

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Advice for a World Plagued by Chaos and Victimhood

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the chaos and the noise that seems to be a normal part of life nowadays?

If so, you're not alone. Anything from a random comment on Twitter to the confirmation of a Supreme Court Justice to an election seems to pit various classes, genders, or political parties against each other. It's as if we have turned every waking moment of our lives into a continual stream of victimhood and revolt against any form of stability.

But while this noisy chaos seems to have intensified in recent years, it is, in reality, nothing new. I was reminded of this fact while perusing the second volume of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's [*Gulag Archipelago*](#).

Although a decorated commander in the Russian army, Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned near the end of World War II for disparaging comments made privately about Joseph Stalin. His years in prison were hardly pleasant, but as Solzhenitsyn writes in *The Gulag Archipelago*, those years gave him striking insight into the reality of human nature:

*"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 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. **Gradually it was***

disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an unuprooted small corner of evil.

Solzhenitsyn goes on to say:

“Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the evil inside a human being (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.”

This realization led Solzhenitsyn to recognize the problem with revolutions, namely, “They destroy only *those carriers of evil contemporary with them*.... And they then take to themselves as their heritage the actual evil itself, magnified still more.”

What strikes me most about these words is that Solzhenitsyn had every right to be a “victim.” In fact, his regular persecution gave him a much bigger claim to victimhood than the “victims” of modern culture have.

Yet Solzhenitsyn refused to claim that victimhood. He refused to blame race, or class, or gender, or political party for the evils in the world that were afflicting him. Instead, he took time to examine his own heart and recognized that he was just as much at fault for the evil problems in the world as were his persecutors.

I wonder how much the noise and confusion in today’s world would be solved if we each did the same as Solzhenitsyn.

Instead of pinning the problems and chaos in our world on those of the opposing political party, or those who don't agree with our opinions on race or gender, and then painting ourselves as the victim, what if we first recognize the part we have played in making the world and ourselves what they are?

If we did so, perhaps we, like Solzhenitsyn, would be able to label our trials and persecutions a blessing.

"Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!" – Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

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[Image Credit: Cpl. Caitlin Brink]