
Ivan Ilych: The Tragedy of an Unexamined Life

by Robin Gretz

Each of us one day will face illness and death. Yet rarely do we consider whether the choices we make in life can help us face suffering and death with courage and dignity. The Death of Ivan Ilych, by the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, is the story of a dying man's struggle to come to terms with the meaning of his life, even as he endures an agonizing death. It is a powerful novel that raises disturbing questions about moral choice, the importance of being treated as a person rather than a patient, and the life-sustaining value of family and friends. This essay examines one man's suffering and dying in a way that suggests that the choices we make during our lives have much to do with the kind of death we will experience.

When a man dies, he does not just die of the disease he has: he dies of his whole life.

Charles Peguy

Occasionally, a novel or story touches us indelibly, leading to the realization that we can never again look at our life in quite the same way. For me, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* by Leo Tolstoy is such a book. For those who have known death, either personally or professionally, or for those who find in literature clues to the diversity of human experience, this story is a valuable pathway to asking whether the choices we make in life can help us face death with courage and dignity.

The Death of Ivan Ilych is the story of an ordinary man whose life ends before it ever really begins, who comes to the disturbing conclusion that his life did not contain the meaning necessary to sustain him through suffering and death. When Tolstoy tells us that Ivan's life had been "most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible" (from *The Raid and Other Stories*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, 235), we see that his life was ordinary because he did what society expected him to do, never questioning where his conformity was leading him until it was too late. Not until an agonizing illness struck and Ivan was forced to confront his mortality, did he begin to question whether his life had been as it should have been.

The choices Ivan made for his life acted as a sieve, filtering out thoughts and feelings he considered unimportant in favor of those which supported his pursuit of a powerful career and high social standing. The pin-pricks of conscience he ex-

perienced off and on throughout adulthood might have led Ivan to new insights about what was most important in life, had he been willing to listen. Instead, by ignoring his conscience and avoiding self-reflection, Ivan's life was drained of meaning, leaving him devoid of character—that highly individual set of qualities that acts as a framework for moral judgment and action. Clearly, Ivan lived his life according to standards set by others, dismissing the stirrings of conscience as irrelevant. Indeed, we read, "Even when he was at the School of Law he was just what he remained for the rest of his life: a capable, cheerful, good-natured, and sociable man, though strict in the fulfillment of what he considered to be his duty: and he considered his duty to be what was so considered by those in authority" (236). Without ever stopping to think about what the loss of his personal value judgments might have meant in the broader sense of his life, Ivan discarded the most important part of himself in favor of what was pleasing to others.

Had Ivan lived with integrity, had he made an honest effort to confront problems instead of trying to escape them, had he not suppressed good impulses in favor of those that pleased people of high rank, he might have achieved real happiness and inner peace (276). It is only when we work to solve the problems that subtract from our humanity that we can experience a life of complete fulfillment and a death without regrets.

Dying with dignity instead of regret can best be achieved when we listen to the voice of conscience. Throughout our lifetime, each of us is presented with many opportunities to act fairly and unselfishly, to help those less fortunate, to bring love and meaning to the lives of others. Life is fleeting, and we must make careful choices about the best use of

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each moment we are given. Every good word or virtuous action is stored within us, contributing to the formation of our characters, like building blocks. As we near the end of our lives, these experiences constitute a foundation of good deeds and moral decisions, remembrances that help us to withstand suffering and to face death with courage and dignity.

To question the meaning of one's life can be risky, especially for a man like Ivan Ilych, whose entire life was spent avoiding difficult answers to personal problems. As a result, when Ivan surveyed his life, the portrait was similar to the dying image he presented to his horrified brother-in-law: there simply was no real light (256). This realization was so troubling to Ivan that his condition became unbearable. And yet, he was unable to die because he had not yet come to terms with his life.

In his youth, Ivan knew that some of the things he did were vile, but he was able to rationalize his actions and soften the sting of his conscience because some of the "very best" people in society approved of these actions (236). Just before he died, however, the previously dulled edges of his conscience became razor sharp as he realized that by suppressing his integrity, he also suppressed what really mattered in life—human relationships, charitable deeds, justice. These, he realized too late, were what constituted the "real thing" (276).

All too often, living well is equated with professional success and material possessions. By contrast, love of family and friends, or service to others, are lasting investments of self that pay unlimited dividends over the course of a human lifetime. Moreover, it is the support of family members and friends that ultimately sustains a person through illness or hardship when power and wealth have dissipated.

Ivan Ilych was a man whose single-minded pursuit of status took precedence over everything else in life—even love—and whose self-inflicted isolation, in keeping his family and friends at arms' length, prevented him from becoming fully human. In this respect, he was like many people who live productive lives according to society's standards, but who never take the time to examine whether their lives have been affluent in a way that will outlive their deaths. An inheritance of wealth passed to the next generation is quickly spent and forgotten, but the investment of oneself is the true measure of personal worth—able to survive even death. Because power and material possessions meant more to Ivan than relationships with family and friends, he was unable to reach out to others for comfort

and support when illness robbed him of his power and prestige.

The pain in Ivan Ilych's body was a physical parallel to the emotional suffering he endured at having squandered his life on things that had no lasting value. Although his physical strength had long been depleted, on his deathbed Ivan was able to draw on a vast store of previously untapped emotional strength to come to terms with his life. Only then was he able to free himself of the oppressive emotional chains that bound him to his tortured body. This unexpected reservoir of strength allowed

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him one last opportunity to take control of his actions. He felt free to tell his family that he understood the effect his suffering had on them, but was unable to speak the words.

"Yes, I am making them wretched," he thought. "They are sorry, but it will be better for them when I die." He wished to say this but had not the strength to utter it. "Besides, why speak? I must act," he thought. With a look at his wife he indicated his son and said: "Take him away . . . sorry for him . . . sorry for you too. . . ." He tried to add, "forgive me," but said "forgo" and waved his hand, knowing that He whose understanding mattered would understand (279).

The moment Ivan realized that he alone had the power to change his selfish ways and release his family from their suffering, his own pain suddenly vanished. And when he searched for his fear of death, it was not there: "He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. 'Where is it? What death?' There was no fear because there was no death. In place of death there was light" (279). Ivan understood that it is never too late to do what is right and honorable.

As a respected judge, Ivan Ilych regularly made life-changing decisions about the lives of other people. He held the power to distinguish between those deemed worthy of mercy and those who were not. In a real sense Ivan was playing God—making judgments about who mattered and who did not, who should be punished and who merited a second chance. Ironically, as Ivan Ilych anguished over the seemingly random way in which illness robbed him of his freedom, he found himself thinking about his days in court. He began to empathize with prison-

ers who, like himself, lost control of their lives through a tragic misstep. With a shock, Ivan realized that it was now his turn to be judged. Perhaps this was why Ivan felt such resentment toward his doctors, who treated him as if he were less important than his diseased organ. When Ivan consulted a celebrated physician about his illness, he appreciated the significance of the experience, since the doctor acted toward him exactly as Ivan treated prisoners in his court. "There was the usual waiting and the important air assumed by the doctor . . . the sounding and listening, and the questions which called for answers that were foregone conclusions and were evidently unnecessary . . ." (250).

As he was forced to listen to endless analyses of his physical problems, Ivan gained considerable insight about how a man on trial in his court must have felt. For Ivan there really was only one question that mattered: "Was his case serious or not?" To make matters worse, Ivan's doctor hedged his judgments about the cause of the illness, saying that "should an examination of the urine give fresh indications the matter would be reconsidered." This was exactly what Ivan had done so many times to defendants in his court (250).

Had Ivan Ilych been able to see through the economic, social and educational barriers that separated him from the people who came to his courtroom, he might have realized that what he shared in common with them was far more significant than any differences: childhoods filled with hope and promise for the future, cherished friendships and good times, the joys of young love, sexual pleasures, pride in home and family, the disappointments of adulthood with its unrealized dreams, the frustrating frailties of aging bodies and the inevitability of death. These came to everyone regardless of social standing.

But Ivan was a man who took great pride in his ability to separate the official side of his life from the human side. As a result, he never allowed himself to feel emotionally for anyone, not even his wife and children. Occasionally, he allowed himself to mix human and official relations "just for fun," but only because he knew he was able to discard the human aspect whenever he chose (247). Ivan Ilych valued material possessions more than human beings. He was a proud man who relished control over every aspect of his life.

It is ironic that an inconsequential incident—a fall from a stepladder, of all things—acted as a catalyst, setting off a chain reaction that resulted in the collapse of every last semblance of control Ivan felt over his life. Ivan's tragic misstep, we realize, represents the fall that inevitably results from pride.

Indeed, it was his preoccupation with outward appearances that led Ivan Ilych and his equally self-centered wife, Praskovya Fedorovna, to brush off various "shabby friends," so that the couple moved only in the best social circles (248). Despite Ivan Ilych's misguided thoughts about what constituted human worth, it was a servant named Gerasim, a member of the lowest class of Russian society, who brought the only comfort Ivan experienced in his agonizing final months. Gerasim, unlike other characters in the story, acknowledged his master's imminent death and demonstrated that virtuous behavior knows no class distinction. The duties Gerasim carried out for Ivan Ilych were quite ordinary; it was his attitude in performing them that was extraordinary.

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Ivan Ilych was touched by Gerasim's goodness, by his willingness to do whatever was needed to make Ivan comfortable, and by his unflinching devotion as he remained hour after hour by the dying man's bedside. There was a humility about Gerasim worthy of respect, as he performed his duties without expectation of honor or reward. Gerasim cared for Ivan because he was a fellow human being in need. At one point Ivan said to Gerasim, "[This] must be very unpleasant for you. You must forgive me. I am helpless," to which the young man replied, "What's a little trouble? It's a case of illness with you, sir" (262).

Perhaps Gerasim's most generous gift to Ivan Ilych, however, was his honesty about his master's condition. The reluctance of Ivan's family, friends and colleagues to face reality, even to use the words "death" or "dying," came as a result of fear that by speaking about his death they were willing it to happen sooner. While family members, friends and even Ivan's renowned physicians refused to admit the severity of his puzzling illness, only Gerasim could name the truth and help Ivan prepare for what was ahead. Only Gerasim understood that a suffering, dying man needed the only thing he had to give . . . unconditional love. It must have seemed curious to Ivan, as he watched Gerasim carry out his responsibilities with dignity and grace, that the young man's caring hands and gentle demeanor were worth far more to Ivan now than the stylish furniture or expensive bric-a-brac that surrounded him—reminders of a life that now seemed empty.

To think seriously about dying is to realize that death can come at any time, regardless of one's actual readiness to die. Ivan Ilych believed that death was abstract, an "It," that happened to others—not to someone like him. After all, he had always been "a creature quite quite separate from all others" (259). Like many terminally-ill people, Ivan clutched at the hope that there would be some cure, some doctor who would know how to help, or even some way that he could take control of the illness by mentally willing it to change its destructive course (257). For a few months he considered his illness merely an unexpected sidetrack in an otherwise ideal life, an unpleasant event that surely would pass. Of course, there was the irritating business of dealing with his doctors, who looked at Ivan strictly from a detached, biological perspective, ignoring the fact that Ivan was more than a patient: he was a person. Long after Ivan realized his condition was terminal, his doctors continued to treat him with aloof professionalism—as though he were an interesting case in a medical textbook rather than a suffering human being with psychological and spiritual needs.

As Ivan's physical agony intensified, so did his moral anguish.

We are reminded how easy it is to remain distant when it is someone else's life hanging in the balance. For the first time Ivan realized that no one else placed the same importance on his life that he did, and he began to comprehend injustice as only an innocent, condemned person can.

At this juncture Ivan should have begun to see the value of each human life, and to empathize with others. Unfortunately, to begin such a self-examination requires hard work and determination. Ivan Ilych was happiest when life was effortless and everything went his way—an outlook that stunted his emotional growth and prevented him from recognizing an abysmal marriage, estranged relationships with his children, and superficial friendships. Perhaps the reason Ivan avoided questions about his life was because he already knew the answers would be troubling. To face up to his failures would have been tantamount to admitting that he had wasted most of his life—a ridiculous notion, to Ivan's way of thinking, since he had only done what was expected of him.

As Ivan Ilych lay dying, contemplating a life that became progressively less happy even as his professional success grew, the reality of his condition became unbearable. And yet, he was unable to die be-

cause he had not yet come to terms with his life. It was inconceivable to him that the life he led was not the one he was supposed to live. In the same way that he absolved himself from blame in his relationships with others, Ivan tried to dismiss responsibility for the path his life had taken. Vainly, he searched for a reason for his suffering, even as he stubbornly clung to the notion that his life had gone exactly as it should. It was precisely this unwillingness to confront the realities of his life that caused Ivan so much anguish and resentment, feelings that exacerbated the pain (276-277).

He raged against his helplessness, the loneliness he felt, the cruelty of people and even the cruelty of God, to whom he demanded: "Why hast Thou done all this?" When he quieted down to listen, he thought he heard the voice of his soul asking what he wanted. He answered that he wanted to live, and the voice responded: "To live? How?" (272)

At this point, Ivan began to comprehend that there had been more goodness in his childhood than in the latter years of his life, and that the person who experienced the earlier happiness no longer existed. "Just as the pain went on getting worse and worse," he mused, "so my life grew worse and worse" (275).

"Then what does it all mean? Why? It can't be that life is so senseless and horrible," Ivan agonized (273). Slowly, he began to understand the horrible reality that something must have gone wrong with his life, and now all that remained was death.

As Ivan's physical agony intensified, so did his moral anguish, which became even worse one night as he gazed upon Gerasim's face and asked himself: "What if my whole life has really been wrong?" (276). Now it occurred to him that the doubts he had struggled to dismiss might have been worth serious attention, that worries about whether he had lived the kind of life he should have lived might have been true. The horror of these thoughts led him to review his whole life in a different light, culminated by three days of incessant screaming.

Ivan's screams drew his young son Vasya to his father's bedside, and the boy unhesitatingly pressed Ivan's hand to his lips and kissed it in a pathetic show of overwhelming grief. This simple act of love revealed to Ivan how much his son cared for him, and helped him to realize that the meaning of life, the "real thing," was in loving and being loved (278). This was a turning point for Ivan, who suddenly understood that even though his life had not been everything that it might have been, there still was time to make amends.

In the end, we realize that although Ivan Ilych's experience of dying was terrible, he arrived at an understanding that to live meant not only to love and be loved, but also to remain true to one's beliefs—even against social and business pressures to do otherwise. Despite Ivan's earlier conviction that he had only done what society expected of him, he came to the conclusion that his previous beliefs about what constituted a good life could not transcend his experience of suffering and death.

Perhaps in Vasya, Ivan Ilych saw himself before he was enticed by society. Or maybe it was Gerasim's unselfish influence that led to Ivan's transformation. Whatever the reason, he seemed to become a new man, capable of giving and receiving love. With his terrible burden of doubt lifted, Ivan Ilych was able to grieve for his son's emotional pain and to make peace with his wife. Gone was the fear of death, and Ivan was able to free himself from his tortured body (279).

Telling Our Stories: A Process of Integration for Patients

by Peg Stokman

We are just beginning to question, much less fathom, how and why we heal. This essay explores the power of storytelling as a key agent in the healing process. Telling stories allows patients to reflect on their lives and identify their unique contribution to the world. A person must be able to integrate illness into his or her life in order to learn from it and finally to accept it. The narrative model brings to light the deeper level of suffering involved in illness. Trust and confidence between patient and caregiver are built on shared storytelling.

Healing means, first of all, the creation of an empty but friendly space where those who suffer can tell their story to someone who can listen with real attention. Healers are hosts who patiently and carefully listen to the story of the suffering stranger. Patients are guests who rediscover their selves by telling their story to the one who offers them a place to stay.¹

"I haven't been to the doctor for two years since our visit in the ICU."

"I've changed doctors since I saw you. This doctor takes time to listen to me."

"Can you believe this! The surgeon made a diagnosis by looking at a chart. He never stopped in my room to see what I looked like."

"I'm in here because of a broken heart since my husband died, and no test will show that."

A chaplain and a doctor offered hospitality to two patients and healing took place. The other two patients felt devalued and angry because their doctors did not take time to listen to them.

Telling our stories is a powerful process for integration and wholeness in all of life, but especially for patients. Illness forces one's world to shrink. Storytelling helps one's world to expand beyond the immediate. For the terminally ill, reflection on their lives pulls together the significant parts, giving them a chance to identify their unique contribution to the world. In acute care, the physical and emotional isolation of a hospital provides an opportunity for a patient to do the necessary work of integration with his personal story. Removed from his support system and the distracting busyness of everyday affairs, the patient has time to listen to his life, not as isolated events but as a continuum linking past and future with the present. This process of integration softens the feeling of isolation.

I would go so far as to say that storytelling is medicine. "Always in emergencies we invent narratives. Storytelling seems to be a natural reaction to illness. Stories are antibodies against illness and

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