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Bob De Smith

Dordt College, bob.desmith@dordt.edu

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Faith in Fiction?

Solzhenitsyn's *One Day* as a Practical Defense of Fiction



by Bob De Smith

One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world
—*Russian Proverb quoted by Solzhenitsyn*
(*Ericson and Mahoney* 526)

On August 9, 2008, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn died of heart failure. Born one year after the Russian Revolution, he died in his homeland (after spending some 20 years in exile in the West) just a few months short of his 90th birthday. Did you notice? I hope that my students did, for I have

Dr. Bob De Smith is Professor of English and Chair of the English Department at Dordt College.

been teaching Solzhenitsyn's stunning little novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, for nearly 20 years. I am convinced that Solzhenitsyn's death will not diminish his relevance or significance, so he is on the syllabus again next term. In this essay (and I invoke the early meaning of the word as "attempt" or "exploration"), I hope to illustrate how and why I teach Solzhenitsyn's novel at a Christian college, focusing especially on how fiction tells the truth (strange claim, since fiction is "made up"). If readers of this piece have never read *One Day*, I hope my description and analysis of the novel encourage them to do so.

First, though, Solzhenitsyn's death almost exactly a year ago as I write asks for a summary of his life. Read his obituaries and appraisals, and you will find repeated phrases like "bore witness," "told the truth," "ethical/moral authority," "[Old Testament] prophet," "national conscience," but also "crank," "nationalist," and "irrelevant." Who was this man? By his own account,¹ Solzhenitsyn was raised in the context of the Christian faith by his mother and an aunt (his father having died a couple of months before he was born). From the earliest, Solzhenitsyn saw himself as a writer, but the means to advancement under the new Soviet regime meant studying the sciences, so he studied mathematics. At university, he left his Christianity behind, becoming an ardent Communist. When World War II broke out, Solzhenitsyn volunteered, putting his mathematical training to use in the artillery, where he was cited for valor and earned the rank of captain. But neither these distinctions nor

his faith in the Soviet system could protect him from an increasingly paranoid regime. In a letter to an old friend who was elsewhere on the front, Solzhenitsyn offered some veiled criticism of “the man with the mustache.” This correspondence was intercepted, and Solzhenitsyn was arrested, tortured, and sentenced to eight years in the Gulag.² (Readers of *One Day* can compare Solzhenitsyn’s experience with that of Tyurin, the Captain, and the main character, Shukhov). His arrest and descent into “our sewage disposal system,” as Solzhenitsyn called it in his *The Gulag Archipelago* (19), was, understandably, the turning point in his life. He spent his first years at hard labor, then some time at a special prison for scientists (this became the setting of his novel *First Circle*), and then, because he did not cooperate fully in the scientific endeavors, his later years at forced labor again (where he was, among other things, a bricklayer like the title character of his novel). During his time in the camps, Solzhenitsyn was called to reconsider his faiths—in human beings, in the Soviet system, in God. He said,

in prison, I encountered a very broad variety of people. I saw that my convictions did not have a solid basis, could not stand up in dispute, and I had to renounce them. Then the question arose of going back to what I had learned as a child. It took more than a year or so. Other believers influenced me, but basically it was a return to what I had thought before. The fact that I was dying also shook me profoundly. At age 34 I was told I could not be saved, and then I returned to life. These kinds of upheavals always have an impact on a person’s convictions. (59-60)

As the latter part of this statement implies, Solzhenitsyn suffered from two occurrences of abdominal cancer—one while in the camps and one after his release—and he considered his recovery miraculous.³ Released from the Gulag in 1953 (the year Stalin died), Solzhenitsyn remained under the sanction of internal exile, which meant he could not have contact with anyone from his past.⁴

Solzhenitsyn taught high school science in rural Kazakhstan, and here is where the amazing story of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* begins.

After hours, Solzhenitsyn began to write: drawing on his *zek* (the Russian word for prisoner) experiences, recalling words he had meticulously memorized in the camps, and engaging his imagination, he created the story of a little everyman, an uneducated but cagey prisoner named Ivan, describing his experiences in a forced labor camp during one day in January of 1951, “from reveille to lights out,” as he summarized it (144). Solzhenitsyn had no thoughts of publishing his work—perhaps he could trust it to close friends (though remember he was allowed no contact with earlier acquaintances) or those who could implicitly trust each other because they shared the *zek* experience.⁵ So the writer took care to bury his manuscript in a jar in the garden. But when Khrushchev began to denounce Stalin’s era as “the period of the personality cult,”⁶ a thaw began to spread, so that by 1961 Solzhenitsyn, through indirect means and at the urging of friends, submitted his manuscript to Alexander Tvardovsky, the editor of *Novy Mir* (the official Soviet literary magazine). The story is told that Tvardovsky had the habit of reading new manuscripts in bed. When he came across this novel, he was so taken that he got up, dressed, and read the manuscript through at his desk. He persuaded Khrushchev that publishing the novel was a good political move in the context of the latter’s campaign of new openness, and so the novel appeared in the journal, showing up in libraries and at the homes of subscribers. Solzhenitsyn had called his manuscript *S-854* (the prison number of his main character), while his editor suggested the title, which replaces that number with *Ivan Denisovich*. The two titles suggest in microcosm the themes of the novel: the impersonal prison number suggests the dehumanizing effects of the cruel camps, while the full name points to the human dignity that needs to be afforded to even the most insignificant prisoner.⁷

The novel was an immediate sensation. To take the long view, it has been cogently argued that this publication was the first crack in the Iron Curtain. But in 1962, it was simply read to pieces by Russians who found the novel telling the truth that everyone knew (millions by experience and more by whisper) to be true but no one talked about. As

Edward Ericson, my former teacher and the person from whom I learned nearly all I know about Solzhenitsyn, puts it,

That little novel . . . [made] Solzhenitsyn world-famous overnight, but it did much more. It broke the official conspiracy of silence about the greatest horror story, in quantitative terms at least, in human history. As more than a million copies passed from hand to hand to yet more hands, all those families that had lost members to the Gulag prison camps now knew what before they could only guess. And the Soviet Union was never the same again. If we couldn't see it then, that was the first crack in the Berlin Wall. ("Another" 28)

The thaw that allowed the novel to flourish did not last long, and Solzhenitsyn faced increasing

Indeed, his Gulag Archipelago stands as a monument to truth telling: its encyclopedic recording, its overwhelming attention to detail, its often restrained tone seem to say, "See! This is true! This is the way it was!"

sanctions, restrictions, and harassment (nothing else that he wrote was published in the Soviet era in Russia) even as his reputation increased in the West, culminating in his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. Perhaps that prize saved his life—it is difficult to summarily execute a Nobel laureate. Instead, he was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974 (for an account of this part of his life, see Remnick), eventually settling in Cavendish, Vermont, where he worked for a decade on his massive *Gulag* and even more massive *The Red Wheel*, the former a full exposition of the

Gulag system and the latter a retelling of Russian history leading up to, and including, the Revolution. Solzhenitsyn's thorny relationship with the West, as well as his return to Russia in 1994, are better told by others and are not directly relevant to an exploration of *One Day*.

One wonders why Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn bothered with fiction. After all, he had so much to do. Famously dedicated to telling the truth about his country, he has said, "Our history has been so hidden. I had to dig so deep, I had to uncover what was buried and sealed. This took up all my years" (Remnick 70). Indeed, his *Gulag Archipelago* stands as a monument to truth telling: its encyclopedic recording, its overwhelming attention to detail, its often restrained tone seem to say, "See! This is true! This is the way it was!" And we understand Solzhenitsyn's single-minded attention to the truth (a quality which has not always played well in the West). We understand because, as we have too often observed in our modern world, when a regime or culture loses its grip on the truth, its citizens must find their own recourse to it. Indeed, in his Nobel Lecture, Solzhenitsyn pitted the power of literature against the "remorseless assault of open violence," claiming that "it is within the power of writers and artists to do much more [than not participate in lies]: *to defeat the lie!*" (Ericson and Mahoney 526). I suppose I sound a bit like Solzhenitsyn himself when I suggest that in North America, we revel in the pale luxury of taking reality television for truth, advertisements for truth, even tabloids for truth; after all, our lives and well-being do not depend on these truths.

In *The Gulag*, Solzhenitsyn describes a prisoner's interrogation in this way:

An indictment is presented. And here, incidentally, is how it's presented: "Sign it." "It's not true." "Sign." "But I'm not guilty of anything!" It turns out that you are being indicted under the provisions of Articles 58-10, Part 2 and 58-11 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Republic. "Sign!" "But what do these sections say? Let me read the Code!" "I don't have it." "Well, get it from your department head!" "He doesn't have it either. Sign!" "But I want to see it." "You are

not supposed to see it. It isn't written for you but for us. You don't need it. I'll tell you what it says: these sections spell out exactly what you are guilty of. And anyway, at this point your signature doesn't mean that you agree with the indictment but that you've read it, that it's been presented to you." (56)

When the absurdity of expediency—and the whim of power—displace truth, truth-telling becomes a sacred commodity. So, as I have suggested, it is not difficult to understand Solzhenitsyn's tenacious dedication to truth. But to rehearse the question: with such an urgent need to tell the truth, who has time—indeed who has need—for fiction?

And yet we have Solzhenitsyn, risking his life and freedom to record his camp impressions on scraps of paper and meticulously memorizing them, laboring for months as he wrote under the cover of darkness and hiding away his manuscript, then risking his freedom again as he offered his piece up for publication. What I am suggesting here is that the history of this novel is itself a defense of fiction: both Solzhenitsyn's persistence and its effect on readers—and as Ericson suggests, on the course of history—are testimony to the power of imaginative writing.

I have been teaching Solzhenitsyn's novel in an introductory literature class for nearly twenty years. One of the things I have learned over the years is that the novel is a means for learning about the truths of history—the facts, we might call them. Who was Stalin? When did the Russian Revolution occur? When did the wall fall? What was the Soviet Union doing during World War II? Or, to be more specific, what would a Soviet ship captain be doing on a British warship during that war (that one always stumps students: they have trouble processing "I was on convoys as a liaison officer" 99). We need to answer those questions in order to make sense out of the novel. Better put, the novel invites us to ask these questions. In the best case, students are prompted to learn about these things, and so about the world; in the worst, I find myself backfilling, teaching the history that the fiction demands.

Occasionally, Dordt College has enrolled students from Russia or the former Soviet Republics.

Word gets around that I teach Solzhenitsyn, so they often end up in my literature class. These students have corrected my pronunciation, given me insight into the meaning of names, parsed out the Russian for the acronym *Gulag*, and verified the story of Solzhenitsyn's exile with their own family stories of finding their way to the West. They have kept me on my toes. And they have helped me to foster in my classroom the best of all teaching situations, where I am a learner as well as a teacher and where my students teach as much as they learn.

One story beats all others. It was, I can say, the absolute best moment I have had as a college teacher in 20 years, the more so because it illustrates the power of real, truthful testimony and its potential to affect learning.

Here is what happened. Leila was a bright, quiet girl from Azerbaijan, where her parents were medical professionals and where she remembers lying on the floor for protection in their apartment during armed confrontations surrounding the fall of Communism (her parents were away treating the injured). When I was describing for students the arbitrariness and senselessness of arrests under Stalin—with reference to Solzhenitsyn's own arrest and those mentioned in the novel (like Shukhov's and the Captain's)—she must have seen the class's eyes beginning to glaze: this was all too far away, too abstract, too unaccountable. They could not imagine such a thing. Well, Leila raised her hand, and when I invited her to speak, she said something like this:

"I am from Azerbaijan, I and my family. Once, my uncle was standing at a street corner, warming himself by a barrel in which there was a fire. He took a piece of newspaper and used it to light a cigarette. Well, on the back of the newspaper was a photo of Stalin. Someone reported him—he had a grudge against my uncle, you see—and my uncle spent ten years in a camp."⁸

I wish I could say I orchestrated that moment, that I had set up the class for the stunned silence that followed as they realized we had not just been talking about a far-away fiction. Leila, quietly but firmly, had made things real.

But does fiction have that power? I hope that

part of the answer is already clear. Fiction (story) interacts with other ways of knowing—with historical accounts, with personal experiences—and it engages the imagination to make sense of them. You might say, Solzhenitsyn might say, that fiction is innocent—it just tells a story, nothing more. As Sir Philip Sidney put it, the poet (the fiction writer) “with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play and old men from the chimney corner” (113). But as even children know, or perhaps know best, that stories can take us away, stories can also help us to see what we don’t see in other ways—stories engage us. As readers in the Soviet Union passed around copies of *One Day*, and as contemporary readers are confronted by the Leila’s of this world, the novel puts them in touch with truth. This, of course, obligates the writer to tell the truth, an obligation Solzhenitsyn never shirks.⁹

And furthermore, fiction puts us in touch with the kind of truth that is useful to us. This is an argument Sidney makes as well,¹⁰ and one given a contemporary context by Mark Edmundson. In his book *Why Read?* Edmundson laments that in colleges and universities the notion that we read in order to discover truth has passed away. Imitating the usual doctrine, he writes, “read for truth? Absurd. The whole notion of truth was dispatched long ago, tossed on the junk heap of history along with God and destiny and right and all the rest” (52). Against this prevailing opinion, Edmundson seeks to recover reading that matters:

What I am asking when I ask of a major work
(for only major works will sustain this question)
whether it is true is quite simply this: Can you live
it? Can you put it into action? (56)

In other words, does the work of fiction offer a kind of truth that can be put into action? It seems to me that this is the kind of reading Solzhenitsyn’s first readers of *One Day* practiced: they learned not only what happened (which they knew but which the novel put into words for them) but how to respond to it—how to live. The truth of fiction works that way, and that truth is available to us as well as we engage with the novel almost 50 years later.

As an illustration of Solzhenitsyn’s fictional truth-telling, we may turn to the account in *One Day* of Shukhov’s arrest. The character of Ivan Denisovich Shukhov is, of course, wonderfully layered. While simple and illiterate, he uses his considerable practical skills to survive in the camps—he fashions a spoon; he sews slippers; he knows “what was what in the camps” (1). Furthermore, in his quiet way, he maintains his human dignity despite his extreme circumstances: indeed he becomes a symbol for all who overcome

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the dehumanizing pressures of the Gulag. It is Solzhenitsyn’s most subtle yet over-arching irony that this prisoner is an ideal worker—just the sort of selfless, resourceful, industrious member of the proletariat that should be idealized under Communism, not incarcerated.

Shukhov, like Solzhenitsyn himself, was arrested while serving his country on the front during W.W. II. He was taken prisoner by the Germans but later escaped:

In his record it said Shukhov was in for treason. And it’s true he gave evidence against himself and said he’d surrendered to the enemy with the intention of betraying his country, and come back with instructions from the Germans. But just what he was supposed to do for the Germans neither Shukhov nor the interrogator could say. So

they just left it at that and put down: “On instructions from the Germans.”

The way Shukhov figured, it was very simple. If he didn’t sign, he was as good as buried. But if he did, he’d still go on living a while. So he signed.
(54)

Solzhenitsyn’s invention of Shukhov’s circumstances resonates with the author’s own arrest on the Russian front, with his description of the process of interrogation in the *Gulag*, and even with my student Leila’s account of her uncle’s arrest. Particularly, it captures the banal absurdity of the entire process and its understated threat (I ask my students to speculate about how exactly Shukhov was coerced—Solzhenitsyn mostly leaves violence to our imaginations). It also points to the programmatic paranoia that made any contact with outsiders suspicious. So this fictional account tells the truth because it is verified by non-fictional accounts. It rings true.

But does it do anything more? I would suggest at least this: because it shows the hand of the shaping artist—Solzhenitsyn has, I am suggesting, drawn on many tales of arrest and coerced conviction—it is able to epitomize these situations and thus to offer more insight into them than any single incident does. Or at least, it epitomizes them, allowing readers with various experiences and understandings of the Gulag access. Furthermore, by his weaving this incident into the life of his character, we are able to see what we might call its full effect. Shukhov’s reaction is of a piece with his humble, passive, and practical nature. In this way—and this is fiction’s power—we can see how a person could so matter-of-factly acquiesce or even understand how one could not burn oneself out with rage at such injustice.

Can you live it? Is a view of life—a worldview—implicit in this incident? Well, to answer that question you need the entire novel, of course. You need Shukhov’s intrepid actions, you need a character called the Baptist’s joy at sunrise (35); you need the Captain’s foolish but very characteristic outburst at injustice (27); you need the gang boss Tyurin’s pockmarked face (36); you need Fetyukov’s desperate scavenging (23); and finally, you need the Baptist’s miraculous contentment

(141-44). This is how fiction works. But even in the incident of Shukhov’s arrest, we are able to understand a human being’s response to overwhelming evil.¹¹

In a well-known passage from *The Gulag*, Solzhenitsyn writes,

So let the reader who expects this book to be a political exposé slam its covers shut right now.

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn’t change, and to that name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil.

(75)

What would this look like in fiction? One of the most remarkable sustained passages in *One Day* occurs as a column of workers is organized, counted, and marched home at the end of a grueling outdoor winter workday: “The prisoners had been out in the cold all day and they were so frozen they were ready to drop” (99). What is at stake is not only a bit of relief and rest but a chance to compete for the scarce resources at camp:

So everybody from all the sites was in one hell of a hurry to get back and make it inside the camp before anybody else. The first ones inside had a head start—they were first in the mess hall, first to get their packages, if they had any, first into the kitchen to get the stuff they’d asked to have cooked in the morning, first to the CES to pick up letters from home, first to the censors to hand in a letter for mailing, first to the barbers, the medics, and the bathhouse—in fact, first everywhere. (92)

Under these pressures, we see the “line dividing good and evil” moving around in individuals and

the entire group as hate, and sometimes sympathy, get redirected during the ordeal.

It begins when Shukhov pauses to take a second look at the wall he has built with his work gang: he thinks, “the guards could set the dogs on him for all he cared now” (88). Shukhov admires his wall—“His hands were still good for something!” (88), he thinks. This is the emotional high point of the novel as Shukhov confirms his human dignity despite his conditions. But the moment doesn’t last long: those dogs are not far away. When Shukhov and Senka Klevshin, a member of his work gang who has waited for him, hurry out to the staging area, they are subjected to harsh verbal abuse, not from the guards but from their fellow prisoners, since it appears they are making the work detail late: “It’s a terrible thing when

We might add that Solzhenitsyn’s insights here are very acute: who has not in one moment condemned the action of another and then found oneself doing—and even justifying—the same action in oneself? Solzhenitsyn’s fiction indicts us.

hundreds of men start shouting at you all at once” (89). So hate is directed at these two prisoners. In an interlude, one prisoner asks another a foolish question: “how are things?” (94). The narrator comments, “A guy who’s warm doesn’t know what it’s like to be frozen or he wouldn’t ask stupid questions like that” (94). The comment elicits both sympathy (for those who have worked outside all day) and contempt (for the prisoner, who has stayed warm and well fed all day, a result of his ability to bribe the guards).

Then it is discovered that another prisoner is missing, and the entire detail (more than 500 men) begins railing against this missing man (94). Remarkably, Shukhov joins in:

Even Shukhov thought it was funny for somebody to go on working like that and not hear the signal to knock off.

He’d clean forgot how he’d kept on working himself a little while back and gotten mad because people were going over to the guardroom too early, but now he was standing there freezing and bitching along with the others. And if that Moldavian [the missing man] kept them hanging around here another half-hour, he thought, and the escorts handed him over to the crowd, they’d tear . . . [him] to pieces like wolves. (95)

The line of evil has just shifted, not only in the crowd but in Shukhov’s own heart as he fails to see that he is not different from the man they seek. We might add that Solzhenitsyn’s insights here are very acute: who has not in one moment condemned the action of another and then found oneself doing—and even justifying—the same action in oneself? Solzhenitsyn’s fiction indicts us.

When the man is found, he is punished with a string of profanity (“And Shukhov joined in, too” [96]) as well as with a beating by his own work gang (which, ironically, may have saved him from a worse fate at the hands of the guards). But then the guards decide to recount prisoners, despite the fact that everyone knows all prisoners are accounted now for: “The prisoners groaned. They forgot about the Moldavian now and all their hate turned on the escorts” (97).¹² It is important to see how deliberate Solzhenitsyn is here as he focuses our attention on the changeableness of hate. Clearly, this movement is what he wants us to notice in the scene.

In the surly shuffling that follows as the guards force a new count, Solzhenitsyn summarizes the feelings of the prisoners: “They’d lost their evening! That damn Moldavian, those damn guards. What a rotten lousy life!” (97).

Eventually, the large detail begins its two-mile march to camp, moving slowly despite the guards’ prodding since they feel cheated by the escorts.

But as the group approaches the camp, a change occurs:

But now all at once something happened in the column, like a wave going through it, and they all got out of step. The column sort of jerked forward and buzzed like a swarm of bees. The fellows in the back—that's where Shukhov was—had to run now to keep up with the men out front. (101)

Shukhov's work group has noticed that another group is lagging behind, and suddenly a race is on between the columns. Solzhenitsyn observes,

So everything was turned upside down. Everything was all mixed up now—bitter was sweet and sweet was bitter. Even the guards were with them. They were all in it together. The people they hated now were the guys over in that other column. (101)

Shukhov's column wins the race,¹³ but Solzhenitsyn's comments make it clear that, unlike Shukhov's pause at his wall, this is no real victory: "It was like a bunch of scared rabbits gloating over another bunch of scared rabbits" and "who is the prisoner's worst enemy? The guy next to him" (103). Solzhenitsyn's narrative has made his point. Not only does it depict the degradations of prison life and expose the inefficiencies of authoritarian rule, but it illustrates something essential about human nature, how we are capable of hate and love in varying degrees and at various times, how "the line dividing good and evil" does not distinguish person from person (prisoner from guard, for instance) but cuts through our very souls. In this context, it is important to notice that this is not the final scene of the novel: that place is reserved for one which shows remarkable kindness and sympathy as Shukhov offers the Baptist Alyoshka a cookie and is in turn ministered to by him.

But to return to our theme: it is the power of fiction which presents these insights about the human condition within a story that makes them both believable and accessible. Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag* statement about "the line dividing good and evil" is true; his fictional account embodies that truth and allows us to understand it, even to feel it, as we respond to Shukhov's experiences and his

reactions to his experiences.

What fiction writers do is create worlds, and these worlds bring with them their own believability. It is built into their coherence and fullness. This is true of fantasy as well as realism. Solzhenitsyn's realism—call it a moral realism—gains our assent in additional ways. First, his account of one day in the life of one prisoner is verified by the experience of millions of prisoners, including the author, who experienced what Shukhov and his fellows are depicted as experiencing.¹⁴ Shukhov epitomizes their experience. Secondly, his fiction gains our assent by being true, as I have tried to illustrate, to our inner experience. If we know our own hearts, then Shukhov's joy (which is not too strong a word) at his accomplishment at the wall he helped to build, as well as his hate on the road back to camp, seems true to us.

If space permitted, we could augment our discussion by exploring how fiction fosters two complementary but quite different effects—identification and universalization. To illustrate briefly, we can find ourselves in *One Day*: are we cagey like Shukhov, strong like the gang boss Tyurin, meek like Alyoshka? How prepared are we to meet extreme circumstances?¹⁵ On the other hand, we are allowed to expand the horizons of the novel, a movement Solzhenitsyn carefully engineers for us. He centers his novel around his title character, yet he gives us detailed characterizations of many (but not all) members of his work gang. Through the repeated headcounts that take place in the novel, we learn that there are over 500 men at Shukhov's worksite and a few thousand in his camp. Similarly, while the novel details just one day in January of 1951, we learn that Shukhov has been in prison for eight years, that standard sentences have increased from 10 years to 25, and that "They twisted the law any way they wanted. You finished a ten-year stretch and they gave you another one" (54). Solzhenitsyn's famously understated conclusion invites us to do the math: he tells us that Shukhov actually felt he had a pretty good day and then adds,

There were three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days like this in his sentence, from reveille to lights out.

The three extra ones were because of the leap years. . . . (144)

Nothing exhibits Solzhenitsyn's genius better than this understated ending. To choose a "good" day in the extremes of camp life during a Siberian winter evokes in us two reactions: How could anyone have a good day in such conditions? And what would a bad day be like? By means of the first question, Solzhenitsyn brings us to the center of his understanding of the human condition. As he writes in his *Gulag*,

What about the main thing in life, all its riddles? If you want, I'll spell it out for you right now. Do not pursue what is illusory—property and position: all that is gained at the expense of your nerves decade after decade, and is confiscated in one fell night. Live with a steady superiority over life—don't be afraid of misfortune, and do not yearn after happiness; it is, after all, all the same: the bitter doesn't last forever, and the sweet never fills the cup to overflowing. It is enough if you don't freeze in the cold and if thirst and hunger don't claw at your insides. If your back isn't broken, if your feet can walk, if both arms can bend, if both eyes see, and if both ears hear, then whom should you envy? And why? Our envy of others devours us most of all. Rub your eyes and purify your heart—and prize above all else in the world those who love you and who wish you well. Do not hurt them or scold them, and never part from any of them in anger; after all, you simply do not know: it might be your last act before your arrest, and that will be how you are imprinted in their memory! (2: 591-2)

The second question leads us to develop insight into the individual, social, and political tragedy of the Soviet Union under Stalin. "The three extra ones" reminds us that each day is significant, for each is a battle between life and death, between dignity and dehumanization, and between good and evil.

Why is fiction important? Because, put simply, it has the capacity to tell the truth. In fact, this is not a bad definition of fiction: imaginative writing that, while not literally true, nonetheless tells the truth (or can tell the truth). Solzhenitsyn's

version of this definition is this: "Lies can prevail against much in the world, but never against art" (Ericson and Mahoney 256). His *One Day* stands as testimony to this statement and proves the statement again and again as readers pick it up and begin to read, "Reveille was sounded as always, at 5 a.m. . ." (1).

Endnotes

1. I draw on especially Aikman's *Time* interview and on the various publications of Edward Ericson listed in the Works Cited.
2. Solzhenitsyn was instrumental in making this acronym familiar to the West, and even for making it a symbol of the authoritarian evil of the Soviet era. The acronym stands for something like "The Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps," in Russian, *Glavnoe Upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovyykh LAGerei*. In his landmark book, Solzhenitsyn called it *The Gulag Archipelago*, metaphorically suggesting a chain of islands (the camps) stretching out across the Soviet Union. Numbers vary significantly, but probably something like 30 million people were interred in these forced labor camps. Considering that many people were executed on the spot for "anti-Soviet activities," that prisoners on average did not survive for a year, and that the Gulag was active from the 1930s until 1953 (when Stalin died—but clearly some political prisoners were interred in a curtailed penal system until the fall of communism, perhaps even beyond), Stalin's legacy of extermination is no doubt greater than Hitler's. Junior High and High School teachers, and interested readers as well, will find a rich set of resources at *Gulag: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom* (<http://gulaghistory.org/nps/teacherresources/>). The paintings of Nikolai Getman, a Gulag survivor, offer a rich account of the camps (<http://www.jamestown.org/aboutus/getmanpaintings/getmancatalog/>).
3. Here is Ericson and Mahoney's account of Solzhenitsyn's encounter with Christian witness as he recovered from cancer surgery:

In the recovery room the still-groggy patient listened to Dr. Boris Kornfeld's fervent account of his own recent conversion to Christianity. Later that very night, Kornfeld was killed by persons unknown for reasons unknown. This unforgettable episode, recounted in "The Ascent," a crucial chapter in *Gulag*, was a key event in reigniting Solzhenitsyn's Christian faith (xix).

4. Two notes. First, his internal exile was typical: here is how his character Shukhov describes the prospect of freedom as he reflects on a rare letter from home: “The only catch was—if you’d been convicted with loss of civil rights, you couldn’t get work anywhere and you weren’t allowed back home” (34). This was Solzhenitsyn’s situation. In the novel, Shukhov’s reflections allow us to see how degrading the tyranny of the Soviet system was: can an ex-prisoner ever be free?

Second, a note on Solzhenitsyn’s marriages, of which I know only the bare facts. He and his first wife divorced while Solzhenitsyn was in prison, a move that spared her from sanctions and may thus have been an act of practicality, even love. Reunited after Solzhenitsyn was released from exile, their marriage eventually failed as pressures mounted on Solzhenitsyn during the ‘70s. Solzhenitsyn began a relationship during this time with the woman who would become his second wife. After he was expelled from the Soviet Union this woman, Natalia Svetlova, became very much his assistant, translator, and advocate. They had three sons (Ericson and Mahoney xix-xx, xxii; “Obituary”)

5. There was, under the Soviet regime, as often in the context of repression, a flourishing tradition of private, carefully circulated, manuscript publication. “Writing for the drawer” it was called in the Soviet Union.
6. These words are from the novel’s original, official introduction, by Tvardovsky (on whom, see below).
7. Russians use one’s first name and second (which is a patronym—“ovich” means “son of” and “evna/ovna” means “daughter of”) to address someone formally and with respect. Little Ivan (his name is cognate with John and Jan) would probably have thought it funny to have someone refer to him with such formality.

One striking example of these themes of dehumanization and human dignity can be found in Solzhenitsyn’s depiction of an old prisoner whom Shukhov observes eating. Shukhov knows him only as Y-81:

In the camp you could pick him out among all the men with their bent backs because he was straight as a ramrod. When he sat at the table it looked like he was sitting on something to raise himself up higher. There hadn’t been anything to shave off his head for a long time—he’d lost all his hair because of the good life. His eyes didn’t shift around the mess hall all the time to see what was going on, and he was staring over Skukhov’s head and looking at something nobody else could see.

* * *

You could see his mind was set on one thing—never to give in. He didn’t put his eight ounces [of bread] in all

the filth on the table like everybody else but laid it on a clean little piece of rag that’d been washed over and over again. (122)

8. In *The Gulag*, Solzhenitsyn tells the grimly comic story of a man who solved a practical problem ingeniously—and was sentenced to 10 years for it: in order to carry large bust of Stalin, the “village club manager” devised a noose, “put it around his neck, and in this way carried it over his shoulder through the village” (239). He was reported and arrested. Solzhenitsyn goes on to describe the role of denunciations (which was Leila’s uncle’s experience) (241).
9. In his Nobel Lecture, Solzhenitsyn delineates what Ericson and Mahoney call “the moral and political responsibility of the artist” (xxxvii). He says, “After all, an artist develops his gift only partially by himself; the greater part has been breathed into him ready-made at birth. And together with this talent, a responsibility has been imposed upon his free will” (521).
10. After the passage cited above, Sidney adds, “And, pretending no more, [poetry] doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue: even as the child is often brought to take most wholesome things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant taste” (113).
11. The ironies here run very deep and are laced with empathy. One would think that Solzhenitsyn, who spent his entire life after his arrest resisting the powerful abuses of Soviet power, would invite us to have contempt for someone who acquiesces so easily. But just the opposite: Solzhenitsyn understands (even from experience) how such acquiescence is achieved, as well as how humanly natural it is. What he evokes in us (here and throughout) is complete empathy for this little man in a horrible situation. Remarkably, as we shall see below, Solzhenitsyn’s empathy extends to the guards. This leads to a sobering understanding of human nature. “‘Where did this wolf tribe appear from among our own people?’ asked Solzhenitsyn. ‘Does it really stem from our own roots? Our own blood? It is ours.’” (qtd. in Matthews). This question—how to cope with the beast in man—gives Solzhenitsyn’s writing not just its moral seriousness but its drama.
12. It is worth observing that earlier we were told, “It was no fun for them [the escorts] either” (92). Sympathy has turned to hate. Compare this with what Solzhenitsyn says in the previous note.
13. The analogy to a race is complicated. Earlier, when Shukhov is hurrying to join the detail, he thinks (or perhaps the statement generalizes the thoughts of the Shukhov’s work gang), “There are some people with nothing better to do than race each other around a track just for sport and of their own free will. How

would they like it, the bastards, if they had to do it after a real day's work, without a chance to straighten their backs, with their mittens soaked in sweat, and their boots worn all thin—and in freezing cold like this?" (89).

14. *The Irish Times* cites one of thousands of written responses Solzhenitsyn received after his novel was published: "Thank you, dear friend, comrade and brother. Reading your story I remembered the frosts and blizzards, the insults and humiliations. I wept as I read. Keep well, dear friend" ("Gulag Survivor").
15. I often illustrate this in class by reference to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, inviting students to bring their psychology class learning into our discussion. To cite just one example, when Shukhov returns to the wall he has built for one last look—despite all the pressures on him to keep moving—he turns the tables on Maslow's hierarchy, choosing to meet the needs of his spirit over those of his body.

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