

Tolstoy in the Time of Covid

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“AGAIN THE SAME ROOM, the same paintings, curtains, wallpaper, vials, and his same sick, suffering body. And Ivan Ilyich began to moan ...”¹

For many years I have facilitated a monthly medical student seminar on Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.²

As a reminder ... Ilyich is a lawyer whose shallow life is upended when a serious illness confines him to his room. It soon becomes clear—to Ilyich himself at least—that he is going to die. During this time of introspection, he has a variety of encounters with his friends, family, and God ... and slowly makes progress toward re-establishing these key relationships.

Recently, several students have noticed similarities between Tolstoy’s protagonist and our own pandemic journey.

“I compare this contrast [Ilyich’s artificial vs. authentic life] to the pre-Covid 19 era, and what things turned out to be during the pandemic. Society in general has been living in a materialistic world that often lack deep relationships between people. With the stay at home order, many people that often had not talked to a friend or relative in many years due to their busy life, came to talk to them again through virtual meetings. This change of pace allowed people to change a little bit in them to try to live a more authentic life by checking on their loved ones, showing that they really care for their wellbeing.” (Victor Bedros, email communication, May 15, 2020, used with permission).

“One of things that struck me the most about the book is the parallel between everyone in the pandemic being forced to spend time at home with their families and how Ivan similarly is forced to spend more time with his family when he becomes ill. It is this forced hermitage at home that allows Ivan to realize that he has two lives, the superficial one he shows to everyone else and the true inner one that represents him. The superficial life is characterized by meaningless, shallow relationships and interactions centered around projecting elitism onto society. The true life is marked by meaningful, deep relationships in which individuals share

their desires, and true emotions. I think a similar forced introspection is happening with individuals across the world as they spend more time at home and are able to reflect on their superficial life and true life. I think it will be interesting to see how people react to this forced introspection once the lock down is over and to see what societal changes come from it.” (Suhaib Bajwa, email communication, May 15, 2020, used with permission).

Each time I do this seminar, I *always* learn something new ... every month. I credit this to Tolstoy’s genius and the student’s serious engagement with the novella. Even though Ilyich finds himself confined, indeed in the very room he had only recently furnished and decorated in the hope of making a good social impression, he is able to pivot and look on his wife and children with a gaze of love and ask their forgiveness. In our own stay-at-home, as we face our same “paintings, curtains, wallpaper” of the coves in which we dwell, we are afforded a similar opportunity to renew and re-establish the relationships that may need healing.

References

1. Tolstoy L: “*The Death of Ivan Ilyich*” in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*. trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York, NY: Knopf, 2009, p. 80.
2. Brungardt GS: Teaching “The Death of Ivan Ilyich”: A guide to introducing Tolstoy’s classic. *J Palliat Med* 2009; 12:679–682.

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