and Vitkevich from April 1944 to February 1945 will serve to convict Solzhenitsyn of anti-Soviet propaganda under Article 58 of the Soviet criminal code, paragraph 10 and of founding a hostile organization under paragraph 11.

On July 5th, 1943 Solzhenitsyn partakes in his first campaign, the Battle of Kursk, the largest tank battle in history. Having good intelligence on Hitler's intentions, the Soviets established and managed to conceal elaborate layered defense works, mine fields, and stage and disguise large reserve forces poised for a tactical and strategic counterattack. This campaign, which included the famous sub-battle at Prokhorovka, remains the largest armored engagement of all time, and included the most costly single day of aerial warfare in history.

¹⁰ Ibid., 103.

¹¹ Ibid., 105.

Though the Germans planned and initiated an offensive strike, the well-planned Soviet defense not only managed to frustrate their ambitions but also enabled the Soviets to follow up the successful defense with counteroffensives—Operation Kutuzov and Operation Polkovodets Rumyantsev—and exhaust the German abilities in the theater.

On August 5, 1943 Solzhenitsyn's unit enters the city of Orel on the Oka River, south of Moscow. Ten days later he is "promoted to first lieutenant and awarded the Order of the Patriotic War, second class."¹² The stables are far behind. From that point until March 1944 his unit is in continual action "as the Germans are driven back across European Russia to the Dnieper, fighting and dying in a bleak alien country, with that grim enemy, winter, coming soon."¹³ In the summer of 1944, Solzhenitsyn is again promoted, this time to the rank of captain.

In the autumn of 1944, Captain Solzhenitsyn complains to his wife of not receiving letters from Nikolai Vitkevich; Vitkevich, writing to Solzhenitsyn's wife, has made the same complaint. Both men are unaware that their correspondence is being intercepted by Soviet counterintelligence.

In January, 1945 the Red Army launches its final offensive that would end in Berlin. Stalin issues the sinister order that "[e]verything is allowed.... They were to remember the suffering of the homeland, and were encouraged to plunder – and worse. A private would be allowed to take home up to ten pounds in weight in booty; senior officers, several tons. And then, of course, there would be plunder that would not need to be carried home, stored only in remorseful or licentious memory."¹⁴ Solzhenitsyn's 14,000 – line narrative poem, *Prussian Nights*, which he composed and committed to memory in camp to avoid

¹² Ibid., 107

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 113.

detection, captures his revulsion at the systemic commission of state-endorsed atrocities of mass rapes, plunder, and civilian murder:

A moaning, by the walls half muffled:

The mother's wounded, still alive.

The little daughter's on the mattress,

Dead. How many have been on it?

A platoon, a company perhaps?

A girl's been turned into a woman,

A woman turned into a corpse.

It's all come down to simple phrases:

Do not forget! Do not forgive!

Blood for blood! A tooth for a tooth!

The mother begs, "Tote mich, Soldat!"¹⁵

Even today, discussion of Soviet atrocities committed in Germany and throughout Eastern Europe is extremely rare. Solzhenitsyn, a notable exception, chronicles the vengeful passage of Soviet troops through Prussia as they swill schnapps, set fire to towns and villages, rape and murder German civilians and loot houses of items ranging from vacuum cleaners to Vienna rolls. Although, as the narrator, Solzhenitsyn remains aloof, offering a dreamlike succession of vignettes of violence, every line declares the author's conviction that a crime is being committed. Misgivings as to the sanctity of the

¹⁵ Alexandre Solzhenitsyn. *Prussian Nights*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 37–39.

task are evident. The fearful mist of these horrid experiences will harden and find form in the Gulag and shape Solzhenitsyn view of man and his nature.

The army moves swiftly through Poland, and then swings north, into East Prussia. On February 9, 1945, ten days after he had led his battery out of encirclement, a baffled Solzhenitsyn is summoned to brigade headquarters where he is ordered to hand over his revolver; his epaulets are ripped from his shoulders, his belt is seized. He is arrested for expressing anti-Soviet views and begins his eight years of incarceration and three years of exile. Years later, he acknowledges that “[t]he day after my arrest my march of penance began”¹⁶ But on February 9, 1945, Solzhenitsyn’s experiences his arrest not as the dawn of a spiritual journey; his primary concern is not being seen by subordinates:

And at the moment when my life was turned upside down and the SMERSH [acronym for Soviet counterintelligence during WWII] officers at the brigade command point tore off those cursed shoulder boards, and took my belt away and shoved me along to their automobile, I was pierced to the quick by worrying how, in my stripped and sorry state, I was going to make my way through the telephone operator’s room. The rank and file must not see me in that condition!¹⁷

Solzhenitsyn’s retrospective *Gulag* account also acknowledges towering intellectual arrogance. On his way to SMERSH headquarters, Solzhenitsyn experiences “an irrational elation – they were driving him straight to Moscow, to the Kremlin; he would be able to talk directly with Stalin, and get him to see that he must change his ways, change Russia!”¹⁸ Moreover, he indulges in the self-satisfaction that “[he] had been arrested not for stealing, nor treason, nor desertion, but because [he] had discovered through [his] power of reasoning the evil secrets of Stalin.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume One*, 164.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Thomas, 121

¹⁹ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume One*, 168.

Besides intellectual arrogance, Solzhenitsyn exhibits an outrageous sense of entitlement. After one night in a punishment cell shared with four other prisoners, he joins a small file of prisoners who are to march to the front headquarters at Brodnitz in western Poland. Indignantly he refuses to carry his own suitcase:

When they led me out of the punishment cell, there were already seven prisoners there in three and a half pairs standing with their backs to me. Six of them had on well-worn Russian Army overcoats ... The seventh prisoner was a German civilian ... What did the [sergeant] mean carry my own suitcase? He ... wanted me, an officer, to pick up my own suitcase and carry it? "I am an officer. Let the German carry it" ... The German soon tired. After that the other POW's carried it in turn, also without being ordered to; and then the German again. All but me.²⁰

Solzhenitsyn comes to confess the degree to which his tenure as captain is distinguished by consideration for personal comfort at the expense of his subordinates. He acknowledges indifference to the precarious conditions under which he placed these underlings. If not for his stumbling into the maw of the Gulag, his excessive narcissism, which cost lives, would have remained unchecked; his compassion, dormant. If memories are the wages of guilt, Solzhenitsyn is indeed well paid:

I tossed out orders to my subordinates that I would not allow them to question, convinced that no orders could be wiser. Even at the front, where one might have thought, death made equals of us all, my power soon convinced me that I was a superior being. Seated there, I heard them out as they stood at attention. I interrupted them. I issued commands. I addressed fathers and grandfathers with the familiar, downgrading form of address – while they, of course addressed me formally. I send them out to repair wires under shellfire so my superiors should not approach me. [Andreyashin died that way]. I ate my officer's ration of butter with rolls, without giving a thought as to why I had a right to it, and why the rank-and-file soldiers did not. I, of course, had a personal servant assigned to me – in polite terms, an "orderly"- whom I badgered one way or another and ordered to look after my person and prepare my meals separately from the soldiers' ... I forced my soldiers to ... dig me a special dugout at every

²⁰ Ibid., 164 –165

new bivouac and to haul the heaviest beams to support it so that I should be comfortable and safe as possible.²¹

At Krasnaya Presnya, a transit prison in Moscow, Solzhenitsyn encounters a camp veteran who offers the new prisoners a harrowing template for survival. At heart, “[i]n order to survive, it seemed you had to screw someone else.”(Thomas, 143) Of course, survival at any price precludes decency and compassion. Initially, Solzhenitsyn conforms to this base morality whose crude class divisions shred his well-cushioned sense of entitlement:

... in camp no one ever does anything for nothing, no one ever does anything out of the generosity of his heart. You have to pay for everything. If someone proposes something to you that is unselfish, disinterested, you can be sure it is a dirty trick, a provocation. The main thing is: avoid *general-assignment work*. Avoid it from the day you arrive. If you land in *general-assignment work* that first day, then you are lost, and this time for keeps ... General assignment work is the main and basic work performed in any given camp. Eighty-percent of the prisoners work at it and die off. All. And then they bring new ones in to take their places and they again are sent to general-assignment work. Doing this work you expend the last of your strength. And you are always hungry. And always wet. And shoeless. And put in the worst barracks. And they won't give you any treatment when you are ill. The only ones who *survive* in camps are those try at any price not to be put on general-assignment work.²²

Solzhenitsyn falters when he is transferred to Moscow's New Jerusalem Prison. With no Virgil to guide him through the morass, he finds himself unfit for the ordeal ahead. In this horrid realm, his tenure as captain proves useless; the survival-at-any-price philosophy that he had accepted at Krasnaya Presnya is now tested. His first night in camp is an initiation into the hideous —humanity at its most base. He is pelted with torment, both internal and external:

The first night in camp! You are already being borne, borne along a slippery slide down, down – and somewhere there must be still a saving protruding ledge which you have to catch hold of, but you don't know

²¹ Ibid., 163.

²² Ibid., 563 – 564

where it is. Everything that was worst in your entire upbringing has come alive inside you – everything suspicious, gloomy, grasping, cruel, installed there by hungry queues, by the blatant injustice of the strong. The worst in you has been even more aroused, even more stirred up by those around you, by the preceding rumors about the camps: just don't get put on *general work!* The wolfish camp world! Here they tear you to pieces alive! Here they stomp on he who has stumbled! Just don't go *on general work!* But how can you avoid it? Which way is one to flee? One has to *give* something! One has to *give* to someone! But what in particular? And to whom? And how is it done?²³

Solzhenitsyn initially escapes general-assignment work by misrepresenting his military background. By claiming that he commanded an artillery battalion instead of a battery, he is assigned a foreman position in the clay pit. Straightaway, Solzhenitsyn grasps to what extent the Archipelago is unlike the front:

In the army even a fool and a nonentity can command, and, in fact, the higher the post he occupies, the greater will be his success. ... But in the archipelago it is not at all like that for the zek who has been appointed to command other zeks. The whole golden shoulder-board hierarchy is not towering behind your back and not at all supporting your orders; it will betray you and toss you out as soon as you're unable to carry out those orders with your own strength, your own skill. And the skill here is: either your own fist, or pitiless destruction through starvation, or such a profound knowledge of the Archipelago that your order also appears to each prisoner as his own salvation.²⁴

On his first shift as foreman, Solzhenitsyn confronts his impotence. Still in military attire, he orders a group of thieves sunning themselves in the clay pit to work. Without the weight of the military apparatus, his orders are ridiculed; his self-assurance crumbles. Demoralized, he implores his supervisor to take him on as an accountant. Instead, he is demoted to the ranks of those assigned to slog it out in the wet clay pits of the camp brick factory. He too is now an underling. He is falling in his own eyes and in the eyes of those at his heels. Rapid physical deterioration and depression lead to suicidal impulses; Solzhenitsyn eagerly awaits an early death.

²³ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Two*, 170.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 176 – 177

Yet in the damp clay pits, an encounter with “a pale, yellowing youth with a Jewish tenderness of face”²⁵ proves pivotal. More physically fragile than Solzhenitsyn, Boris Gammerov, a younger prisoner and poet with fragments of German shells in his lungs, will not last the winter: “Boris was weaker than I; he could hardly wield his spade, which the sticky clay made heavier and heavier, and he could hardly throw each shovelful up to the edge of the truck.”²⁶

Before succumbing to tuberculosis and exhaustion, Gammerov shocks Solzhenitsyn by his belief in God:

I don't remember why, but I recalled one of the prayers of the late President Roosevelt, which had been published in our newspapers, and I expressed what seemed to me a self-evident evaluation of it: “Well, that's hypocrisy, of course.” And suddenly the young man's yellowish brows trembled, his pale lips pursed, he seemed to draw himself up, and he asked me: “Why? Why do you not admit the possibility that a political leader might sincerely believe in God?”²⁷

Solzhenitsyn is staggered not only by Gammerov's religious faith, but by the sudden realization that his own core values and worldview might be nothing more than Soviet indoctrination:

To hear such words from someone born in 1923?...and right then it dawned upon me that I had not spoken out of conviction but because the idea had been implanted in me from outside. And because of this I was unable to reply to him, and I merely asked him: “Do you believe in God?” “Of course,” he answered tranquilly.²⁸

²⁵ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume One*, 611.

²⁶ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Two*, 193.

²⁷ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume One*, 611 – 12.

²⁸ Ibid.,

The damp clay pit becomes a holy house where Solzhenitsyn's rigid materialist conception of history and atheism give way to doubt. Here past certainties begin to dissolve; a breaking is perceived. In *The Ignorant Perfection of Ordinary People*, Robert Inchausti captures Solzhenitsyn's shedding of status quo Marxism and his ensuing spiritual ascent:

You can have the worldly significance of everything you do taken away. You can have your pride and your future annihilated. You can become ahistorical and politically anonymous – erased from society by the powers that be. When this happens, your will is no longer fueled by personal ambition or the demands of the historical moment. Instead, if you survive, you become a quiet, solitary resistance fighter, combating that evil within everyone that wants to subject life to its own tedious projects. Solzhenitsyn even blesses his prison cell for having purged him of the confusions of his age.²⁹

Although under the auspices of the clay pits doubt infiltrates certainty, Solzhenitsyn is still far from ready to sanctify his Gulag experience. In the fall of 1945, providential intervention whisks Solzhenitsyn away from New Jerusalem Prison and spares him Gammerov's fate. To make room for German POWs, Solzhenitsyn is transferred to Kaluga Prison.

At Kaluga Prison at the southern end of Gorky Park in Moscow, Solzhenitsyn finds himself far from the clay pits. Although his positions vary - production superintendent, assistant norm-setter, painting and laying floors – they are privileged. He has escaped general-work assignment. Dismal camp food is supplemented with parcels from home twice a week; rooms are spacious with single bunks and dry bedding. Solzhenitsyn reverts to wearing his captain's uniform, a frayed memento of past power and privilege. Yet, in his retrospective account of his six months at Kaluga Prison, Solzhenitsyn counts not his blessings; he pencils in remorse:

Only with my later camp experience, as I became a veteran, did I look back and comprehend how pettily, how insignificantly, I had begun my term. Having become used, in my officer's pelt, to an undeservedly high

²⁹ Inchausti, 38

position among those around me, in camp, too, I kept climbing into positions of some kind and immediately falling out of them again. And I clung tightly to that pelt – to my field shirt, britches, greatcoat. How hard I tried not to exchange it for the dark camp camouflage.³⁰

But remorse does not account for privilege; complicity does. Solzhenitsyn is coerced by prison authorities into signing a pledge: “to report to the camp security any escape planned by prisoners.”³¹ For this stoolpigeon role, he is assigned the pseudonym Vetrov. In the Gulag where “[s]ouls were sold for just a pack of tobacco,”³² Solzhenitsyn’s concession appears minor and strategic. In fact, during his term at Kaluga Prison he informs on no one. Yet this compromise shames him and the six letters that comprise *Vetrov* remain “branded in the shameful grooves of [his] memory.”³³ His biographer D.M. Thomas provides this assessment:

No reasonable person can blame him for the slight concession he made; it was far below the *norm* of compromise set by the frightened Soviet populace; but Solzhenitsyn was not a “reasonable” man – it is part of his greatness that he was not, however irritating the trait can be – and in *The Gulag Archipelago* he expresses his shame for having compromised so far, in order to keep his dry bed, his parcels and visits from Natasha.³⁴

And more comfort awaits. Upon his arrival to Kaluga Prison, Solzhenitsyn fills out a form where he describes his occupation as a nuclear physicist “on the grounds that he was a first – class physics graduate and had managed to read a book about the American atomic bomb.”³⁵ These two words – nuclear physics- serve to secure his entry into the much cozier world of the sharashka, a special research centre in which the scientists, specialists, and technicians are all prisoners under a much looser prison discipline. On

³⁰ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Two*, 360.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 365.

³² *Ibid.*, 357.

³³ *Ibid.*, 366.

³⁴ Thomas, 158.

³⁵ Thomas, 164.

July 18th, 1946 he returns to Butyrki Prison where for a two-month period “he experience[s] a sheer bliss in being able to sleep, and sleep again; and have two hot meals a day and intelligent conversation.”³⁶

In September, 1946 he is sent to the aeronautical sharashka in Rybinsk where he works on pure Math. Later he is moved to Zagorsk sharashka and serves as a librarian. In July, 1947 he is transferred to Marfino sharashka, a former seminary outside of Moscow. Initially he sorts and catalogues confiscated German scientific material. Later, he is assigned to a voiceprint for speaker identification research project [phonoscopy] where the Russian language is broken into fundamental patterns. These patterns were to be identified for police purposes even when camouflaged by a change in tone. They would serve to entrap Soviet citizens.

The conditions at Marfino are better than any normal camp or prison. Each prisoner has a comfortable bed and a small bedside table. The library gives Solzhenitsyn access to Pushkin, Tiutchev, Gumilyov, Yesenin, and Blok. In addition, the BBC World Service is not yet jammed. Based on the survival code – avoid general assignment work- set forth by the Krasnaya Presnya camp veteran, Solzhenitsyn has indeed done well. Ironically, he takes no pleasure in this accomplishment. Instead he experiences shame and recoils at his comfort:

The middle part of my sentence I served on a golden isle, where prisoners were given enough to eat and drink, and kept warm and clean. In return for all this not much was required of me, just twelve hours a day sitting at a desk and making myself agreeable to the bosses.

But clinging to these good things suddenly became distasteful. I was groping for some new way to make sense of prison life. Looking around me, I realized how contemptible was the advice of the special-assignment

³⁶ Ibid.,

prisoner from Krasnaya Presnya: “At all costs steer clear of general duties.”³⁷ The price we were paying seemed disproportionately high.

The price that Solzhenitsyn is no longer willing to pay is conscience. Amazingly, rather than serve out his last three years in the relative coziness of Marfino, Solzhenitsyn rejects the survival-at-any-cost camp philosophy. Suddenly indifferent to his own material well-being, he takes a derisive attitude with a project supervisor and is immediately transferred to Ekibastuz, a large complex of special hard labour camps in the barren steppes of Kazakhstan region, where he serves out his final three years. Ekibastuz will also serve as a setting for *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. But it is clearly at Marfino that for Solzhenitsyn, homo religioso eclipses homo sovieticus. And in making his material well-being subordinate to conscience, Solzhenitsyn embraces his literary destiny as the archivist of the terror:

At some indeterminate point at Marfino, Solzhenitsyn ... realized the enormity of what had happened to Russia, and that Stalin had given him the opportunity – as nature or God had given him the talent – to explore this theme in all its terrible grandeur. Once he had grasped this, he could not but try to get himself moved from the comfortable sharashka.³⁸

An examination of Solzhenitsyn’s six months in Marfino is crucial to understanding his moral presence. It is here in the confines of this almost good prison that he chooses to take a quiet, yet firm stand by declining not only material comfort but also an accelerated exit out of the Gulag which is offered, along with a clean passport and a Moscow apartment, for successful completion of state research projects. Instead he joins a minority who affirm the sanctity of individual conscience:

Let us admit the truth: At that great fork in the camp road, at that great divider of souls, it was not the majority of the prisoners that turned to the right. Alas, not the majority. But fortunately neither was it just a few. There are many of them – human beings – who made this choice. But they did not shout about themselves. You had to look closely to see them.

³⁷ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Three*, 37.

³⁸ Thomas, 194.

Dozens of times this same choice had arisen before them too, but they always knew, and knew their own stand.³⁹

Solzhenitsyn's religious and philosophical novel, *The First Circle*, supplements *The Gulag Archipelago* by magnifying the lens through which the reader measures Solzhenitsyn's Marfino period. The title, taken from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, refers to the highest level of hell. Solzhenitsyn peoples his novel not with enlightened pagans but with prisoner-scientists who are required to decide whether or not they will submit their scientific know-how to the uses of the totalitarian Soviet state. Hovering precariously on the lip of the Gulag abyss, these different centres of consciousness strive to cope with their shattered lives. Some are motivated by an early exit; others, by fear of slipping deeper into the Gulag mire; still others, albeit a minority, by conscience. The character, Gleb Nerzhin, one of Solzhenitsyn's most autobiographical characters, serves as a vehicle through whom Solzhenitsyn articulates his spiritual and ethical positions:

Both Nerzhin and Solzhenitsyn are thirty-one in 1949. Both are trained in mathematics and science. Both are allied with a chemistry student named Nadya. Both have had early difficulty accepting official versions of history, and so both study history for themselves. Both had been born in December – Solzhenitsyn on the eleventh and Nerzhin on the twenty-fifth. Even the physical description of Nerzhin resembles that of Solzhenitsyn. Finally, both come to similar views about the world and the nature of man.⁴⁰

Solzhenitsyn's positions about the world and the nature of man come to fruition during the Marfino period and anticipate the fault line in his post-exilic relationship with Western leftist intellectuals. These positions, all of which are predicated not on abstract philosophical principles, but on the real experiences of ordinary victims of a totalitarian state, establish the foundations on which rest his 1972 Nobel Lecture, his controversial 1978 Harvard commencement address, and his 1983 Templeton Prize address. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of a consumer society, material comfort becomes subordinate to spiritual development.

³⁹ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Two*, 603.

⁴⁰ Ericson, Jr., 66.

After his expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1974, Solzhenitsyn encounters a world which he characterizes as surrendering to the lust of comfort at any price. Susan Sontag's collection of essays, *Against Interpretation*, typifies the cultural texture of this world into which Solzhenitsyn is to find himself. As the spokesperson of the new sensibility, Sontag's manifesto was twofold: strip the arts of what she herself described as *moral sentiments* and hail the advent of *a new attitude toward pleasure*. Into this setting, Solzhenitsyn emerges as an anachronistic anomaly, a modern day Micah or Amos; ridicule soon follows.

But I am getting ahead of my story. Let us return to the relatively snug world of the sharashka, whose comforts Solzhenitsyn now finds toxic. His spirit which began its climb in the lowly clay pits of New Jerusalem Prison will not be seduced by the relative privileges afforded by the sharashka. In fact, a profoundly divergent celebration of pleasure is sanctified in *The First Circle*. Gleb Narzhin's experience of material deprivation bestows on him spiritual bliss. His consuming the Gulag rations serves as an enactment of the sacrament of Holy Communion, a ritual action in worship accompanied by divine grace:

Remember that thin, watery barley or the oatmeal porridge without a single drop of fat? Can you say you *eat* it? No. You commune with it; you take it like a sacrament! Like the prana of the yogis. You eat it slowly; you eat it from the tip of the wooden spoon; you eat it absorbed entirely in the process of eating, in thinking about eating – and it spreads through your body like nectar. You tremble at the sweetness released from those overcooked little grains and the murky liquid they float in. And then – with hardly any nourishment – you go on living six months, twelve months. Can you really compare the crude devouring of a steak with this?⁴¹

And the mere relaxing of the severity of prison routines provides Nerzhin another point of entry into the realm of mystical exaltation:

⁴¹ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. *The First Circle*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 33

And even though nothing in my external situation has changed for the better, still the yoke of the prison has let up on me a bit, and I have a real conversation or read an honest page and I'm on the crest of a wave. I haven't had any real life for many years, but I've forgotten about that. I'm weightless, suspended, disembodied. I lie there on my upper bunk and stare at the ceiling. It is very close, it's bare, the plasterwork is bad – and I tremble with the utter joy of existence! I fall asleep in perfect bliss. No president, no prime minister can fall asleep so satisfied with his Sunday.⁴²

Like Solzhenitsyn, Gleb Nerzhin blesses his prison experience; his critical eye which he initially cast on himself now probes those on the outside and their misuse of freedom:

I personally, Gleb Nerzhin, a prisoner in harness for the fifth year, who has risen to that stage of development where the bad begins to appear good. And I personally hold the view that people don't know what they are striving for. They waste themselves in senseless thrashing around for the sake of a handful of goods and die without realizing their spiritual wealth.⁴³

Spiritual wealth appears attainable within the claustrophobic confines of the Gulag. In the Mesopotamian world, legends abound of the hero who survives an inundation. For Solzhenitsyn, he and his fellow prisoners are such heroes. And through the baptism of the flood creation is renewed; community, restored; and the rot of their past lives and of those wasted lives beyond the barbed wire, exposed. These prisoners experience a bliss that transcends their incarceration. Towards the end of *The First Circle*, Solzhenitsyn enters his novel as omniscient narrator to portray his fellow prisoners as enlightened passengers of an ark. Like Noah, these prisoners float safely above the chaotic waters of a sinful world; they float beyond history, and they float in opposition to the shallow pursuits of those on the outside. They mount to the stars to gaze down on an inferior realm:

Those who floated in the ark were weightless and had weightless thoughts. They were neither hungry nor satiated. They had no happiness and no fear of losing it. Their heads were not filled with petty official calculations, intrigues, promotions, and their shoulders were not burdened with concerns about housing, fuel, bread, and clothes for their children. Love,

⁴² Ibid., 34

⁴³ Ibid.

which from time immemorial has been the delight and torment of humanity, was powerless to communicate to them its thrill or its agony. Their prison terms were so long that no one ever thought of the time when he would go into freed ...

From here, the ark confidently plowing its way through the darkness, the whole tortuous flow of accursed History could easily be surveyed, as from an enormous height, and yet at the same time one could see every detail, every pebble on the river bed, as if one were immersed in the stream.

In these Sunday evening hours solid matter and flesh no longer reminded people of their earthly existence. The spirit of male friendship and philosophy filled the sail-like arches overhead.

Perhaps this was, indeed, that bliss which all the philosophers of antiquity tried in vain to define and teach to others.⁴⁴

And in the sixth year of his imprisonment and his spiritual world view essentially intact, Solzhenitsyn arrives at Ekibastuz. His resolve is “to cleanse [his] mind of the camp prejudices, intrigues, and schemes, which leave it no time for deeper matters.”⁴⁵ Yet could an academic find his footing as a labourer in a prison camp?

I was anxious and unsure of myself to begin with. Could I keep it up? We were unhandy cerebral creatures, and the same amount of work was harder for us than for our teammates. But the day when I deliberately let myself sink to the bottom and felt it firm under my feet – the hard, rocky bottom which is the same for all – was the beginning of the most important years in my life, the years which put the finishing touches to my character. From then onward there seem to have been no upheavals in my life, and I have been faithful to the views and habits acquired at that time.⁴⁶

But Solzhenitsyn’s spiritual resolve is not matched by physical ardour. Again, as at New Jerusalem Prison, providence, this time in the guise of a decent officer, salvages him from physical decline. Major Sokholv watches Solzhenitsyn’s deterioration and finds him an inside job cutting up trees. Later he is made leader of a construction brigade.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 294.

⁴⁵ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Three*, 98 – 99.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Truly, Solzhenitsyn is spared from sinking too deep into the mire. But major upheavals - rebellion and cancer - await at Ekibastuz.

A convoy of two thousand desperate Western Ukrainian nationalists arrives in Ekibastuz. Many of these prisoners are former guerrilla fighters who have alternatively fought the Nazis and the Soviets in a desperate effort to gain their independence. Over an eight – month period they are responsible for murdering 45 informers. Retribution takes various forms: a log rolling off a pile and casting a stoolie into the river, an apparent suicide, masked men entering barracks to stab informers with primitive knives. Though not celebrating these reprisals, Solzhenitsyn grasps how brutal oppression erupts into gruesome violence; the ark no longer floats outside of history:

Retribution was at hand—not in the next world, not before the court of history, but retribution live and palpable, raising a knife over you in the light of dawn. It was like a fairy tale: the ground is soft and warm under the feet of honest men, but under the feet of traitors it prickles and burns.⁴⁷

But the fairy tale doesn't last. On January 6, 1952 prison authorities strike back, first by regrouping prisoners and then by allowing stoolies to torture suspects. On January 23, 1952 the unexpected ensues; the prisoners respond to these reprisals with a spontaneous work stoppage - hunger strike. Solzhenitsyn recalls:

This was a hunger strike ration called not by well-fed people with reserves of subcutaneous fat, but by gaunt, emaciated men, who have felt the whip of hunger daily for years on end, who had achieved with difficulty some sort of physical equilibrium, and who suffered acute distress if they were deprived of a single 100-gram ration. Even the goners starved with the rest, although a three-day fast might tip them into irreversible and fatal decline. The food which we had refused, and which we had always so beggarly, was a mirage of plenty in the feverish dreams of famished men.⁴⁸

The prison authorities are taken back by these unexpected events. They too have quotas to meet and superiors to answer to. They enter into negotiations with the prisoners. With

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Three*, 258.

but one year of his sentence to serve, Solzhenitsyn places his future freedom at risk by not only supporting the rebellion, but also by articulating the prisoners' complaints at the Commission of Inquiry. Yet, even here at this pseudo-inquiry whose real agenda is to identify ringleaders, where Solzhenitsyn could be crushed like a bug, he eyes a literary destiny whose orbit extends well beyond the barbed wire of Ekibastuz:

Just one more year! On more year to go, and the thought crushed me. I could not get the words out that they deserved to hear. I could have delivered there and then an immortal speech, and been shot the next day. I would have delivered just the same – if they had been broadcasting it throughout the world! But no, the audience was too small.⁴⁹

Is Solzhenitsyn compromising truth to further his literary ambitions or is he pragmatically choosing a more opportune moment to discredit the Soviet regime? In either case Solzhenitsyn skillfully limits the scope of his denunciations; he awaits a larger platform:

So I did not tell them that our camps followed the Fascist model, and were a symptom of the regime's degeneration. I limited myself to waving a kerosene-soaked rag under their eagerly sniffing noses. I had learned that the commander of convoy troops was sitting there, and so I deplored the unworthy conduct of the camp guards, who had ceased to resemble Soviet fighting men, who joined in the pilfering from work sites, *and* they were bores and bullies, *and* they were murderers in the bargain.⁵⁰

Weeks prior to the insurrection, Solzhenitsyn becomes aware of a lump in his right groin the size of a lemon. During the strike the pain increases yet he delays visiting the medical clinic until the Commission of Inquiry's session has come to an end. Prison doctors diagnose cancer. Solzhenitsyn claims indifference to his fate:

The same experience, in different lives, can be seen in very different perspectives. This tumor, which was to all appearances malignant – what a blow it would have been if I were a free man; how I should have suffered, how my loved ones would have wept. But in this place, where heads were

⁴⁹ Ibid., 267.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 268.

so casually severed from trunks, the same tumor was just an excuse to stay in bed, and I didn't give it much thought.⁵¹

On February 12, 1952 the growth is removed. While Solzhenitsyn is recovering, the punitive clamp down begins. Prison authorities make use of the Commission of Inquiry to pluck out leaders of the strike. Designated prisoners are seized and “beaten by their warders to a bloody pulp: they had nothing left to lie on – their flesh was in ribbons. One burly warder had been particularly brutal with his length of iron piping.” (Gulag 3.269) Because of Solzhenitsyn's cancer, he is spared the regime's excesses.

With the camp in turmoil, Dr. Boris Kornfeld sits by Solzhenitsyn's bed and shares his story of conversion from Judaism to Christianity. He tells a feverish Solzhenitsyn that “there is no punishment that comes to us in this life on earth that is undeserved ... [and] if you go over your life with a fine-tooth comb and ponder it deeply, you will always be able to hunt down the transgression of yours for which you have received this blow.”⁵² Ironically that very night Kornfeld is brutally murdered from a series of blows; he has been struck on the head several times with a plasterer's mallet. For Solzhenitsyn, Kornfeld's final words take on a sort of mystical inheritance and resonate with his own reflections:

In the seventh year of my imprisonment I had gone over and re-examined my life quite enough and had come to understand why everything had happened to me: both prison and, as an additional piece of ballast, my malignant tumor. And I would not have murmured even if all that punishment had been considered inadequate.⁵³

Yet Solzhenitsyn's endorsement of Kornfeld's worldview is not without reservations because it contains a cruel corollary – if one's life fails to work out, it must be because you have done something wrong:

⁵¹ Ibid., 269.

⁵² Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Two*, 612.

⁵³ Ibid., 614.

I would have been inclined to endow his words with the significance of a universal law of life. However, one can get all tangled up that way. One would have to admit on that basis those who had been punished even more cruelly than with prison – those shot, burned at the stake – were some sort of super-evil doers. [And yet ... the innocent are those who get punished most zealously of all.] And what would one then have to say about our so evident torturers: Why does not fate punish *them*? Why do they prosper?⁵⁴

Solzhenitsyn's reflections draw him into the anguished yet mysterious realms of *Job* and *Ecclesiastes* where "[t]he heart of the wise is in the house of mourning."⁵⁵ Indeed, for Solzhenitsyn suffering provides some the potential of spiritual growth. Conversely, evildoers are punished with spiritual stagnation or worse, degeneracy:

The meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we have grown used to thinking, in prospering, but ... in the development of the soul. From *that* point of view our torturers have been punished most horribly of all: they are turning into swine, they are departing downward from humanity. From that point of view punishment is inflicted on those whose development ... holds out hope.⁵⁶

In the very room where Kornfeld "had gone forth in death"⁵⁷ Solzhenitsyn - like Dante leaving the Judecca, the deepest abyss, the last circle of Hell - finds renewal. In rhymed verse he proclaims God's presence throughout the course of his own ragged life. Readily combining purification and re-birth imagery of water, he traces his own spiritual development:

I look behind me with a grateful tremor

Upon the life that I have lived.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 613.

⁵⁵ Eccles.7.4 KJV

⁵⁶ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Two*, 613.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 613.

Not with good judgment nor with desire

Are its twist and turns illumined.

But with the even glow of the Higher Meaning

Which became apparent to me only later on.

And now with measured cup returned to me,

Scooping up the living water,

God of the Universe! I believe again!

Though I renounced You, You were with me!⁵⁸

In a later passage, expanding the water imagery and evoking Jonah, Solzhenitsyn sees himself as a sufferer rescued by God from a metaphorical drowning of his own making:

But just as the waves of the sea knock the inexperienced swimmer off his feet and keep tossing him onto the shore, so also was I painfully tossed back on dry land by the blows of misfortune. And it was only because of this that I was able to travel the path which I had always wanted to travel.⁵⁹ (Gulag 2. 615)

And with this renewed sense of purpose comes a profound awareness of good and evil that, for Solzhenitsyn, exists within every human heart, starting with his own:

And it was granted me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: *how* a human being becomes evil and *how* good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer, and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied

⁵⁸ Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago – Volume Two*, 614 – 615.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good.⁶⁰

From his labour-camp experiences Solzhenitsyn abandons a Marxist worldview where crimes against humanity are framed as moral derelictions. He comes to see the absurdity of serving any abstraction, which stands outside the immediacy of life. Instead, he reclaims a Christian worldview that affirms the duality of human nature, the primacy of the individual, and hope.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Coda

In the end what does it all amount to? Yes, one day while reading a Solzhenitsyn biography on a cozy sofa, my worldview and past were brought into question. Admittedly, it would be ludicrous to equate my experience with that of a suicidal Solzhenitsyn slogging it out in the damp clay pits and being staggered by a tubercular Boris Gammerov's religious faith. No, my apprenticeship was not harsh: my sofa was not a slave labour camp; nor the biography I had devoured, a sickly youth with shrapnel in his lungs awaiting death. Albeit in a much less dramatic way, I too was staggered by what I was reading. In fact, I had already met these individuals, oppressors and victims, whom Solzhenitsyn describes in the Gulag. I had met them in myself, and I had met them in others. I had met them as a young child in elementary school playgrounds, as an adolescent being beaten up in a back lot behind a grimy Winnipeg restaurant, as a minimum – wage warehouse worker, as a classroom teacher, and as an administrator. I was now renewing acquaintances with people I knew and with myself, all of us placed in a pressure cooker.

No one has said this before: Solzhenitsyn had a good Gulag. He was not one of the eighteen million labourers to die in the camps from 1941 to 1953. He spent over half his incarceration in various sharashkas where he was pampered. His leaving Marfino was his own choice. His very worse moments were of short duration. At New Jerusalem Prison he was extracted from the clay pits with the arrival of German POWs. At Ekibastuz a decent officer salvaged him from physical decline. Even the timing of his cancer proved fortuitous, as he was spared the brutal reprisals of the prison authorities following a prison hunger strike. Yet Solzhenitsyn hides nothing: his arrogance, ignorance, cowardice, humility, and courage. Even his unflattering role as prison stoolie is forthrightly acknowledged. His courage is that of a good witness. And for this honesty, a direct reflection of his inner character, I stayed with him for the duration of the three volumes of *The Gulag Archipelago*.

And Solzhenitsyn's honesty sparked my own longing to come to terms with an uncomfortable past. I felt shame for my shabby treatment of women; I wanted forgiveness. Being the father to two daughters heightened my remorse. I did not want my girls to meet up with the man I was some twenty years ago. Sadly, the description of my behaviour and that of many of the expatriate community is accurate. Also, it was my intent to capture cultural aspects of the post-exilic landscape in which Solzhenitsyn found himself. Hence, Chapter Two: A Difficult Encounter with Self in which I describe my own experiences in Africa in the 1980s partly as an indication of my self-absorption at the time and partly as a critique of the counterculture that influenced me.

Besides forgiveness, I craved a more intimate understanding of the faith that had sustained both Solzhenitsyn and Akhmatova, especially during the Stalinist Terror. For me, Solzhenitsyn made it possible to enter a church without leaving my intellect at the door. So, on May 22nd, 2004, after an absence of some 45 years, I embarked on my own journey of return. On that day I tentatively stumbled into St. Helen's Anglican Church in Surrey where, for the next three years, I regularly attended service, took on various committees and outreach programs, taught Sunday school, and served as crucifer. I made many friends. In fact, during this three-year period, when work or travel took me to India or China or Northern British Columbia, I would seek out a local church for communion, fellowship, and forgiveness. For me, the church came to represent a symbol of the sacred mystery at the centre of life; prayer, an opportunity to align morally my priorities.

I am aware that at times I have more in common with secular humanists than with many evangelicals who view scripture as an infallible product of the divine. For me, scripture provides neither a static belief system nor absolute truth. Instead, it is a human document, often contradictory and often in conflict, about what life with God is about. But this document is both relevant and vibrant. For example, Amos's passion for social justice, Micah's disdain for those for whom religious ritual is an end in itself, or Job's radical questioning of conventional wisdom and his longing for a firsthand encounter with the sacred act as an antidote in today's world of frenzied consumerism, the selfish cult of

material success. Also, thanks to my time at St. Helen's, I have studied contemporary Christian theologians, most notably John Dominic Crossan, Jack Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg, three scholars for whom idolatry is religion pretending it has all the answers. For these writers, wrestling with key questions has more value than possessing a rigid truth, be it Marxism or Fundamentalist Christianity. Besides, by living the question, as I have learned from Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, we gradually live our way into the answers.

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