

# Solzhenitsyn, Suffering, and the Meaning of Life

“Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul.”

– Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Older readers will hardly need reminding of who Alexander Solzhenitsyn was. Younger readers, sadly, might never have heard of him. The ignorance of the latter is nothing less than tragic.

Solzhenitsyn, by any measure, is one of the most important and influential figures of the past century and his neglect in the West today (he is still rightly revered in his native Russia) is a mark of how our society has fallen and floundered in the years that have elapsed since he was lionized by the western media. A courageous Soviet dissident who survived a KGB assassination attempt, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972. His works include the powerful novella of life in the Soviet labor camps, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*; and his seminal exposé of the Soviet tyranny and its reign of terror, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

So much could be said of Solzhenitsyn and his legacy, not least of which would be the considerable role he played in helping to topple the communist edifice in eastern Europe, but the two sentences from *The Gulag Archipelago* quoted above are quite enough in themselves. Here, in fewer than 50 words, the great Russian writer unlocks the very meaning of life.

The purpose of life is not worldly riches and the creature comforts they can purchase. Such trinkets can never satisfy the needs of the soul. The purpose of life is to grow in wisdom, to mature into the fullness of what it means to be human. The problem is that most of us are quite happy remaining comfortably numb, wasting our lives on trash and trivia, distracting ourselves to death long before we actually die. We are all in danger of growing old without growing up, which is the greatest tragedy that can beset any of us. It is for this reason that suffering is such a blessing. It brings us to our senses. It is a reality check. It reminds us that we are not gods, that we are not immortal. It cuts us down to size.

Most of us do not need years in prison to come to our senses, as Solzhenitsyn did, though one wonders how much it might do us good. But we do need suffering. We do need sorrows. We do need our crosses to bear.

It is, however, not suffering that sets us free from ourselves and our comfortable numbness but the *acceptance* of suffering. This is the beginning of wisdom.

If suffering is not accepted it embitters. It twists us. It shrivels us.

In contrast, the *acceptance* of such sorrow and suffering is liberating. It sets us free. It allows us to grow into the fully human persons we are meant to be. This is why Solzhenitsyn could bless the prison in which he found himself. He did so because prison had set him free.

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