

MAKING THE LIFE OF TOLSTOY'S IVAN ILYICH "REAL"

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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"Martha, Martha," groans Jesus, "you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."ⁱ Today's gospel lessonⁱⁱ has Jesus visiting two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha ends up being complimented by Jesus for sitting on her duff listening to him, while Mary is criticized for actively welcoming him to their home and then working hard, presumably to make a nice meal for them all.ⁱⁱⁱ What in the world is going on here? A parishioner in my sister's home state of Minnesota told her minister that "she never likes hearing this text preached because she always comes away with the sense that it's never possible to get things right. If, like Martha, she works hard, she will be labeled 'overfunctioning.' If, like Mary, she sits and listens too long, nothing gets done."^{iv}

Leo Tolstoy also seems to bear down hard in this vein on his title character in his novel The Death of Ivan Ilyich. Ivan's a good, hard-working professional who's ultimately criticized for not living a life that's "real." By examining Ivan Ilyich in some depth, I think we might be able to crack this gospel conundrum, not to mention gaining some important insights for our own lives.

Let me put the Ivan Ilyich dilemma baldly, first, in the words of a Russian critic writing a hundred years ago: "of what particularly is Ivan Ilyich guilty before Tolstoy's moral code? ... In a word he is guilty of being a man of office routine and making a career... Actually Ivan Ilyich is not a bad man, not an evil man; he is honourable, and incorruptible... a picture of a very respectable person... Tolstoy wants every such Ivan Ilyich to be a fully developed moral and religious personality, rising above the given level of commonplace conceptions... not to see life as a pleasant and orderly passing of the time, but to see its meaning and value in serving some higher ideal. Tolstoy demands too much."^v

So, what does Ivan do, and what does his life really look like? He's born in 1837 as one of four children of a St. Petersburg government official, and he dies at the age of forty-five in the same city as a respected judge, after a terminal illness.^{vi} He has a pleasant childhood,^{vii} and the narrator explains that by the time he's a law student, "he had become exactly what he was to remain the rest of his life: a capable, cheerful, good-natured, and sociable man, but one strict to carry out whatever he considered his duty."^{viii} Not bad, eh?

Later, as a magistrate, he inspires respect and is always careful to separate his official duties from his private life. He had considerable power over other people by virtue of his position, but was never known to abuse it.^{ix} When he becomes a public prosecutor, with the capability of summoning, indicting and incarcerating whomever he chooses, he remains utterly impartial and skillful in the exercise of his duties.^x Likewise, when he's appointed a member of the Court of Justice in St. Petersburg he acts skillfully and professionally.^{xi}

Meanwhile he meets the woman who becomes his wife, known as "the most attractive, intelligent, and outstanding young lady of the set in which Ivan Ilyich moved."^{xii} She falls in love with him and they marry, but now the narrator gives us potential pause regarding Ivan's reasons for marrying her. Yet, how different is this explanation from that which many of us

might offer in a particularly candid moment: "To say that Ivan Ilyich married because he fell in love with his fiancée and found her sympathetic to his views on life would be as mistaken as to say that he married because the people in his circle approved of the match. Ivan Ilyich married for both reasons." They go on to have 2.2 children, or rather a daughter and a son, and live in well-appointed homes, even without a white picket fence.^{xiii}

When he's forty-three years old, Ivan experiences what seems to be a minor accident: missing a rung on a ladder while hanging curtains, he bruises his side on a window-frame knob. But it turns out that he's suffered an internal injury which will ultimately lead to his death two years later.^{xiv} As his health slowly declines, he periodically becomes irritable, quarrels with his wife, criticizes his children, and becomes a less effective bridge player with his friends.^{xv} More importantly, his illness forces him to ask some big existential questions: "Can this really be death?" "Where will I be when I'm gone?"^{xvi} "Why has God done this to me?" "What is all this horror for?" "Does life really make any sense in the first place?"^{xvii}

Most painful for Ivan are a set of questions he begins asking himself about whether his life has been "real" at all. For example, he begins questioning his judicial professionalism as he watches how his doctors care for him during his illness. He feels treated exactly as he has dealt with people in his courtroom: "Just put yourself in our hands and we'll take care of everything; we know exactly what has to be done -- we always use one and the same method for every patient, no matter who."^{xviii} Yet, Ivan becomes resentful of what he sees as professional distance and professional indifference to what's vitally important to him. He starts longing for a more personal response from his physicians, especially regarding whether his illness is terminal and how to handle that reality.^{xix}

Much of life begins looking false to him, as he asks whether anyone, including his wife and close friends, has moved beyond play-acting to really empathize with him and pity him, in the best sense of that word.^{xx} He sees that this same falseness has been part of his life all along.^{xxi} He's simply not deeply cared about others. Now, he begins to condemn virtually everyone around him as his final illness progresses. He hates his wife for her plump vitality,^{xxii} his daughter for her impatience with his illness which interferes with her happiness,^{xxiii} and his friends for wanting to take his place professionally when he dies.^{xxiv}

However, a household servant named Gerasim is one bright light in his life. He consistently shows Ivan compassion. For example, Ivan apologizes for Gerasim's having to clean his chamber pot when Ivan can't leave his bed. Gerasim simply responds with a smile, "Oh no, sir! Why shouldn't I help you? You're a sick man."^{xxv} Gerasim holds his legs up, so that Ivan can feel more comfortable, sometimes throughout the whole night, saying, "Don't worry, Ivan Ilyich, I'll get a good sleep later on."^{xxvi} Only Gerasim will directly acknowledge that Ivan is dying: "We all have to die someday, so why shouldn't I help you?"^{xxvii} This is not done simply as part of his employment contract, but genuinely as a matter of empathy and sympathy.

Within several days of his death, as he gazes at Gerasim's face, Ivan begins in earnest what the narrator calls his "moral agony," along with the intense physical agony from the pain in his belly: "What if my entire life, my entire conscious life, was not the real thing? It occurred to him that what had seemed utterly inconceivable before -- that he had not lived the kind of life he should have -- might in fact be true...His official duties, his manner of life, his family, the values adhered to by people in society and in his profession -- all these might not have been the real thing."^{xxviii} But then what would make a life "real?"

I've taught this book to students at the Harvard Business School and the Graduate School of Business at Stanford for over ten years now. I've asked them how they'd answer this question. How would you? What makes a life "real?" Here are some of my students' answers: 1) Strive to become extraordinary in your life, not just ordinary. Live with passion. That makes your life real. (One of the classic lines of the book, near the beginning, is this: "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible."^{xxxix}). 2) Don't get so absorbed in climbing ladders that you start missing rungs. Enjoy and appreciate each aspect of your life day to day, like playing bridge with friends, and a job well done. That makes your life real. 3) Non-attachment. Pursue your dharma or your role in life without getting attached to success and to externals. That makes your life real. 4) Develop personal values to live by authentically, rather than trying to fulfill conventional societal expectations. That makes your life real. 5) Only the examined life is worthwhile. Set up a regimen for self-examination and truly get to know yourself. That makes your life real. 6) See pain and suffering as a positive force for growth and insight. That makes your life real. 7) Actually, there was nothing wrong with Ivan's life, except his long, agonizing death which would contort anyone's self-understanding. If he'd just been killed instantly crossing the street, everyone would have said he that he'd lived a good life and a "real" life.

These are all thoughtful answers -- "A" for effort -- but I don't think any of them are ultimately right. Listen to what happens in the last two pages of the novel: "An hour before his death...his son crept quietly into the room and went up to his bed. The dying man was still screaming desperately and flailing his arms. One hand fell on the boy's head. The boy grasped it, pressed it to his lips, and began to cry. At that very moment, Ivan Ilyich fell through and saw a light, and it was revealed to him that his life had not been what it should have, but that he could still rectify the situation. 'But what is the real thing?' he asked himself, and grew quiet, listening. Just then he felt someone kissing his hand. He opened his eyes and looked at his son. He grieved for him. His wife came in and went up to him. He looked at her. She gazed at him with an open mouth, with unwiped tears on her nose and cheeks, with a look of despair on her face. He grieved for her... He looked at his wife and, indicating his son with a glance, said: 'Take him away...sorry for him...and you. He wanted to add: 'Forgive' but instead said 'Forget,' and too feeble to correct himself, dismissed it, knowing that He [God] who needed to understand would understand. And suddenly it became clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not leave him suddenly was vanishing all at once -- from two sides, ten sides, all sides. He felt sorry for them, he had to do something to keep from hurting them... He searched for his accustomed fear of death and could not find it. Where was death? What death? There was no fear, because there was no death. Instead of death there was light. 'So that's it!' he exclaimed. 'What bliss!'"^{xxx}

So, we have a reprise of last Sunday's sermon theme here. The great commandment of the Torah, the key to living a life that is real, is twofold: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Ivan had lived his whole life without ever truly learning how to love. Finally, at the end he was taught how to do so by his servant Gerasim and by his schoolboy son, Vasya. Then, he was able to transcend himself in concern for others; moreover, he asked for forgiveness from humans to whom he was very close but for whom he had not fully cared, and he asked for forgiveness from God. So, from my perspective, some other business students in

my classes have gotten it right. When asked what would make a life "real," they've said: 1) Become selfless, thinking of others' needs first and building for posterity. 2) Develop depth relationships with others as your first priority. 3) Be like Gerasim, holding other people when they need to be held. 4) Develop a spiritual life, looking for the light. 5) Transcend yourself, and work on connecting with God.

What about Martha and Mary now? "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."^{xxx1} The one thing is love, not hard work, even in fulfilling one's role in life admirably. The one thing is being fully present to others, listening to them empathetically, and letting them know they're being heard and understood. The one thing is sitting at Jesus' feet when he turns up in your life, and giving him your full attention. In the words of today's psalm, "O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? ...Those who speak...the truth from their heart...and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors."^{xxxii} In the words of John, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God...for God is love." May our love -- each of us -- be forever full, forever flowing free.

NOTES

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- i. Luke 10: 41-42.
 - ii. Luke 10: 38-42.
 - iii. New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 231.
 - iv. Stephanie Frey, "Living with Martha," The Christian Century, July 13, 2004, p. 16.
 - v. D.N. Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky, from a 1905 essay collected in A.V. Knowles (ed.), Tolstoy: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1978), pp. 419-424.
 - vi. Leo Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyich (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), pp. 35, 49.
 - vii. Ibid., p. 119.
 - viii. Ibid., p. 50.
 - ix. Ibid., p. 53.
 - x. Ibid., p. 58.
 - xi. Ibid., p. 75.
 - xii. Ibid., p. 55.
 - xiii. Ibid., pp. 55-56.
 - xiv. Ibid., p. 66.
 - xv. Ibid., pp. 73-74, 82-83.
 - xvi. Ibid., p. 89.
 - xvii. Ibid., pp. 118, 120.
 - xviii. Ibid., p. 75.
 - xix. Ibid., pp. 75-76.
 - xx. Ibid., p. 89.

xxi. Ibid., p. 105.

xxii. Ibid., p. 111.

xxiii. Ibid., pp. 114-116.

xxiv. Ibid., pp. 99 (See also p. 36).

xxv. Ibid., p. 100.

xxvi. Ibid., p. 104.

xxvii. Ibid.

xxviii. Ibid., pp. 126-127.

xxix. Leo Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories (New York: Signet, 2003), p. 102.

xxx. Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyich, pp. 132-134.

xxxi. Luke 10: 41-42.

xxxii. Psalm 15: 1-3.