

Live Not By Lies

By Alexander Solzhenitsyn

At one time we dared not even whisper. Now we write and read samizdat and sometimes when we gather in the smoking room of the Science Institute we complain frankly to one another. What kind of tricks are they playing on us, and where are they dragging us? There is gratuitous boasting of cosmic achievements while poverty and destruction exist at home. Propping up remote uncivilised regimes. Fanning up civil war. And we recklessly fostered Mao Tse-tung (at our expense) — and we shall be the ones sent to war against him and we will have to go. Is there any way out? They put anybody they want on trial and put sane people in asylums - always they; we are powerless.

Things have almost reached rock-bottom. A universal spiritual death has already touched us all and physical death will soon flare up and consume us and our children. But, as before, we still smile in a cowardly fashion and mumble with our tongues tied. What can we do to stop it? We haven't the strength. We have been so hopelessly dehumanised that for today's ration of food we are willing to abandon all our principles, our souls and the efforts of our predecessors, as well as all the opportunities for our descendants, Just don't disturb our fragile existence!

We lack resolution, pride and enthusiasm. We don't even fear universal nuclear death, nor do we fear a third world war — perhaps we can hide in crevices. We just fear acts of civil courage. We are afraid to lag behind the herd and to take one step alone — and suddenly to find ourselves without white bread, heating gas and a Moscow registration. What was drummed in our ears at political courses we have now internalised: live comfortably and all will be well ever after. You cannot escape your environment and social conditions. Existence determines consciousness. What does it have to do with us? We cannot do anything about it.

But we can! We lie to ourselves to preserve our peace of mind. It is not they who should be blamed but ourselves. One can object, but cannot imagine what to do. Gags have been stuffed into our mouths. Nobody wants to listen to us and nobody asks our opinion. How can we force them to listen to us? It is impossible to change their minds. It would be logical to vote them out of office, but there are no elections in our country. In the West people resort to strikes and protest demonstrations, but we are too downtrodden and it is too horrifying for us. How can one suddenly renounce a job and take to the streets? Other fatal paths tested during the last century by our bitter Russian history are even less suitable for us, and truly we do not need them.

Now that the axes have done their work and everything that was sown has sprouted, we can see that the young and presumptuous people who thought they would make our country just and happy through terror, bloody rebellion and civil war were themselves misled. No thanks, fathers of enlightenment! Now we know that infamous methods breed infamous results . . . Let our hands be clean!

Is the circle closed? Is there really no way out? Is there only one thing left to do - to wait without taking any action? Maybe something will happen by itself. But it will never happen as long as we daily acknowledge, extol and strengthen — and do not sever ourselves from — the most perceptible of its aspects: lies. When violence intrudes into peaceful life, its face glows with self-confidence, as if it were carrying a banner and shouting: 'I am violence. Run away, make way for me — I will crush you.' But violence quickly grows old. After only a few years it loses confidence in itself, and in order to maintain a respectable face it summons falsehood as its ally — since violence can conceal itself with nothing except lies, and the lies can be maintained only by violence. Violence does not lay its paw on every shoulder every day: it demands from us only obedience to lies and daily participation in lies. And this submissiveness is the crux of the matter. The simplest and most accessible key to our self-neglected liberation is this: personal non-participation in lies. Though lies may conceal everything, though lies may control everything, we should be obstinate about this one small point: let them be in control but without any help from any of us. This opens a breach in the imaginary encirclement caused by our inaction. It is the easiest thing for us to do and the most destructive for the lies. Because when people renounce lies it cuts short their existence. Like a virus, they can survive only in a living organism.

Let us admit it: we have not matured enough to march into the squares and shout the truth out loud or to express aloud what we think. It is not necessary. It's dangerous. But let us refuse to say what we do not think. This is our path, the easiest and the most accessible one, which allows for our inherent, well-rooted cowardice. And it is much easier (it's shocking even to say this) than the sort of civil disobedience that Gandhi advocated. Our path is not that of giving conscious support to lies about anything at all. And once we realise where the perimeters of falsehood are (everyone sees them in his own way), our path is to walk away from this gangrenous boundary. If we did not paste together the dead bones and scales of ideology, if we did not sew together rotting rags, we would be astonished how quickly the lies would be rendered helpless and would subside. That which should be naked would then really appear naked before the whole world.

So in our timidity, let us each make a choice: whether to remain consciously a servant of falsehood (of course, it is not out of inclination but to feed one's family that one raises one's

children in the spirit of lies), or to shrug off the lies and become an honest man worthy of respect from one's children and contemporaries.

And from that day onward he:

- will not sign, write or print in any way a single phrase which in his opinion distorts the truth
- will utter such a phrase neither in private conversation nor in public, neither on his own behalf nor at the prompting of someone else, neither in the role of agitator, teacher, educator, nor as an actor
- will not depict, foster or broadcast a single idea in which he can see a distortion of the truth, whether it be in painting, sculpture, photography, technical science or music
- will not cite out of context, either orally or in writing, a single quotation to please someone, to feather his own nest, to achieve success in his work, if he does not completely share the idea which is quoted, or if it does not accurately reflect the matter at issue
- will not allow himself to be compelled to attend demonstrations and meetings if they are contrary to his desire
- will immediately walk out of a meeting, session, lecture, performance or film if he hears a speaker tell lies, or pervey ideological nonsense or shameless propaganda
- will not subscribe to or buy a newspaper or magazine in which information is distorted and primary facts are concealed.

I have not enumerated, of course, all possible and necessary ways of avoiding lies, but whoever begins to cleanse himself will easily apply the cleansing pattern to other cases. It will not be the same for everybody at first. Some will lose their jobs. But there are no loopholes for anybody who wants to be honest. On any given day, any one of us, even those securely working in technical sciences, will be confronted with at least one of the above choices. Either truth or falsehood: towards spiritual independence or towards spiritual servitude.

And he who is not sufficiently courageous to defend his soul - don't let him be proud of his 'progressive' views, and don't let him boast that he is an academician or a people's artist, a distinguished figure or a general. Let him say to himself: I am a part of the herd and a coward. It's all the same to me as long as I'm fed and kept warm.

Even this path — the most moderate of all paths of resistance — would not be easy for those of us who have become too set in our ways. But it would be far easier than a hunger strike or a

self-immolation. The flames would not touch your body, your eye would not burst from the heat and your family should always be able to get black bread and fresh water.

Has not the great European nation Czechoslovakia — betrayed and deceived by us — demonstrated how even an armourless breast, if it holds a worthy heart, can stand up to the onslaught of tanks?

This would not be an easy path, but the easiest of all possible ones. Not an easy path — but there are people among us, dozens of them, who have been observing all these conditions for years and who live by the truth.

Therefore you will not be the first to take this path, you will join others! It will be easier and shorter if we embark on it in great and friendly numbers. If we are in thousands it will not be possible for them to do anything to anyone. If we are in tens of thousands we will not recognise our own country!

If we are too frightened, then we should stop complaining that we are being suffocated. We are doing this to ourselves. If we bow down even further and wait longer, our brothers the biologists may then help to bring nearer the day when our thoughts can be read and our genes restructured.

If we are too frightened to do anything, then we are hopeless and worthless people and the lines of Pushkin fit us well:

What use to the herds the gifts of freedom?
The scourge, and a yoke with tinkling bells
— this is their heritage, bequeathed to every generation.

Moscow, 12 February 1974