A compelling reason for reading literature from the Soviet Gulag is the need, once again, to reevaluate the nature of man, this time in light of the violent cataclysms of the 20 Century. This reevaluation must include an attempt to understand why some perished in extreme conditions while others survived. Although many have attributed their survival to chance and luck (and these factors certainly played a role), there is evidence in numerous accounts that psychological factors were no less important. Most frequently survivors affirm the power of religion to sustain prisoners through suffering and oppression. But many survivors were not religious, and they too withstood the deleterious psychological effects of camp life. In his renowned study of the psychology of concentration camp prisoners, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl argues that above all man needs meaning and purpose in his life. Religious belief certainly provided this for some, but there are many different paths, concludes Frankl, and each person must find his or her own.

This paper examines the specific case of Varlam Shalamov and his use of myth to help him understand his own tragic life. Shalamov believed that his duty was to continue the dissident tradition of the 19 Century Russian intelligentsia, but cast in quasi-religious terms that often echo Biblical prophets and martyrs. Shalamov’s works are shaped by a philosophical perspective on existence and an ethical orientation toward human behavior, in spite of his rejection of any belief in a benevolent God and meaningful universe.

**About Laura Kline**
Laura Kline is a Sr. Lecturer in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures. Her research interests are in Soviet/Russian prison camp literature. She has published articles and given papers on the life and works of Russian writer Varlam Shalamov.