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## Freedom Illuminated by Imprisonment in One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

### Keywords

Individualism, Personal Rights, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

**Freedom Illuminated by Imprisonment  
in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich***

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Western conceptions of freedom are based primarily on individualism and personal rights. For Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, however, the foundation of human existence and true freedom is an inner quality, "morality steeped in spirituality" (Patterson 373). While Solzhenitsyn values freedom, he recognizes that freedom, especially external freedom, by which he means freedom from externally imposed constraints, is "quite inadequate to save us" and is valuable only as a means to a higher goal (Solzhenitsyn, "As Breathing" 18). Through his writing, Solzhenitsyn interprets human experience, and "it is always within [the] context of the Christian view of the human drama that he does his interpreting" (Ericson 25). For Solzhenitsyn, "the task of the writer is to select more universal, eternal questions [such as] the secrets of the human heart, the triumph over spiritual sorrow, the laws of the history of mankind that were born in

the depths of time immemorial and that will cease to exist only when the sun ceases to shine” (qtd. in Barker 35). Through *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn interprets, through his Christian view, the universal and eternal question of freedom, revealing its true nature as the moral duty of sacrifice and self-restraint rather than individual license.

Solzhenitsyn himself experienced extreme external bondage in Russia’s labor camps. While a Russian soldier in 1945, at age 26, Solzhenitsyn was arrested for writing “disrespectful remarks about Stalin” (Solzhenitsyn, *Solzhenitsyn* 20) in letters to a school friend. Without a trial, and in his absence, Solzhenitsyn was convicted by a “procedure” and “sentenced to eight years in a labor camp” (Solzhenitsyn, *Solzhenitsyn* 20).

Solzhenitsyn was to spend the last few years of his sentence in a “special camp for political prisoners” (Solzhenitsyn, *Solzhenitsyn* 31) similar to the one described in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. After eight years and an additional month of imprisonment, Solzhenitsyn was released from the camps but sent into “perpetual exile” in southern Kazakhstan (Solzhenitsyn, *Solzhenitsyn* 31). During the few years he spent in the forced labor camp, where “he became a number” (Rothberg 6), Solzhenitsyn “conceived the idea of writing *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*” (Rothberg 6).

Solzhenitsyn’s imprisonment in the forced labor camps was “the crucial experience” in his life (Clement

12).

During his imprisonment, he experienced prisons into which human beings are crammed to the point of suffocation, the labour camps of the North where the common laws reign supreme, and where inhuman regulations and starvation rations leave a man almost without defence against the rigours of the climate. (Clement 13)

Out of this experience he created the short novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, through which he illuminates the universal theme of freedom. In "As Breathing and Consciousness Return," Solzhenitsyn describes the nature of freedom:

We are creatures born with inner freedom of will, freedom of choice—the most important part of freedom is a gift to us at birth. External, or social, freedom is very desirable for the sake of undistorted growth, but it is no more than a condition, a medium, and to regard it as the object of our existence is nonsense. We can firmly assert our freedom even in external conditions of unfreedom. (21-2)

Solzhenitsyn's own experience in "external conditions of unfreedom" gives credence to his assertion that true freedom is possible even in the most restrictive human situations. Solzhenitsyn believes that to assert one's "freedom

even in unfreedom”(Solzhenitsyn, “As Breathing” 22) implies a persistence of inner freedom which denies the significance of the external condition and affirms the identity and value of the individual. The exertion of individual choice in renunciation of external conditions stands as an act of freedom which is a necessary step toward the ultimate freedom of moral responsibility.

While imprisoned, Solzhenitsyn expressed his inner freedom and individuality by continuing to write. He did not have the freedom to write prose, so he began to “compose verse by heart” (Solzhenitsyn, *Solzhenitsyn* 38). By his own admission, Solzhenitsyn “could not make moral compromises” (qtd. in Rothberg 6) even in prison. He refused to cooperate with the secret police, and he was subsequently transferred from comfortable prison conditions to the forced-labor camp where he would finish his sentence (Rothberg 6). Solzhenitsyn asserted his identity and refused to surrender to the surrounding lies.

Not surprisingly, Solzhenitsyn depicts the characters in *One Day* as individuals who, in the midst of external unfreedom, maintain their individuality. “To look at them, the gang was all the same—the same black overcoats and numbers—but underneath they were all different” (*One Day* 16). The title character, also known as Shukhov, demonstrates a sense of personal freedom in his individuality as he always removes his hat to eat (16, 169) and refuses to eat the eyes of the fish “when they’d come off and were floating around in the bowl on their own . . . .

The others laughed at him for this" (17). Prisoners, they are externally stripped of individuality and worth as they are clothed in black coats, pants, and hats with painted numbers for identification. Each has a different past, however, and a particular story surrounding his conviction.

The characters retain the stories that make them who they are. The prisoners share these stories with each other in an affirmation of their humanity and individuality. Remembering his past, Shukhov resists the lie communicated by the prison structure and the painted identification number. His inner freedom expresses itself as he jokes with his fellow prisoners:

Never been out in the cold in Siberia before? Come and warm up under the moon like the wolves. The "wolves' sun," that's what they sometimes called the moon where Shukhov came from. (*One Day 190*)

Shukhov refuses to relinquish his particular story, his past, and his individuality.

For Solzhenitsyn, resistance to inaccurate and deceptive assertions of the external condition is fundamental to true freedom. In "As Breathing and Consciousness Return," he writes,

Our present system [the USSR in 1973] is unique in world history, because over and above its physical and economic constraints, it demands of us total surrender

of our souls, continuous and active participation in the general, conscious *lie*. To this putrefaction of the soul, this spiritual enslavement, human beings who wish to be human cannot consent." (24-5)

Solzhenitsyn refused to participate in "the general conscious lie" (25) by his refusal to compromise his morality and by his refusal to sign his deportation papers after his release from the forced-labor camp. Abraham Rothberg reports his explanation:

"Later on I was summoned to appear before the local committee of the security police where I was asked to sign a document confirming my permanent deportation. It was formulated exactly in this way—permanent deportation, not deportation for life. I refused to sign." (qtd. in Rothberg 7).

Solzhenitsyn continued to refuse participation in the lie as he protested the seizure and censorship of his writings and condemned the Writers' Union for his expulsion (Rothberg xv-xvii). Solzhenitsyn held on to his inner freedom, in part by refusing to make his writing acceptable to those in authority. In *One Day*, K-123, an otherwise nameless prisoner working in the office with Shukhov's gangmember Caesar, expresses the same revulsion towards those who participate in the lie so rigorously repudiated by Solzhenitsyn. Speaking in a voice very similar to Solzhenitsyn's, he claims, "A genius doesn't



adapt his treatment to the taste of tyrants!" (*One Day* 94).

Many of the characters in *One Day* demonstrate self control and find a degree of freedom in spurning the lie of the camp, which insists that they are subhuman and must abandon their dignity and morality if they are to survive. Recognizing that both refusal to surrender and maintenance of self-control mean survival, the prisoners take the words of a former gang boss seriously:

"It's the law of the jungle in here, fellows.

But even in here you can live. The first to go is the guy who licks out bowls, puts his faith in the infirmary, or squeals. . . ." (*One Day* 2)

The prisoners' refusal to yield, their refusal to lick bowls or spit bones on the floor, which "was thought bad manners," sustains their inner freedom (*One Day* 15).

Shukhov also refuses to participate in the lies, the untruthful assertions of the environment, surrounding him. In a culture where dishonesty and bribery prevail, Shukhov has "never given or taken a bribe from anybody, and he hadn't learned that trick in the camp either" (48). While the narrator's assertion that "even after eight years of hard labor he was still no scavenger and the more time went on, the more he stuck to his guns" (178) may seem to lack credibility in light of Shukhov's actions, Shukhov has not become subhuman in his scavenging (178). Even his name, likely derived from "shukhovat" meaning "to pick up secretly small advantages for oneself" (Rutter 106), reveals

to the reader that Shukhov is resourceful, not bestial, in his scavenging.

Fetyukov, a prisoner in Shukhov's gang whose name probably means "poor fool" (Rutter 106), is unable to retain his dignity, however. His scavenging makes his imprisonment more encompassing as he is reduced to the level of an animal. Unlike some others, Fetyukov has not maintained an inner freedom. After he'd "gotten beat up again for trying to scrounge somebody's bowl" (*One Day* 181), the narrator concludes that "he'd never live out his time in the camp. He just didn't know how to do things right" (*One Day* 181). Fetyukov has succumbed to the lie of the prison camp that tells him he is an animal and has forfeited his dignity and true freedom found in self-restraint.

In contrast to Fetyukov's lack of dignity, Y-81 epitomizes the survival of the human will. After countless years in the camp and a day of working outside at the hardest site, Y-81 maintains his dignity, sitting ramrod straight, undisturbed by the commotion of the mess hall.

He didn't bend down low over the bowl like all the others did, but brought the spoon up to his mouth. . . . His face was all worn-out but not like a "goner's." . . . And you could tell from his big rough hands with the dirt worked in them he hadn't spent many of his long years doing any of the soft jobs. *You could see his mind was set on one thing—never to give in.* He didn't

put his eight ounces 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. (171-2, italics added)

Y-81's determination to maintain his individuality and his dignity in prison enables him to maintain an inner freedom; he is still human. "The most important part of our freedom, inner freedom, is always subject to our will. If we surrender it to corruption, we do not deserve to be called human" ( "As Breathing" 25). Persistence of the will in the midst of extreme suffering maintains the freedom of the spirit. The spirit cannot be imprisoned, so it is possible to achieve freedom even in the camps (Rothberg 45). Solzhenitsyn contends, however, that it is not in spite of deep suffering, but *because* of it that people achieve intense spiritual development ( "A World" 12).

Spiritual development, in Solzhenitsyn's view, is also fostered through work.

For Solzhenitsyn work (which he divorces neither from the humble tasks of every day nor from the most sublime artistic creation) requires and promotes a movement of self-transcendence in which spiritual awareness is established. (Clement 49)

In *One Day*, Shukhov experiences freedom in work.

For Shukhov, work is a form of freedom; "not being let out to work—that was real punishment" (*One Day* 7). He takes pride in his bricklaying (72), caring more for

his work than about his safety. After finishing for the day, "Shukhov—the guards could set the dogs on him for all he cared now—ran back to have a last look" (125) at the wall he had been building. Shukhov almost regrets that he had to stop working "just when they'd gotten into stride" (119). From the top of the wall,

Shukhov no longer saw the view with the glare of sun on the snow. And he didn't see the prisoners leaving their shelters either and fanning out over the compound. . . . All he saw now was the wall in front of him. (106)

Because Shukhov almost forgets his imprisonment, the time flies when he is working (73). Work even combats the cold:

Shukhov and the other bricklayers didn't feel the cold any more. They were now going all out and they were hot—the way you are at the start of a job like this when you get soaking wet under your coat and jacket and both shirts. . . . The main thing was they didn't get the cold in their feet. Nothing else mattered. (11)

Work not only assails the cold, but it also has the ability to cure Shukhov's pain (10). After arriving back at camp in the evening, Shukhov remembers how he had tried to get on the sick list. "Funny he'd forgot all about it at work" (142). He then realizes that after working all day, "the

pain was pretty much gone" (142). Through work, Shukhov transcends himself and his situation. "Creative joy is born, not in spite of hardship and fatigue, nor by suppressing them, but *through* them" as Shukhov and the other prisoners empty and transcend themselves to find freedom (Clement 52, italics added). Freedom is only worth finding if it is moral. Freedom is moral, according to Solzhenitsyn, "only if it keeps within certain bounds, beyond which it degenerates into complacency and licentiousness" (qtd. in Ericson 240). The freedom of self-restraint—of not simply looking out for oneself but considering others, and thereby restraining the self's impulse to preserve its own comfort first—is the moral responsibility of each person. For "the truth that liberates is the truth of moral responsibility of each for all in the light of a relation to One who is above all" (Patterson 377). True freedom is not license to look out for oneself but "moral responsibility of each for all." Solzhenitsyn illustrates this true freedom of self-restraint and moral responsibility through the characters in his novel.

The narrator describes camp life as "every man for himself" (*One Day* 83), but this perception is renounced through the actions of the individuals in Gang 104. For the gang is much more than every man for himself; it is a prisoner's family (96-7). Gang 104's members are responsible for each other and even sacrifice for each other. They trust the boss of their work gang to do what is best for them.

Your boss only had to say the word, even  
if it was the meal break, and you worked.  
Because it was the boss who fed you. And  
he wouldn't make you work if you didn't  
have to. (103)

The narrator continues: "There's nothing you wouldn't do for your boss" (104). This sacrificial attitude is reciprocated as Tyurin, the gang's boss, takes the blame on himself for the gang's tardiness (127) and continually protects them.

While Tyurin protects the gang, the gang also stands behind him. "Shukhov wasn't a bit worried about himself" when Der, a prisoner acting as the building foreman, arrived threatening Tyurin about the discovered roofing felt; Shukhov knew that Tyurin "wouldn't give him away — but he was scared for Tyurin." Pavlo, the assistant gang boss, stood with Tyurin, however, "looking murder at Der," and "Senka, deaf as he was, . . . came out with his hands on his hips. He was strong as an ox." They supported Tyurin as he threatened Der into retreat (115-6). The gang looks out for each other.

The freedom in responsibility to one another is further revealed in the relationship of the camp's two Estonian prisoners, who "stuck together as though they couldn't breathe without each other" (55). They recognize the responsibility they had to one another as "they always shared and shared alike and wouldn't use a single shred of tobacco without the other knowing" (99). This

care and camaraderie between individuals is not limited to the Estonians. Senka, a prisoner in Shukhov's gang, waits for Shukhov when they are both late because Senka "wasn't the kind to leave you in the lurch. If you were in trouble, he was always there to take the rap with you" (126).

Another example of this sort occurs when, at lunch, Pavlo gives the extra bowl of mush to the Captain, who had only been a prisoner in the labor camp a short time, and "to Shukhov's way of thinking, it was only right. . . . The time would come when he'd learn the ropes, but as it was he didn't know his way around yet" (91). At the end of the day, Shukhov, as Pavlo had with the Captain, recognizes Caesar's need and sacrifices himself to help him. While Shukhov has not completely renounced the lie of the prison world, which claims that acts of assistance require payment, he does, at the end of the novel, act in opposition to that lie. Caesar runs out of time to take his package "to the store room before night check," leaving himself susceptible to theft (188-9). Shukhov offers to help not "to get something out of Caesar again but [because] he was just sorry for him" (188). The moral responsibility that the prisoners show, their willingness to compromise their own safety for the benefit of their fellows, *constitutes a freedom from the external restraints of life in the camp.*

"Freedom," [Solzhenitsyn] declares, "is *self-restriction*! Restriction of the self for the sake of others! Once understood and

adopted, this principle diverts us—as individuals, in all forms of human association, societies and nations—from *outward* to *inward* development, thereby giving us greater spiritual depth.” This shift from outward to inward comes about in a shift away from the self. The moral path to freedom, then, leads the self away from a stance of I-for-myself to the position of I-for-the-other. (Patterson 377)

No character exemplifies this more fully than Alyoshka, the Baptist. He epitomizes the freedom that arises from the “I-for-the-other” position. Alyoshka is a good worker who is able to satisfy the demand when the Captain requests “a man” (*One Day* 112) to work with instead of Fetyukov. He is not noted solely for his strength as a worker, but for his willingness. “Alyoshka was a quiet fellow and he took orders from anybody who felt like giving them” (112). He “would never say no. He always did whatever you asked” (120).

Shukhov found this quality inspiring: “If only everybody in the world was like that, Shukhov would be that way too. If someone asked you, why not help him out? They were right on that, these people” (120). The narrator concludes that “a meek fellow like that is a real godsend in any gang” (112). Alyoshka has attained what Solzhenitsyn describes as a restraint of self in order to benefit others. It is a quality that illuminates Alyoshka’s



true freedom.

Duty is a crucial component of freedom. According to Solzhenitsyn, "duty is one's capacity to 'lay down one's life for one's friends'" (Clement 46). Alyoshka fulfills this duty willingly. A.B., a contributor to *From Under the Rubble*, believes that "mysterious inner freedom, once achieved, will give us a sense of community with everybody and responsibility for all" (qtd. in Patterson 377). Alyoshka is not free because he acts on his "sense of community;" rather, he acts on his "sense of community" because he has attained inner freedom.

The extent of Alyoshka's inner freedom is revealed throughout *One Day*. He has maintained his individuality and has not surrendered to the lies surrounding him. He continues to pray and read "his notebook in which he had half the Gospels copied down" (*One Day* 26). Alyoshka is not ashamed of his faith. He even reads the Gospels aloud in the morning. He reads, "Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf." His pride at suffering for Christ is not the result of reckless stupidity or naiveté, however. His reading aloud the Gospels is juxtaposed with a commentary on his practical skill: "One great thing about Alyoshka was he was so clever at hiding this book in a hole in the wall that it hadn't been found on any of the searches" (28).

The inner freedom of many of the characters enables them to live and not to submit to the lie; Alyoshka's

inner freedom is so great that he even rejoices in the midst of his imprisonment.

Alyoshka, at Shukhov's side, looked at the sun and rejoiced. A smile came to his lips. His cheeks were sunken, he lived only on his ration and didn't earn anything extra. What was he so pleased about? On Sundays he spent all the time whispering with the other Baptists. The camp didn't worry them—it was like water off a duck's back.

(49)

While Shukhov has developed a degree of inner freedom, he cannot understand the extent of Alyoshka's. Shukhov's conception of freedom is linked with health, extra rations, and free time. There is a difference in Alyoshka's freedom, and Shukhov recognizes this. There is something attractive to Shukhov about Alyoshka. He sees a light in Alyoshka's eyes that makes them "like two candles" (195). Alyoshka possesses the truth. After considering Alyoshka's admonition to rejoice in his imprisonment, Shukhov realizes that "Alyoshka was talking the truth" (199). And Shukhov respects Alyoshka's sincerity, as his words are proved by his life: "you could tell by his voice and his eyes he was glad to be in prison" (199).

Not only does Alyoshka rejoice *while* in prison, he rejoices *because* he is in prison. Alyoshka rejoices in his imprisonment because he is there for Christ, and perhaps because in prison he experiences the greatest religious

freedom. For Alyoshka, as for Solzhenitsyn, the ontological impossibility that became possible in a movement inward is the discovery of freedom in prison. Indeed, when the State is totalitarian, prison may be the only place where the inner freedom of the soul can be discovered, since it may happen that only in prison is participation in a lie no longer required. (Patterson 375)

Alyoshka has true freedom. Like many of the other prisoners, he has not surrendered to the lie, he has maintained his individuality and his faith, and he works at least as hard as Shukhov, although there is no indication that he finds his freedom in this. Unlike the other prisoners, however, Alyoshka has fully attained the highest freedom, which is the moral freedom/duty of laying down one's life for another. He has laid down his life for God and lays it down continually for his fellow prisoners. Freedom is not an end in itself for either Alyoshka or Solzhenitsyn. Rather, for them, "freedom . . . is part and parcel of the image of God which we human beings bear" (Ericson 160).

Solzhenitsyn's depiction of the hard life of the forced-labor camps legitimately horrifies the reader who has never experienced such "external conditions of unfreedom." While Solzhenitsyn's belief that "a hard life improves the vision" is evidenced by *One Day* (Rothberg 1), a hard life is certainly not *required* to attain the true freedom of "morality steeped in spirituality." In Solzhenitsyn's view, it is the renunciation of the pervasive lie of external and individualistic freedom that changes

our vision and allows us to participate in the truth that “freedom does not lie in the permissiveness of being able to do anything I want to do; rather, it lies in the self-restraint that comes with the realization of what I *must* do, of what the Good commands me to do” (Patterson 374).

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