



## **Vaclav Havel and the Politics of Hope**

**By Jeffrey B. Symynkywicz**

**I**t could be that many in our culture have developed an almost voyeuristic interest in the personal lives of our celebrities, including our political leaders. Yet, we seldom (if ever) deem it necessary to consider in any deeper ways the worldviews of those who lead us. It is not considered "important" to know, for instance, George Bush's view about the meaning of life, or even what the perspective of Dan Quayle is regarding the nature of reality. Certainly, this apparent lack of interest in such "deeper" matters is not unique to American society. While consideration of such philosophical matters may have a somewhat more prominent place in the political history of other lands, nowhere do they predominate. Nowhere do they assume a prominence over more down-to-earth, "bread and butter" issues like war and taxes and bread and circuses.

Perhaps this is the reason Vaclav Havel seems to some to be a manifestation of a completely different genre of political leader. He is a man whose life is energized by consideration of these "deeper things". What is the main issue faced by modern humanity in these closing years of the twentieth century? One might tick off the whole "laundry list" of the troubles of our day: the Middle East, the world economy, problems of industrialization. But no, Havel says:

The question is . . . deeper . . . whether we shall, by whatever means, succeed in reconstituting the natural world as the true terrain of politics, rehabilitating the personal experience of human beings as the initial measure of things, placing morality above politics and responsibility above our desires, in making human community meaningful, in returning content to human speaking, in reconstituting, as the focus of all social action, the autonomous, integral, and dignified human I, responsible for oneself because we are bound to something higher, and capable of sacrificing something, in extreme cases even everything . . . for the sake of that which gives life meaning.

Perhaps one needs to remind oneself that these are not the words of a detached professor of philosophy (or even of political science!) at some central European university. They are the words of the *president* of a nation of sixteen million souls in the heart of Europe. These are the words of no detached intellectual; they are the words of a man whose philosophy of life has been tempered in a crucible far harsher than that which most of us will ever be called upon to withstand. They are the words of a man who led a revolution, right in front of the eyes of the world.

And what a different kind of revolution it was! "In Poland, the revolution took ten years, in Hungary ten months, in Czechoslovakia ten days." So the saying (coined by the British reporter Timothy Garton Ash) went during the later months of 1989, the year that changed our world. Strictly speaking, the revolution in Czechoslovakia took all of a month and a half, from November 17, when government riot police attacked demonstrators in Prague, to the afternoon of December 29 when, with Alexander Dubcek presiding, the nation's Federal Assembly elected Vaclav Havel the president of what was then still called the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

It was a revolution led by writers and actors and teachers and university students and members of labor unions by intellectuals and workers, side by side. It was a revolution whose manifestos and policy statements were often drafted at mass meetings held in the auditorium of a theatre called the "Magic Lantern" with several hundred people present, all with the right to make a point about the matter under consideration. It was a revolution which, aside from that initial state-instigated violence in Wenceslas Square, proceeded in a spirit of passionate and rigorous non-violence. It would become known among the people of Czechoslovakia and then the world as the "velvet revolution", because it was so gentle and non-violent and seemed to hold close to its center a joyousness and a celebration of imagination and creativity unknown in the annals of political revolutions of ages past.

**I**t was a gentle revolution with a most unlikely leader: Vaclav Havel was born to a prosperous bourgeois family in Prague in October of 1936. His father was a civil engineer and a builder; his mother's father was a financial editor and had served as ambassador to several countries and then as a government minister for a short while. As a child, Vaclav grew up in the midst of plenty and privilege. Of those early years, he would later write:

Our family employed, as the custom was, domestics. I had a governess; we had a cook, a maid, a gardener, and a chauffeur. All of that put between myself and those around me (I mean my poorer fellow students and our staff) a social barrier which . . . I was very much aware of and found hard to deal with. I was ashamed of my advantages, my 'perks'. . . . I longed for equality with others, not because I was some kind of childhood social revolutionary, but simply because I felt separate and excluded . . . because I knew that between me and those around me there was an invisible wall, and because behind that wall . . . I felt alone, inferior, lost, ridiculed . . . humbled by my 'higher' status.

Havel's feelings of being an "outsider" would only intensify when the Communists came to power in Czechoslovakia in 1948, and the members of his family were stripped of all their special privileges. He would later say that this feeling of always being outside the norm would have great influence upon him; later, he said, it would influence his art and his view of the world.

**C**entral among the ideas which Havel articulates in his work is a view of humanity standing humbly before the greater forces of the natural world and the unfolding cosmos. It is only by rooting our lives within these greater forces, and directing our sights toward greater goals, Havel believes, that the so-often-absurd little lives of each of us can grow to become truly meaningful. But if we cling with all our strength to our own little lives as the center of all meaning, then we ultimately drown in a sense of our own absurdity—or, we lose hope and give over control of our lives to some outside force of ideology or authority.

It is through our identification with goals and ideals beyond the ephemeral, transient world of business or politics as usual that we find meaning and strength in our lives. Through this identification with the timeless, indestructible forces of life, the conscience of the individual is empowered to continue questioning without pause in the face of absurdity, and the individual person is empowered to act without fear in the face of tyranny. This sense of oneness with a greater force beyond the constrictors of an oppressive society is what Havel calls "the power of the powerless".

Each individual being connects with the "greater force" by listening to his or her own deep, inner voice and then seeking to lead a life based upon the principle of *living within the truth*. Where does one find "truth"? Out in the natural world, Havel believes: in the natural world with its natural objective laws, its cycles and seasons, and its ebb and flow. According to him, it is modern humanity's alienation from the natural world which is the cause of much of our trouble. In order to grow into harmony with the greatest Truth in the universe, Havel believes we human beings must stop seeing ourselves as the ruler *over* nature, and must once again come to see ourselves as part and parcel *of* nature. In one essay, he writes, "We must honor with the humility of the wise the bounds of that natural world and the mystery which lies beyond them, admitting that there is something in the order of being which evidently exceeds all our [human] competence. . . "

The natural world will tell us what is true for us—and what is true for the world. Alienation results when people in a modern society fail to listen to the voice of nature, the voice of the conscience, and instead base their lives on the dictates of some party or corporation or ideology outside of themselves.

**H**uman beings relate to the cosmos and to the natural world, not only individually, but *socially and politically* as well, of course. What kind of social and political structures can help to lead women and men away from the alienation of living a lie, and assist them as they seek to "live within the truth"? To further these ends, Havel believes, the institutions and structures of society have to be built *from the ground*

*upward*, and not from the top down. Structures must be constructed based upon "human factors"—the needs and desires of individuals—"rather than from a particular formalization of political relationships" and the overriding demands of this or that ideology. Havel writes: "Rather than a strategic agglomeration of formalized organizations, it is better to have organizations springing up ad hoc, infused with enthusiasm for a particular purpose and disappearing when that purpose has been achieved."

It is *because* such small groups of mutual support and edification seem so insignificant in the face of the totality of the predominating culture that these manifestations of the "parallel polis" in the East and in the West (are these the *real* "thousand points of light"?) can keep hope alive.

Because they set their sights on more distant horizons—which is at the same time the horizon within their individual consciences—supporters of such grassroots organizations can strive to remain true to their own personal integrity even in the midst of oppression.

**L**iving within the truth is never easy, for the pull of forces outside of ourselves is so very strong, and the ideology of the predominating culture always provides what Havel calls a "bridge of excuses" for choosing not to live within the truth. For Havel and his fellow dissidents in Eastern Europe, as for political dissidents everywhere, choosing to live within the truth sometimes meant facing harassment or exile or jail or even death. (Havel himself was imprisoned for nearly five years during the regime of Gustav Husak. He nearly died in prison, and was only released because such "enlightened" Communist authorities decided that they didn't need a martyr on their hands.) But in spite of persecution, Havel remained true to his course; indeed, he seemed to grow stronger in the face of persecution, for the hope within him continued to grow, and to nourish him.

In 1986, three years before he became president of Czechoslovakia, Havel was asked, "Do you see a grain of hope anywhere in the 1980s?" And he replied:

Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. . . . Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for . . . success, but rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more propitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper the hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. *It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.* [My emphasis.]

Our hope arises from "elsewhere", Havel writes, from the "wide horizon's grander view", in the words of Samuel Longfellow, and not from the day-to-day reality of existence. Our hope—our sense that life "makes sense", that it has meaning (in spite of the absurdity and violence and tragedy all around us)—emerges out of our rootedness in the universe (not by our putting ourselves at the center of the universe). It does not emerge out of the blind glorification of human beings, human reason, and human endeavors—but rather emerges from the sense we receive when our human good works grow into harmony with the greater spirit of life.

Which might bring some of us to the question of God, but does not necessarily bring Vaclav Havel there. At their deepest, Havel believes, the roots of life are *transcendental*: in some fundamental way "more than" the physically verifiable here and now. But, he adds, "I can't—unlike Christians, for instance—say anything concrete about the transcendental."

In describing his own religious background, Havel wrote:

I haven't been to confession (I mean the institutional variety) since childhood. I don't pray, and I don't cross myself when I *am* in church. I took part in secret masses in prison, but I didn't take communion. There are some things that I have felt since childhood: that there is a great mystery above me which is the focus of all meaning and the highest moral authority; that the event called the 'world' has a deeper order and meaning, and therefore is more than just a cluster of improbable accidents; that in my own life I am reaching for something that goes far beyond me and the horizon of the world I know; that in everything I do I touch eternity in a strange way. . . .

What is also important is to keep one's sense of humor, and a humble sense of one's own absurdity. "The life of a dissident in Czechoslovakia is not particularly jolly, and spending time in Czechoslovak jails is even less so," Havel wrote in 1985. But still, he maintained, the need for a sense of levity and lightheartedness toward life remained a crucial part of his existence.

There is also, Havel believes, a need to be realistic and not to give in to pie-in-the-sky Utopianism. For Utopianism—the belief that human society can somehow be made perfect—can readily become the genesis of political or ideological tyranny and totalitarianism. A grain of what he calls "our distinctive central European skepticism" can provide a very healthy sense of balance, indeed. "This may be a world of dreams and of the ideal, but it is not the world of Utopia."

In April of 1985, Vaclav Havel wrote, "History is unpredictable, and we need to be prepared for a whole range of eventualities." Just how unpredictable it could be, even he had no way of knowing. In little more than four years, he would become president of his country, a "politician", whether he liked it or not. Within just seven years, he had come from being a prisoner of the state to being president of that same (but utterly transformed) state. Seemingly overnight, the most unlikely of eventualities became political reality,

and the members of Civic Forum were transformed from outcasts of society into government ministers. The "parallel polis" had become the government. And the world watches eagerly to see what will happen next, and to see if the world is truly changed.

"The real question," Havel wrote in 1978, "is whether the 'brighter future' is always really so distant. What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness has prevented us from seeing it around us, and within us, and kept us from developing it?"

For in Havel's view, deep, real change does not merely take place on a political plain, on a linear scale of chronological history. The real change takes place within our souls; the real change takes place when the unfolding of our souls reflects in some deep, mysterious way the unfolding of the universe. Then it is—when an individual person dares to live within his or her truth—that the world is changed, forever.

*There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.*

—Edith Wharton

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