

A Humanist Answer to Alexander Solzhenitsyn

David N. Aspy

In an address to Harvard graduates and alumni this past June, Alexander Solzhenitsyn "described a world destroying itself by worshipping despiritualized humanism." A prominent humanist answers the esteemed author's charges here.

In his recent address at Harvard's graduation, Alexander Solzhenitsyn described a world destroying itself by worshipping despiritualized humanism. His stance indicated clearly that Solzhenitsyn was referring to humankind's collective narcissism. He seemed to be saying that our entire world had been seized by a belief that humankind can lift itself from being a servant of the supreme being to master of the universe. He asserted that despiritualized humanistic philosophy is manifested in Eastern societies by communism and in the West by capitalism. Both of these systems were described by Solzhenitsyn as striving to exploit humankind's inherent weakness toward greed, which will ultimately destroy spirituality, the highest reason for being. To Solzhenitsyn the means of these two systems were slightly different, but both were ignoring, even negating, spiritual development. Solzhenitsyn's thesis is more complex than the preceding description of some of its major points. However, the elements listed earlier are sufficient to illustrate why it is important for those who call themselves humanistic to answer Solzhenitsyn's charges against us.

If you doubt the force of Solzhenitsyn's remarks, remind yourself

that they originated at Harvard University and were disseminated by the national news networks to every part of the world. If there is doubt that Solzhenitsyn meant to impugn humanism, the following quote from his address appeared in *The Washington Post* on Sunday, June 11, 1978.

As Humanism in its development became more and more materialistic, it made itself increasingly accessible to speculation and manipulation at first by socialism and then by communism. So that Karl Marx was able to say in 1844 that communism is naturalized humanism.¹

How about that as an indictment of modern humanism and humanists?

The rather clear-cut inference from the preceding quote from Solzhenitsyn's address is that society should gird itself against modern humanists because they are the ones who soften up the people so that they can be taken over by communism and socialism. Alas, present day humanists have been placed in the "bad guys" role and made the enemy of humankind's noblest aspirations and hopes. It is unfortunate, but some inexperienced or neophyte humanists may be persuaded by Solzhenitsyn to

¹ A. Solzhenitsyn. Article in *The Washington Post*, June 11, 1978.



Alexander Solzhenitsyn at the podium at Harvard University last June. Photo: Harvard University News Office.

stay away from humanists or humanistic organizations. This group includes many ASCD members as well as the organization-at-large, because it advocates humanizing schools and supports task forces and committees working toward that end.

Solzhenitsyn's first violation of fair discourse was to create a "straw man" and attack it. He did this by making humanism into a monolithic movement with a single purpose. In this way he was able to depict it as an anti-God (spiritual) effort across the board. This accomplishes two tasks simultaneously. First, it labels all humanists as anti-God and second, indicates all humanists are gluttonously pro-materialism. Thus, those of us who sit in relatively plush offices may feel a little guilty when we propose a humanistic approach to

education. We find that Solzhenitsyn has meat-axed us from two directions with a single act. That's quite a feat! We must rise from our comfortable places and answer his charges with both words and deeds. It behooves us to put the record straight with regard to the efforts of modern humanists and humanism.

Creating a straw man and attacking it is not a new tactic. It merely is stereotyping a group and attributing negative characteristics to it and its members. It is one of the first steps people use to foment a movement against specific groups. Thus, we get all the racist, sexist, and chauvinistic sores that flow from such thinking. Even though there may be some small seeds of truth in the accusations, the tactic is called unfair play in any forum where human rights are of prime value.

Solzhenitsyn's position makes it quite clear that he has not attended many conferences on humanizing education or else he would understand that monolithic humanism in American education is not only non-existent, but also unattainable in the foreseeable future. A second thing Solzhenitsyn's position does not recognize is that some of this nation's most active humanizers of education also believe devoutly in God. Many are Jewish, many are Christian, many are members of other religions, many are agnostics, and many are in fact atheistic. But, the term humanistic educator cannot be equated with either atheistic or materialistic educator.

A somewhat subtle implication by Solzhenitsyn is that humanistic educators are naive and are being seduced into an approach to education that will result in a materialistic or anti-God way of life for our nation. This means that the label humanistic or humanizing disguises a lethal sub-

stance that humanistic educators are swallowing innocently, but nevertheless the effect will be terminal. In addition to implicitly insulting the humanist's intelligence and/or maturity, Solzhenitsyn exposes his own lack of knowledge of front-line experience in American education. In many educational settings across the nation, it is the humanistic educator who stands as a bulwark against the cruel and indecent practices promulgated by all kinds of groups that wish to inhibit the healthful growth and development of our students. It was the humanistic educators who stood firmly and effectively against the computerization of American education when it appeared that the classroom teacher would be supplanted by an impersonal computerized program. On the other hand, it was the humanistic educators who conceded that the computer could assist some teachers in some situations, and then encouraged schools to make constructive uses of computers.

Humanistic educators produced a classic book like *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming* in a time when our nation was consumed with catching up with the Russians in the race to the moon. This masterful work provided a type of platform for those who preferred to launch human beings toward self-actualization rather than hurl missiles toward outer space or Russia. Incidentally, Solzhenitsyn told his Harvard audience that humankind's space travels are not a substitute for spiritual growth. Humanistic educators concurred that a person is more important than space and demonstrated this with their actions by facilitating an individual's travel into himself/herself and into constructive relationship with others. In fact, humanistic educators were at least two decades ahead of Solzhenitsyn in their efforts to deepen the personal meaning

of education and life itself. This is a vital part of the type of spiritual development Solzhenitsyn advocates, and yet he asserts that humanists stand in contradiction to his position. This is a gross misinterpretation of the facts.

Finally, Solzhenitsyn shows the same "creative fatigue" he projects onto American society, which he describes as dominated by the humanist philosophy. He assesses communism as "zero or less than zero," but states that he cannot recommend Western society as an alternative because it has lost its courage. Solzhenitsyn sounds like all the other critics who know what is wrong with something, but do not know how to remedy it. We humanistic educators invite Solzhenitsyn to read ASCD publications like *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming* and the recent monograph *Humanistic Education: Objectives and Assessment*, and to see their new challenges and new vistas. We have a



David N. Aspy is Director, The National Consortium for Humanizing Education, Catholic University, Washington, D.C.

dream for America and humankind. Most of all we invite Solzhenitsyn, a man of unquestioned courage, to experience the compassionate courage of humane education and to see the work of those who implement it.

Most of all let us reassure Solzhenitsyn of our increased commitment to a more humane world. Also, let us thank him for giving his thoughts to us so that we could re-examine our effects upon the lives of the individuals we teach. [E]

Copyright © 1978 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.