

Solzhenitsyn's Harvard 1978 Commencement Address

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Tucked away on a quiet street near Harvard Square is an organization called the Abigail Adams Institute. Created in 2014, their purpose is to “revive the traditional liberal arts at Harvard” through reading groups, discussions, seminars, and fellowships. I stumbled upon one of their posters in the Smith Student Center. It was an invitation to a discussion on the works of the renowned author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. I had heard about his seminal work *The Gulag Archipelago* but had never approached any of his work directly.

On the day of the discussion, I was greeted by a friendly young woman named Jacinta, who would moderate the conversation. The venue was cozy and tastefully decorated. About 20 people slowly filed in, served themselves dinner, and took a seat. There was a diverse mix of generations, occupations, and nationalities.

The focus of the conversation was Solzhenitsyn's 1978 Harvard Commencement Address, a fiery hour-long speech in which he outlines looming threats to Western societies. As the discussion

unfolded, I was impressed by the level of dialogue. There were many articulate points of view, differing but always respectful. Very soon every one of the 20 people gathered had the opportunity to share their thoughts.

The first thread in the discussion, which engendered significant disagreement, was Solzhenitsyn's critique of what he deemed an overly legalistic society. He felt that a system of laws that was not supported by strong moral convictions was destined to fail. His philosophy could be explained by a modern analogy: the notion that society should not pass laws against pornography because such laws would steal the virtues of restraint and discretion from citizens.

During this point in the discussion, a powerful quotation from President John Adams came to mind. What better place to share it than in an institute named for his closest advisor, his wife? The quotation was “Our constitution is made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to a government of any other.” This quotation acknowledges that the liberty that exists in the United States comes with a hefty price tag—responsibility. It is incumbent on individual citizens to restrain their own vices to promote the common good. The alternative, which our founders feared, is to have an intrusive government restrain them instead.

The discussion then veered to the future of the United States. Several participants who were immigrants, including a group of English scholars, provided insightful commentary from the perspectives of outsiders. There was a general sense among the participants, a sentiment shared by many in our nation, that the United States is in rapid decline. One individual, a student not born in this country, offered a curious question: “So what if America falls? All societies in the past have fallen and new ones have emerged. What makes this coun-

try so special that we should save it?" I wish I could say only a foreigner could offer such a fatalistic perspective, but too many of my peers also mirror his apathy.

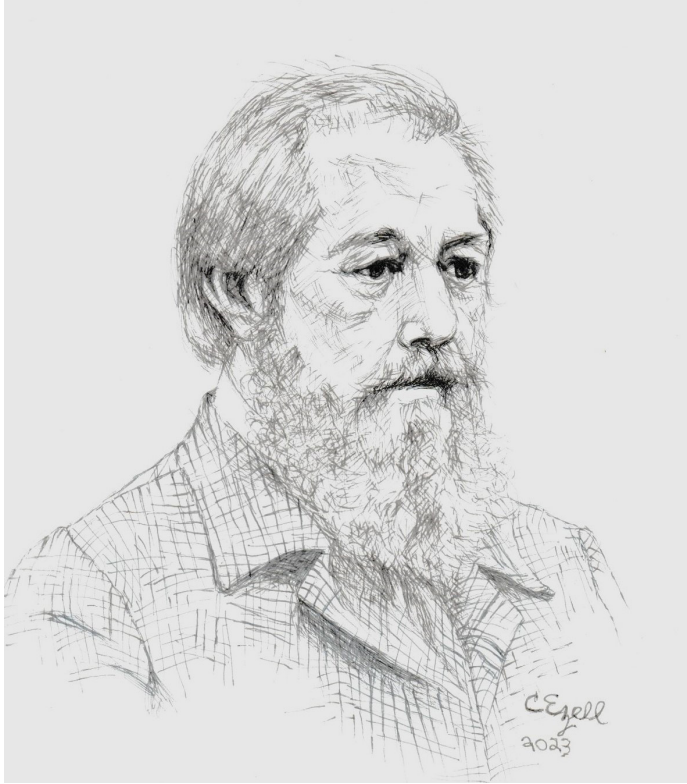
My opinion, which I believe Solzhenitsyn would have sympathized with, is that our world is made better by the existence of an America grounded in its founding ideals. When we are at our best, we are an instructive example to the world that liberty, democracy, equality, individualism, hard work, innovation, and excellence are better alternatives to despotism, state control, collectivism, tyranny, and cowardice.

Solzhenitsyn ends his speech with an inspirational call to arms: "...[the future] will demand from us a spiritual blaze; we shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life." His message in 1978 is as timely now as it ever was. In modern Western society, we have grown accustomed to peace and abundance. The desire for material comfort has become the north star of all our energies.

If we do not heed Solzhenitsyn's warnings, we may very well find that this indulgence in simple physical well-being has rendered us morally weak. And it was Solzhenitsyn's great contribution to the world to show that this moral weakness will inevitably lead to great atrocities, suffering, and evil.

Solzhenitsyn: The Hopeful Artist

Jacinta Hogan



Alexander Solzhenitsyn

en to the artist,” he says in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “to sense more keenly than others the harmony of the world, the beauty and ugliness of man’s role in it - and to vividly communicate this to mankind.” Solzhenitsyn does not ask for a keen insight, nor does he believe that he has a comprehensive perception of the world. He sees glimmers of truth and is compelled to share them.

As is often the case for modern readers, the participants of the AAI discussion group wanted to piece together precisely what Solzhenitsyn’s world view is. Clarifying the role of the artist, though, Solzhenitsyn says “it was not [the artist] who created this world, nor does he control it.” Solzhenitsyn is not creating a world; he is revealing one. The artist has a unique and valuable gift to give to society.

Solzhenitsyn’s most famous speech is the Harvard Commencement Address of 1978, “A World Split Apart” (see Darshan Kalola’s article in this edition of *The Veritas Review*). He critiques elements of American society, including materialism and legalism. He describes what he sees, not offering a political solution. The absence of solutions in Solzhenitsyn’s writing is often the primary criticism of his work. Recall, however, that Solzhenitsyn does not perceive himself as a politician. He is an artist whose role is to reveal; in this speech, he reveals trends in American behavior that do not reflect the ideals Americans pride themselves in having. Solzhenitsyn’s insights are strikingly accurate, and prompted the AAI discussion group to wrestle with the concepts of truth, the telos of law, and the meaning of freedom.

Because Solzhenitsyn had experienced such extreme suffering in his life, his works can often feel weighty and depressing. New readers of Solzhenitsyn can be disheartened at his recognition of evil in the world. The AAI

Does an artist have a duty to society? Is legalism a weakness of America? How do we find hope when every political system seems flawed? Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn offers answers to questions such as these throughout his works. At times, though, his answers can be challenging to decipher.

This summer, as an intern at the Abigail Adams Institute, I had the pleasure of leading a discussion group through five of Solzhenitsyn’s speeches. The discussion group welcomed twenty-seven participants over the course of five weeks. Participants spanned generations, political beliefs, education levels, and backgrounds. The expertise of members in the group included philosophy, psychology, mathematics, and politics. The interdisciplinary nature of the group shed light on the universal applicability of Solzhenitsyn.

For all his novels, short stories, histories, essays, and speeches, Solzhenitsyn believed himself to be an artist. Not a politician. Not a historian. Not a philosopher. An artist! “It is merely given

discussion group reflected this pattern, but Solzhenitsyn is firmly committed to hope. Those who commit time to reading his works will discover his hope.

The final speech discussed in the AAI group was “We Have Ceased to See the Purpose,” Solzhenitsyn’s farewell address to the West in 1993. At the conclusion of this speech, he says, “we have not experienced the trials of the twentieth century in vain. Let us hope: We have, after all, been tempered by these trials, and our hard-won firmness will in some fashion be passed on to the following generations.” Suffering strengthens the human person. For Solzhenitsyn, individual persons passing strength on to future generations is where the hope of a whole people is found. There will never be a utopian society, but Solzhenitsyn believes that the freedom of the individual to choose the good at every turn is the means by which mankind can achieve higher things. The conclusion of his Harvard Address reads, “this ascension is similar to climbing onto the next anthropological stage. No one on earth has any way left but - upward.”

Solzhenitsyn: The Artist who Humanized History through Narrative

Mohammed Said Alhalimi



For me, Solzhenitsyn is a remarkable figure who was simultaneously an intellectual with an unmatched breadth of historical insight and an artist with an eye for beauty and a story to tell. It was this apparent contradiction that led me to approach Solzhenitsyn's writings with extreme caution. However, as I became more familiar with his life story and the overarching ethic that drove his work, I realized the power of Solzhenitsyn's method; that is, the use of narrative for historical documentation. I have always recognized that historians assume a responsibility to establish a clear account of a particular event that approximates an objective description thereof, unswayed by ideological commitments and devoid of normative judgments to the greatest degree possible. Solzhenitsyn, on the other hand, although meticulous and concerned with historical objectivity, does not hesitate to share the personal moral lessons he derived from his meditations through the tragedies of the twentieth century.

Engaging with Solzhenitsyn's numerous volumes, especially *The Gulag Archipelago* and *The Red Wheel*, I was struck by the dissident's disregard for standard academic practices in relating major historical events; in this case, the Bolshevik Revolution and the transition that ensued from imperial Russia to the Soviet Union. This, I believe, explains the historical significance and impact of Solzhenitsyn's account. For Solzhenitsyn, the drama played in the political arena was a direct reflection of the moral choices of each and every member of society. This heterodox, bottom-up approach to history is much more compelling. It places the individual at the center as a responsible citizen, rather than a marionette pulled by evil forces outside his control.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky proclaims that "there is only one way to salvation, and that is to make yourself responsible for all men's sins." In his writing, Solzhenitsyn takes this maxim seriously. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, for instance, Solzhenitsyn constantly employs the second-person point of view to compel the reader to experience what it would be like to be under interrogation and torture, or to have the power to inflict these fates on other people. He recounts the internal dialogue that inevitably takes place in the mind of each prisoner. He gives stories of the people one is bound to encounter in a corrective labor camp. He elaborates on what he calls the "intoxication" of power that drove State Security representatives to exercise their authority. As he puts it, "Only a little while ago your parents were deeply concerned about you and didn't know where to turn to launch you in life. You were such a fool..." But now, "you have a power over all the people in that military unit, or factory, or district, incomparably greater than that of the military commander, or factory director, or secretary of the district Communist Party. These men control people's military or official duties, wages, reputations, but you control people's freedom." It was his experience as both a communist artillery officer in the Soviet army and then a Gulag prisoner that provided the psychological depth that characterizes Solzhenitsyn's writing and led him to declare 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 emphasis on the moral significance of each individual contains a vital ethical lesson to the reader: your actions matter! As Solzhenitsyn puts it, “you can resolve to live your life with integrity” and “the simple step of a courageous individual is not to take part in the lie.” In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn recounts the story of what transpired at the conclusion of a party conference in a Moscow province. As was always the case, a tribute to Comrade Stalin was called and everyone was expected to stand up and clap. As he describes it, the hall echoed with “stormy applause, rising to an ovation.” This continued for three minutes, four minutes, and then five minutes. Even Stalin’s staunchest supporters became aware of the “insufferably silly” nature of this ritual, especially after the ten-minute mark. Despite this, no one dared be the first to cease clapping for the great Comrade Stalin, particularly as “NKVD men were standing in the hall applauding and watching to see who quit first.” After eleven minutes, the director of the local paper factory made a decision. Having witnessed the hypocrisy of a myriad of men who, aware of the falsity and absurdity of the situation, kept on clapping, the strong-minded director “assumed a businesslike expression and sat down in his seat.” Everyone else followed suit, and the “uninhibited enthusiasm” in the hall vanished instantly thereafter. This courageous man was arrested that same night and given a ten-year sentence, which gave rise to the remark, “don’t ever be the first to stop applauding.” Despite the terrible fate that had befallen the honest man, it is precisely this truth faculty that Solzhenitsyn seeks to awaken in his readers. It is the ability to tell the truth despite the consequences that demands our respect. Having been condemned to work in a labor camp himself and experienced censorship and other Soviet horrors, Solzhenitsyn retains unique credibility as well as power, the kind of power that history bestows on people who are prepared to suffer for their belief in the righteousness of their ideas.