

## Reflecting on Solzhenitsyn's Line between Good and Evil

Amanda Udis-Kessler, Pre-Worship Enrichment, Eau Claire, WI Quakers, October 4, 2020

In his book 'The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956,' Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously wrote, "the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart." This quote has haunted me in the years since I first read it, and today I would invite us to reflect on it. What might this insight mean for us as spiritual, ethical, and political beings?

First, some spiritual implications. I don't believe it minimizes the power of the Quaker insight that there is a divine spark within each of us to recognize that our frailties, wounds, and imperfections can make it hard for us to be our best selves at all times. And that's just at the individual, psychological level. We also live in a society that praises individualism at the expense of community, that values some people over others based on what should be irrelevant personal attributes, and that defines success in unsustainable, cruel, and sometimes violent ways. If Solzhenitsyn is right that each of us must navigate the line between good and evil in our own hearts and our own lives, spiritual practices become even more important than they otherwise might have been. They strengthen us to choose the good every time a choice must be made. The peace and wonder, the joy and gratitude and healing that we find in silence, prayer, and other rituals of love strengthen us for ethical action, comfort us when we fail to do our best, and remind us of our commitment to the Mystery at the heart of all that is good and of our commitment to embodying that goodness in the world.

Ethically speaking, if the line between good and evil runs through each of us, all of us will struggle to make the best moral choices consistently; nothing about our larger identities – not state, not class, not political party, and to extrapolate, not gender, not religion, not race, not sexual identity, not physical or mental ability – will guarantee that we act ethically at all times. In this context, I am defining ethical action as action that recognizes the sacred spark in all of us, ourselves and all others, and that refuses to treat anyone as though they were lacking that sacred spark. Ethical action happens on individual levels but has larger social and cultural impacts and implications. And on a mundane, daily basis, it is often easy to act in ways that deny the sacred worth and dignity of other people, other groups, and non-human beings, or that deny our own sacred worth and dignity. On a day-to-day and decision-to-decision basis, we can nurture our best selves or our worst selves, or do some of both. Moral actions are always available to us; so are immoral actions. Just as spiritual practices will help us choose well, so will practices of ethical discernment about the actions we take, why we take them, and whether they will lead to human and planetary flourishing.

We are also political beings, by which I mean that we exist as part of a larger society. That society makes us who we are, and we make that society what it is. Right now, the society around us is in bad shape, spiritually and ethically speaking. It's easy, and not inaccurate, to blame various forms of social inequality or the ravages of unfettered capitalism for the mess we're in; it's also easy to point to dishonesty, corruption, greed, cruelty, violence, and other immoralities writ small and large. The problem with those diagnoses is how very easy it is to accuse others of being the problem – to borrow from Solzhenitsyn, other states, other classes, other political

parties. Blame China if you're the US. Blame the rich if you're poor; blame the poor if you're rich. Blame Republican political leadership if, well, you get my point. Now, sometimes one group of people has more power than another group and uses that power for evil. We should blame China for its human rights violations against the Uighurs. We should blame the wealthy for rigging our electoral system. There are some things we could reasonably blame Republican political leadership for.

But remember that line between good and evil, the one that passes through every human heart? That's my heart too, friends, and your hearts. We must interrogate our own role in the moral and political failings of our society. Are we ourselves politically engaged? Are we working against one or more forms of social inequality, such as racism? Have we found ways to tie our spiritual and ethical lives to our work for a world in which everyone is treated with the dignity and respect that is their birthright? Are we willing to make some sacrifices so that those with less than us – less money, less status, less power – can live and live well? Are we using our power and privilege for good or is our power and privilege lulling us into complacency?

These are hard questions and they can make us uncomfortable. That's another reason those spiritual and ethical practices are so crucial: they help us build up the resilience to be uncomfortable not just about inequality or unfettered capitalism, for example, but about our roles in them. And once we are uncomfortable enough, we will be part of the healing, part of the solution. But we will never be uncomfortable enough if our narrative is simply that we're good and they're evil. Whoever they are. Solzhenitsyn's line through the heart is a line in the sand, an invitation, a demand, a prayer, a sob, a scream for justice. How will you respond?

How will you respond? That might be a query for us today. Here are a few other queries for your reflection:

- How can your spiritual practices help you choose the good over the evil, especially when doing so is exceptionally challenging?
- What spiritual practices are the most helpful for your ethical life?
- What ethical discernment practices do you find helpful?
- What work do you do to heal the world? To increase beauty and joy and wonder and hope?
- Where do you get support for your spiritual and ethical and political life?
- How can you support others in their spiritual and ethical and political lives?
- What does it mean to you to see the line between good and evil as passing through your own heart? What does that insight demand of you? What opportunities does it offer you?

Peace, friends.