

A Gulag Guide to Life By Anthony Sacramone

If you're one of the .05% of Americans who enjoys going to work in the morning, I have nothing to say to you. But if you're one of the vast majority of despair-sodden grunts for whom Monday signals nothing more than an extension of an unjust prison sentence, then allow me to share with you a way out—Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the late Nobel Prize-winning Russian writer, and a former zek.

You read it correctly: a zek, the name given to prisoners in the Siberian forced-labor camps during the bad old days of the Soviet Empire. Now, the connection between Solzhenitsyn's grim prison life and your 9-5 day job may not be immediately apparent. But if you find yourself trapped in a dead-end position, if you're frustrated, bored, and bitter, believing your talents and experience deserve better than you're getting from the mediocrities of middle management, then Solzhenitsyn's your guy. His experience under the lash of his jailers can provide just the guidance and inspiration you need to succeed under the most grueling conditions.

So I impart to you a dozen principles gleaned from the life of a zek that may prove the key to fulfillment and a transcendent peace you could only have imagined, and then only with the help of pills. You can thank me later.

1. **Don't expect a thank-you.** Russians released from German POW camps at the close of WWII, rather than receiving a hero's welcome, were thrown into the gulag by Stalin for consorting with the enemy. Keep this in mind when you've worked 22 straight 22-hour shifts, developed carpal tunnel that would numb a professional wrist-wrestler, and suffered through migraines that could split an atom. You should be fired just for expecting anything more than your paycheck. Cry on a friend's shoulder.

2. **You have no friends.** That amiable colleague you just spent your lunch hour venting to? He's off to HR, where you will be written up as a malcontent who spreads bad juju. Solzhenitsyn spent eight years in a prison camp for making a joke about Stalin that *somehow* made its way back to the authorities. Confess immediately. Don't make excuses—and don't try kissing up to your boss.

3. **Kiss up to your boss.** In Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*, Stalin is referred to by many elaborate titles, including "The Immortal," "The Coryphaeus of All Sciences," and "The Best Friend of Communication Workers." So try addressing your immediate superior by original and imaginative monikers, such as "The Adjudicator of all Justice" or "The Locus of Mercy." Don't think of it as sucking up but rather as a refusal to conform.

4. **Conform.** Once the Revolution is in place, teamwork is the key to domination of world market share, with no room for recalcitrant counterrevolutionaries. Get with the program—but first make sure you know what the program is. A Menshevik in a Bolshevik cafeteria is another word for dead meat. Take your enthusiasm to the exponential max. Nothing wrong with being more Catholic than the pope.

5. **Don't be more Catholic than the pope.** An overenthusiastic demeanor may communicate one of two things: (1) you think your colleagues are lacking in party spirit, or (2) you're a double agent (make that a corporate spy). There's a fine line between high morale and being a putz who snows himself into believing he's happy.

6. **Pray for snow.** In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn describes how heavy snow days meant prisoners got to stay indoors, spared backbreaking construction work in subzero temperatures. Seems the guards feared that whiteouts would provide prisoners opportunities to escape. A snow day is God's way of reminding you of the serendipitous in life.

7. **There is no God.** "God" is merely an instrument of repression, concocted by the bourgeoisie to placate the masses with promises of rewards in a mythical afterlife. You are a biological accident, without purpose or meaning. Only the Company is absolute. How do I know this? The Company told me when I filled out my W4. And the Company never lies.

8. **The Company always lies.** Look at Enron. Look at WorldCom. Look at Crazy Eddie's. The gap between image and reality is filled with lies. Big fat lies. Morbidly obese, BMI-of-86 lies. Oh, and --

9. **You're fatter than you think.** Those \$75 Langer calipers may say you're ripped, but a diet of boiled onionskins and dust will prove you're packing more avoirdupois than a love-starved Sumo. Impoverished Soviet citizens with little flab to spare emerged from the labor camps emaciated but breathing—thanks to interstitial fat, that stuff trapped inside muscles and between organs that you can't see and calipers can't grip. The average American male is 20% body fat. You need only 3% to live. The disparity is 20 years of hard labor. Fat people don't get promoted the way thin ones do. So if the corporate ladder is too steep to climb in your current state of unfitness, spit out that mint Oreo or you'll be stuck in your current position forever.

10. **Nothing is forever.** Don't buy into the détente argument, that the Party would never relinquish power and that the Cold War was eternal. The regime ruining your company will eventually collapse and be replaced with something not currently being investigated by the FTC. Or you'll find a gig where your myriad talents will be unleashed and appreciated. Be grateful you survived, then prepare to tell others what you've learned.

11. **Keep your pie hole shut.** If you've been fired or just plain quit, please spare the world another whiny tell-all. Unless you have the talents of a Dostoyevsky and worked for Silvio Berlusconi, just move on. Be grateful someone thought enough of you to deduct FICA.

12. **FICA is history.** If current administration estimates are correct, your first Social Security check will be an IOU and a cookie. You will never be able to retire, hastening your demise as a bitter, broken, and bankrupt shell of a man.

You can thank me now.