

“THE OAK AND THE CALF”

BY ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN

Background on the Selection

Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn (1918–) is a writer, novelist, Nobel laureate, and a living legend. Born in Kislovodsk, Russia, he was educated in mathematics and physics and served in World War II, but was imprisoned from 1945–53 for negative comments on Stalin’s conduct of the war. After surviving Stalin’s infamous Soviet Corrective Labor Camps, the Gulag, Solzhenitsyn turned his pen into a sword and his books into military divisions, and became not only a Nobel Prize winner but a one-man resistance movement against Communist totalitarianism and other dehumanizing phenomena. This selection from his 1975 autobiography focuses on his sense of calling, which emerged slowly.

Group Discussion Questions

1 How does Solzhenitsyn see his being “put inside” affecting his early attitudes to a writing career?

2 How do you understand his apparently paradoxical confidence that “no one would ever publish me” but there was “the surety that my work would not be in vain”?

3 Review his heroic efforts at writing—writing whole books in his head, memorizing thousands of lines, exile, cancer, desertion and so on. What motivated him? What was the effect of the “divine miracle” of surviving cancer?

4 In the section “Bolder by the Day,” a new note enters: “the dying wish of millions.” How does this affect him? Do you have any similar passion or burden in your life?

5 What was Solzhenitsyn’s decision about his children? How does this compare with the common modern maxim that “work” never come above “family”? Which of the two is closer to the teaching of Jesus?

6 Clearly Solzhenitsyn has a high view of the power of words (“a shout in the mountain has been known to start an avalanche”). What lies behind this conviction? Do we have a similar view in the West? What has changed our attitudes to words? How can we counter this situation?

7 Solzhenitsyn quotes V. V. Ivanov: “Many lives have a mystical sense, but not everyone reads it right.” In retrospect, how does Solzhenitsyn apply this understanding of life direction to his own experience? What do you think of this mystical understanding of calling?

8 Consider the section “Racing Against Time.” Is his hurry driven by circumstance or character? Is there room for rest, for enjoyment, in his understanding of his calling? Do you feel a similar pressure of time to do your life’s work? What grounds your perspective on work, rest, and identity?

9 His strongest statement of his calling is in the paragraph “The one worrying thing . . .” What are the components of this extraordinary statement? Do you have an equivalent, if less dramatic, sense of purpose in your life?

10 The reformer William Wilberforce came to his sense of calling early (at the age of 28) and lived all his life in the light of it. Solzhenitsyn came to a similar conviction late and then could look back and decipher all God’s signs leading up to it. Which of the two do you most identify with in this respect?

Further Reading

- *Entrepreneurs of Life: Faith and the Venture of Purposeful Living*, The Trinity Forum (Nav-Press 2001)
- *But Not Through Me: Seven Steps to Facing up to the Challenge of Evil and Suffering*, The Trinity Forum (2004)
- “Abraham Lincoln: The Spiritual Growth of a Public Man,” by Elton Trueblood, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1993.
- “One Word of Truth: A Portrait of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn,” by David Aikman, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1997.
- “A World Split Apart” by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2002.