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# He Will Be Remembered

It was my graduation, but I had considered skipping Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's speech at Harvard's 327th commencement. The week had stretched on too long — three days of "celebration" for something I wasn't sure deserved the applause.

Solzhenitsyn drew peals of applause as he filed out in the procession of honorary degree recipients. His posture was rigid — unlike the slouch of the others — and watching him pass in his green military jacket, I realized he was of another world.

The exercises opened with a lengthy panegyric to the successes of the various class fund-raising drives, each one, a record-breaker. I sat watching Solzhenitsyn, thinking that beneath his immobile expression was an impatience greater than my own. When he finally took the podium, he offered the correct congratulations, but dispensed with the conventional assurances that the world belonged to the graduates, and immediately plunged into a critique of the West. He singled out a "decline in courage" as our "most striking feature" and blamed the "legalist" system, in which the ultimate authority is the letter, not the spirit, of the law.

The press, which "has become the greatest power" in the West, best reflects the "hastiness and superficiality" which has become the "psychic disease of the 20th century." We are in a "state of spiritual exhaustion," while physical privation has spiritually strengthened those in "communist captivity."

When he cited as ominous our "capitulation" in Vietnam, many hissed. But I doubt anyone listening did not agree with some of his speech, while disagreeing, or choosing to disbelieve, other parts of it. The alumni applauded his condemnation of socialism, and acknowledgement of western supremacy in economic development; the undergraduates — especially those wearing white arm-bands in protest of apartheid in South Africa — cheered when he denounced the cult of materialism, in which a mediocrity has triumphed, "paralyzing man's noblest impulses."

The speech has drawn attention from a slew of critics, editorial writers, and even Rosalynn Carter. The news media has generally acknowledged the

jeremiad quality of Solzhenitsyn's speech, and perhaps because of that, for the most part its criticisms have been negative and unfair.

One editorial dismisses the speech as the product of someone obsessed, but would it discredit Einstein's theories because he was obsessed with their formulation? Others present self-serving comparisons between the freedom of the West and the conditions of the Gulag, as if Solzhenitsyn were a propagandist for the Soviet government.

Another attack faults Solzhenitsyn for refusing to admit that "we are superior, that our way is not only better, but best. . . didn't we publish his books?"

Disregarding the alien status which frees him from our cultural biases and confers a certain objectivity on his observations, this columnist demands only gratitude. The column goes on to complain that his speech denied the graduates "the feeling of new worlds to conquer," that we "heard nothing to cheer about." How does this columnist, who was not

graduating, know what we thought and felt? Doesn't this presumption bespeak of the very hastiness and arrogance that Solzhenitsyn condemned?

Did we need someone to tell us what we already knew, that as Harvard graduates we start the game with advantages, that if we behave "properly", like 20 percent of the class of '53, in 25 years, we will earn over \$100,000 annually?

No, I did not want to hear that, nor, I think, did my classmates.

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn ruffled many assumptions about ourselves and the world that Harvard has so carefully groomed. His speech was disquieting and frequently disputable — especially his references to Vietnam — but he made our graduation the milestone it is supposed to be: he challenged us; he bothered us; and he will stay with us.

(Wanda Urbanski, of Orono, is a 1978 Harvard Graduate.)

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