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*The Czech president is the product of a culture whose artists and intellectuals have for fifty years been remarkable for their courageous commitment to democratic government for the sake of the common good.*

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Walter H. Capps

## Interpreting Václav Havel

Though the intellectual and academic worlds haven't caught full sight of it yet, we are standing on the threshold of a new era in thought, idea, and cultural construction. This new era has been made possible by the ending of a prolonged Cold War, and the sudden, unexpected opportunity to learn how the people of Eastern bloc nations sustained themselves culturally and spiritually during the time of their subjection to totalitarian forces. For most of the Cold War period, philosophical and artistic expression in Marxist countries was neither widely known nor acknowledged in the western world. Since the appropriate evidence was not readily available, it was too easy to assume that not much of significance was happening.

Yet, one can quickly appreciate how untrue such an assumption is. Human nature being human nature, there is never a time or circumstance that does not produce ideas or cultural expressions. Indeed, many of the most profound ideas and the most stirring expressions have been created during times of greatest social, political, and economic unrest, and by those who were the most seriously affected. We learn about the character of the struggles of the time, for example, through Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," Nelson Mandela's autobiography, the *Diary of Anne Frank*, the testimony of dissidents, and the literature of

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marginality. And when the portion of the world that is now being referenced deserves to be called the “new Europe,” one recognizes that the social, cultural, religious, and intellectual fallout is of significant proportions and dimensions.

Of course, a single essay cannot attempt a comprehensive sketch of pertinent developments in Eastern Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, not to mention Bosnia, and the provinces of the former Soviet Union. But we can focus attention on one of these places, namely, the Czech Republic, knowing that the other regions can also boast of important and exciting occurrences and developments. In this essay we wish to focus specifically on the intellectual and political life in the city of Prague, prior to the successful “velvet revolution” of 1989 — a subject that is magnetized by another remarkable piece of prison literature, namely, Václav Havel’s *Letters to Olga* — and then to give consideration to Havel’s thought and vision for politics.

### **Prague’s Intellectual Life during the Cold War**

It is difficult to imagine what was transpiring in the city of Prague during Soviet occupation. But we do know something about how intellectual freedom survived, and how it was advanced. For clues I am indebted to the insight and analysis of the late Ernest Gellner, Prague-born Cambridge University philosopher, who, at the time of his death, was the director of the Center for the Study of Nationalism at the new Central European University in Prague, and whose most recent book is *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (1994).<sup>1</sup> My thinking on these matters has also been influenced by Dinko Tomasic and Stjepan G. Mestrovic, whose work is referenced in Mestrovic’s highly provocative *Habits of the Balkan Heart: Social Character and the Fall of Communism* (1993),<sup>2</sup> which builds its case in brilliant conversation with Alexis de Tocqueville, Thorstein Veblen, Erich Fromm, David Riesman, Robert N. Bellah, and Seymour Martin Lipset. Also supporting Mestrovic’s analysis are the writings of Friedrich Tonnies, and, in particular, Tonnies’s distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, as this is the central focus of Tonnies’s *Community and Society*.<sup>3</sup> But I am following Gellner’s analysis because it is compatible with that offered by Václav Havel (b. 1936), the famous playwright and essayist, who currently serves as president of the Czech Republic.

The sequential development can be traced and sketched. Prague is invaded in 1968 when the Soviet tanks come rumbling into the city

and make their indomitable presence felt in Wenceslaus Square. The citizens of the city try to make some accommodation to the Soviet presence. Promises are offered but promises are broken. The people suffer increased disappointment and disillusionment. Suddenly, with the frustration level high, a certain Jan Palach, hardly a well-known or prominent citizen, in protest against the repressions of occupying Soviet forces, burns himself to death in front of the statue of St. Václav in Wenceslaus Square on January 19, 1969.

A few months after Palach's suicide, Václav Havel, already known as a superb essayist and dramatist, appealed to President Alexander Dubcek to institute democratic reforms, proposing that such an act of defiance against the Soviets "would place before us an ethical mirror as powerful as that of Jan Palach's recent deed." Dubcek listened to Havel's plea, but, under pressure from the reigning Communists, took no action. But the tide of revolution was already in process. Havel commented that Palach's self-immolation marked the beginning of a period in which nothing short of "human existence itself is at stake."

None of this happened, of course, in isolation, but rather was part of an intricate set of interconnecting influences. A prominent background presence is Tomas Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), a brilliant philosopher who served for fifteen years as a member of the Austrian Parliament. Opposed to Germany's nationalism in Austria and Austria's adventurous policies in the Balkans, Masaryk became convinced that Austro-Hungary could no longer serve as the common homeland for the small nations of Central Europe. Thus, dramatically, following the outbreak of World War I, Masaryk became the champion of an independent Czechoslovakia, leading troops who fought successfully alongside Allied forces. At the end of the war, Masaryk became president of the first Czechoslovakian Republic, from 1919 to 1938.

Primarily a philosopher, Masaryk had come under the influence of Franz von Brentano (1838–1917) during his studies in Vienna. Subsequently, when he was twenty-seven years old, in Leipzig, Masaryk developed a friendship with Edmund Husserl, and was instrumental in convincing Husserl to switch from the study of mathematics to philosophy. Through Masaryk, Husserl was directed toward the work of Brentano. And from Masaryk, Husserl acquired a heightened sense of the spiritual crisis of the modern world. Masaryk was concerned about the loss of religious faith. Alarmed that increased scientific sophistication did not bring moral progress, he feared that modern reason had

become detached from the world of good and evil, which for him was the foundation of lived reality.

Husserl extended Masaryk's analysis to include the judgment that theoretical knowledge had lost contact with living human experience. Eventually Husserl wrote a powerful treatise on the subject, *The Crisis of European Sciences* (1936),<sup>4</sup> in which he affirmed that the morally ordered world of our prereflective lived experience is indeed the common life-world. Masaryk would have said the same, though with greater emphasis on matters of religious belief. For our purposes, it is significant to note that these Masarykian and Husserlian themes are perceptible in Václav Havel's thinking and writing.

In addition, Masaryk affirmed that Czech national consciousness had been grounded and shaped by the Hussite movement. Through Masaryk's testimony, the national martyr, Jan Hus (1370–1415), gained fresh place in contemporary Czech thinking. So when Jan Palach burned himself after the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia, it was appropriate for Czech patriots to assign Hussite martyr symbolism to the event.

We must also cite the strong influence of the philosopher Jan Patočka (1907–77), who studied under Husserl, taught Václav Havel, and subsequently was instrumental in publishing Charter 77, the statement of resistance to Soviet occupation and communist ideology. Patočka, whose philosophical work at last is becoming better known outside the Czech Republic, drew upon the thought of his significant predecessors. First, he studied under Husserl, and devoted a good portion of his graduate work to a systematic study of Masaryk's thought. (When Husserl was expelled from Freiburg University by the Nazi rulers of Germany, Patočka was instrumental in bringing him to Prague to deliver guest lectures.) Then too, like Masaryk, Patočka exhibited respect for religion, and spent considerable time studying theology. In one of his earlier essays he wrote, "without God the world is unthinkable." He admitted, however, that God was not accessible to him through lived experience.

Patočka's final set of writings, grouped under the title *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, provides evidence that the subject that most captivated him is the requirement of the human struggle.<sup>5</sup> The final essay in this collection, "Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War," offers a commentary on Heraclitus's understanding of *polemos*, which Patočka translates as "struggle, fight, and war." The reference is to Heraclitus's Fragment 26: "It should be understood that war is the common condition, that strife is justice, and that all things come to pass through the compulsion of strife." Here Patočka affirms that this

struggle possesses the kind of ontological fundamentality that others accord to love, justice, compassion, happiness. Indeed, there is evidence that Patočka would vote for other thematic possibilities himself, were it possible to do so. But the always necessary struggle against the world — which is nothing less than an adversarial conflict with reality — forces him to give priority to *polemos*.

Patočka employed Heraclitus to correct and amend Husserl's phenomenological assumptions about reality's underlying harmony. The conclusions of *Heretical Essays* are thoroughly compatible with Patočka's understanding of his cultural task. In fact, the publication of the *Essays*, in informal typescript copies, received widespread attention, and served to rally the Czech citizenry against the oppressions being inflicted by the occupying forces. Patočka's readers understood that hope is paradoxical: when its ontological supports fail, hope must be re-established on grounds intrinsic to the person. Paradoxically, the collapse of confidence in external supports evokes personal responsibility; there emerge twin needs to save one's soul in the midst of war's apocalypse and to establish a community of solidarity among those who have been shaken. This "solidarity of the shaken" provides them with that refuge and strength which is "the power of the powerless."

He even took on the alien, adversarial powers, with the promulgation of the Charter 77 texts, prompted by the 1977 Helsinki Agreement on human rights which affirm that human beings are obliged to discover and protect a valid moral foundation since there can be no rightful expectation that salvation will be provided by the state, or that it can be effected by any combination of social powers and forces. In a message to the Czech people, Patočka explained the creed of Charter 77 as follows:

Something fundamentally non-technical and non-instrumental must exist. There must be a self-evident, non-circumstantial ethic and unconditional morality. A moral system does not exist in order to help society function but simply so that man can be human. It is not man who defines a moral order according to the arbitrary nature of his needs, wishes, tendencies, and desires, but, on the contrary, it is morality which defines man.<sup>6</sup>

Patočka and the other signers of Charter 77 urged their Czechoslovakian compatriots to resist injustice by assuming the responsibility of free citizens, in accordance with the Helsinki principles. For Patočka, *polemos* both separates and unites people. The solidarity it enjoins is the basis for establishing the *polis*, and for seeing oneself and other citizens as members of the *polis*.

Predictably, the promulgation of Charter 77 incensed the authorities. Patočka, whose publications were already censored, was brought in for long hours of intensive interrogation. It was too much for him emotionally and physically, and he was transferred to the hospital after suffering heart trouble. Still, he kept up his resistance, promulgating an explanatory statement: "conformity has not yet led to any improvement; what is needed is to speak the truth."<sup>7</sup> Under continuing pressure from the authorities, on March 13, 1977, just a few days prior to his seventieth birthday, he died of a severe brain hemorrhage. More than a thousand mourners came to his funeral, all under the watchful eyes of police agents and cameramen. Several of his friends were taken into custody. Havel, calling Patočka Czechoslovakia's "most important philosopher," named it a martyr's death. On March 19, Paul Ricoeur, in a commemorative essay in *Le Monde*, attested that it was because he "knew no fear that he has literally been put to death by the authorities."<sup>8</sup> Havel was also arrested and jailed for four months for his part in Charter 77 activities. In 1979 he was convicted again, this time sentenced to four-and-a-half years in prison, but received a suspended sentence because of poor health and an international protest campaign. It was during his second stay in prison that he wrote the letters to his wife that were subsequently published as *Letters to Olga*.<sup>9</sup>

### **Masaryk, Patočka, and Havel**

Before analyzing the career and thought of Václav Havel in more detail, we must call attention to similarities in the principal ideas and sense of vocation of Masaryk, Patočka, and Havel. Note, first, that all three mixed keen interest in theory and unfailing commitment to scholarship with dedicated involvement in direct political activity. As noted, Masaryk was a member of the Austrian parliament, the leader of a Czech movement for independence, and the first president of independent Czechoslovakia. Patočka dedicated much of his philosophical career to identifying reality's most distinctive principle; after according centrality to strife, he then rallied his fellow citizens to support freedom and responsibility, before succumbing to a martyr's death. Havel was a playwright and essayist, who, following the "velvet revolution" of 1989, became the first president of the newly (re-)established Czech Republic.

Note, second, that the lives and careers of all three exhibit narratives that support the collective identification of the Czech people with the martyrdom of Hus. Masaryk invoked the memory of Hus to facilitate independent Czech national identity. Patočka, following Jan Palach's



self-immolation, was interrogated so severely that his death was perceived as suffering on behalf of the Czech people. When Patočka died, Havel wrote his testimonial, *The Power of the Powerless*, and dedicated it to Patočka's memory.<sup>10</sup> Havel's own qualifications for martyr's status are to be found in his imprisonments.

Third, the intellectual intentions of all three were remarkably similar. All three took their intellectual cues from the shared recognition that, as a result of disjuncture, disharmony, or pervasive conflict, European life and thought were in profound crisis. In *The Crisis of European Sciences*, Husserl's extensive commentary on the principles according to which Descartes established modern philosophy, this disjuncture was portrayed as a crisis of self-alienation. Such profound alienation could not possibly be resolved, Husserl argued, except through attribution of normative status to the *Lebenswelt* (life-world), which is the basis for ethical autonomy. Masaryk perceived a crisis too. For him, the traditional habits and patterns of religious faith conflicted with a technological world increasingly devoid of moral and ethical meaning. As Masaryk saw it, nineteenth-century science had usurped the authority previously accorded to faith and reason, and the moral and ethical repercussions were catastrophic. In *Suicide as a Mass Phenomenon of Modern Civilization*, Masaryk traced the reversal of moral progress which had accompanied the loss of religious faith. For him, science was both mechanistic and materialistic, and, in these senses, substituted dysfunctionally for an awareness that human life belongs to an ordered moral universe. Following Brentano, Masaryk believed it crucial that human beings return to the world of primary experience, there to be reconnected with a vital sense of good and evil.<sup>11</sup>

### **Václav Havel's Philosophical and Political Program**

Václav Havel, then, did not emerge out of nowhere; he is part of an ongoing Czech intellectual tradition. When he needed ideas by which to counter oppressive Marxist thinking, he found the key in Husserl's concept of *Lebenswelt*. For Havel, the resort to *Lebenswelt* fostered the conditions of "living in truth." The alternative to top-down, mechanistic, manipulative theoretical deduction (which, in Havel's view, is the tendency of Marxism) is acute attention to what Havel calls "the flow of life." And "flow of life" (a phrase Heraclitus might well have incorporated in his "everything flows" [Fragment 20] and "time is a river into which one cannot step twice in the same place" [Fragment 21]),



evidences deep contrasts between the superficiality and artificiality of ideology and the dependability of fundamental ideas.

It is also important to recognize that Havel understood that he too was responding to the problematic identified in Husserl's *Crisis*. In "Politics and Conscience" (1984), Havel calls Husserl's understanding of "the natural world" and "the world of lived experience" reliable vectors through which to approach "the spiritual framework of modern civilization and the source of the present crisis."<sup>12</sup> In the same passage, reflecting Masaryk's fundamental trust in what Erazim Kohak describes as "the prereflective certainty of Moravian peasants," Havel identifies children, working people, and peasants as "far more rooted in what some philosophers call the natural world, or *Lebenswelt*, than most modern adults." Then, in direct response to the self-alienation Husserl addressed in the *Crisis*, Havel explains:

They have not grown alienated from the world of their actual personal experience, the world which has its morning and its evening, its *down* (the earth) and its *up* (the heavens), where the sun rises daily in the east, traverses the sky and sets in the west, and where concepts like "at home" and "in foreign parts," good and evil, beauty and ugliness, near and far, duty and rights, still mean something living and definite.<sup>13</sup>

It is significant that Havel employed his predecessors' commentaries on "the crisis" to criticize the totalitarian system under which the people of (then) Czechoslovakia were subjected. Indeed, the untrustworthy mechanistic world of impersonal agents and forces is vividly illustrated in Soviet Marxist rule. In *What I Believe*, Havel becomes quite specific. He criticizes "systematically pure market economics," while seeking to cast suspicions on Marxist ideology. He chastises both for presuming that "operating from theory is essentially smarter than operating from a knowledge of life."<sup>14</sup> The alternative — again following the guidance of Masaryk and Patočka — is a true "understanding of individual human beings, and the moral and social sensitivity that comes from such understanding." In other words, "social life is not a machine built to any set of plans known to us." Rather, in true Heraclitean fashion, "new theories are constantly being fashioned." And in this essay, Havel invokes *Lebenswelt* as "the flow of life which is always taking us by surprise."<sup>15</sup>

Through all of this it becomes apparent that Havel and his colleagues interpreted the Czech situation under Soviet rule to be a vivid exemplification of the fundamental challenge that both Masaryk and Patočka had identified, and Husserl had conceptualized. In *Disturbing the Peace*,

Havel thanks Patočka for teaching him that “the real test of a man is not how well he plays the role he has invented for himself, but how well he plays the role that destiny assigned to him.”<sup>16</sup>

Put the ideas together, and they come out like this: there is a fundamental contrast between the world that can be constructed out of some presumed ideological viewpoint and the world that is rooted in trustworthy lived-experience; impersonal, mechanistic, manipulative force can be effectively resisted only by the one true power that all persons have at their disposal, their own humanity. Ivan Klima, a brilliant contemporary Czech writer, in *The Spirit of Prague* finds the same lesson in the teachings of Prague’s Franz Kafka:

[Kafka’s] hero is, above all, a hero for our time, a godless age in which power endowed with a higher meaning has been replaced with a vacuous power of tradition and legal and bureaucratic norms, that is, by human institutions. Man, deprived of all means and all weapons in his effort to achieve freedom and order, has no hope other than the one provided by his inner space.<sup>17</sup>

### Havel and the Language of Being

The pattern was established by Masaryk. After the basic human conflict has been identified and described and effective ways of responding are proposed, the question becomes what portions and degrees of the religious or spiritual world can be invoked. Masaryk found satisfaction in traditional Christianity. Patočka flirted with religious resolutions, but adopted the position that strife is the source of all things. Havel moved in a distinctive direction, keeping faith with the intellectual tradition in which he had been raised and trained, while continuing to combine insights from Husserl and Heidegger, both of whom employed the language of being and felt constrained to come to terms with the transcendent.

It is hardly surprising that Havel writes (in *Letters to Olga*, Letter 76):

Behind all phenomena and discrete entities in the world, we may observe, intimate, or experience existentially in various ways something like a general “order of Being.” The essence and meaning of this order are veiled in mystery; it is as much an enigma as the Sphinx, it always speaks to us differently and always, I suppose, in ways that we ourselves are open to, in ways, to put it simply, that we can hear.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, when addressing an audience at the Stanford University Law School, September 29, 1994, Havel referred to “unconscious experience” as well as to “archetypes and archetypal visions.” His point was that cultures formed thousands of years ago, quite independently of one

another, nevertheless employ the same basic archetypes. This suggests that “there exist deep and fundamental experiences shared by the entire human race.” Further, “traces of such experiences can be found in all cultures, regardless of how distant or how different they are from one another”.<sup>19</sup>

... the whole history of the cosmos, and especially of life, is mysteriously recorded in the inner workings of all human beings. This history is projected into man’s creations and is, again, something that joins us together far more than we think.<sup>20</sup>

The idea is extended even further: “after thousands of years, people of different epochs and cultures feel that they are somehow parts and part-takers of *the same integral Being*, carrying within themselves a piece of *the infinity of that Being* [italics mine].”<sup>21</sup> In the final take, Havel asserts that “all cultures assume the existence of something that might be called the *Memory of Being*, in which everything is constantly recorded.” The guarantees of human freedom and personal responsibility lie neither in programs of action nor systems of thought, but, rather, in “man’s relationship to that which transcends him, without which he would not be and of which he is an integral part.”

Havel’s Stanford University discourse carried the title “The Spiritual Roots of Democracy” and was designed to delineate his understanding of the fundamental crisis in the modern world. Humans, he says, have lost respect — self-respect, respect for others, and respect for what Havel calls “the order of nature, the order of humanity, and for secular authority as well.” When respect is lost, laws, moral norms, and established authority are also undermined. Gone is the sense of responsibility that inhabitants of one and the same planet have toward one another:

The relativization of all moral norms, the crisis of authority, reduction of life to the pursuit of immediate material gain without regard for its general consequences [originates] in that which modern man has lost: his *transcendental anchor*, [italics mine], and along with it the only genuine source of his responsibility and self-respect.<sup>22</sup>

When explaining how human dignity, freedom, and responsibility can be secured, Havel makes the same point again: “The source of these basic human potentials lies in man’s relationship to that which transcends him.” And what is this? Havel answers not by talking about God, or even about Being (though both may be implied), but by referring to the universal experience of the human race. He pleads that humankind today must become connected (or is it reconnected?) to “the mythologies

and religions of all cultures" so that all humans, together, may "engage in a common quest for the general good." And what is the general good? Havel's somewhat apocalyptic answer is that "global civilization" is already preparing a place for "planetary democracy." And what is this? It is "the very Earth we inhabit, linked with Heaven above us":

Only in this setting can the mutuality and the commonality of the human race be newly created, with reverence and gratitude for that which transcends each of us, and all of us together. The authority of a world democratic order simply cannot be built on anything else but the revitalized authority of the universe.<sup>23</sup>

In an essay entitled "Politics and the World Itself" (*Kettering Review*, Summer 1992), Havel criticized the Marxist presumption that reality is governed by a finite number of universal laws whose interrelationships can be grasped by the human mind and anticipated in systematic formulae. According to Havel, there are no such laws or theories, just as there is no comprehensive ideology that can either explain or direct human life. The demonstrable weakness of Marxist philosophy carries profound implications for the future of the world. Indeed, it calls for an abandonment of "the arrogant belief that the world is merely a puzzle to be solved, a machine with instructions for use waiting to be discovered, a body of information to be put into a computer with the hope that, sooner or later, it will spit out a universal solution."<sup>24</sup> Havel understands that there is no "universal key to salvation." The alternative is to recognize the pluralism of the world, which does not reduce to "common denominators" or to a "single common equation." Havel's alternative to proposed keys to salvation begins with "an elementary sense of transcendental responsibility," to which he appends "archetypal wisdom, good taste, courage, compassion, and, not least, faith in the importance of particular measures."

### **The Global Agenda**

Several extraordinary addresses he has given in the United States provide a clear sense of Havel's aspirations. One of the most compelling was his February 1990 address to the U.S. Congress on the subject of democratic ideals and the rebirth of the human spirit. The previous bipolarity of the Cold War has yielded to "an era of multipolarity in which all of us, large and small, former slaves and former masters, will be able to create what your great President Lincoln called 'the family of men.'" His experience with antagonists, Havel said, had taught him that "consciousness precedes being, and not [as Marxist philoso-

phy erroneously teaches] the other way around." This means that "the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility."

To be more specific:

Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed — be it ecological, social, demographic, or a general breakdown of civilization — will be unavoidable.<sup>25</sup>

So, what is to be done? Havel's answer is not a specific program, or a prescribed philosophical or ideological point of view. Rather, the only way to progress is through dedication to responsibility:

Responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my company, my success — responsibility to the *order of being* [italics mine] where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where and only where they will be properly judged.<sup>26</sup>

On June 8, 1995, in a commencement address at Harvard, Havel sounded similar themes in recognizing that the world has already entered a single technological civilization. He commended the scientific achievement that made such a civilization possible but — in the spirit of Masaryk, Husserl, and Patočka — sounded the alarm. In fact, to counteract this single technological civilization, a contrary movement is occurring which finds expression in dramatic revivals of ancient traditions, religions and cultures. Havel explained the phenomenon as the recovery of an "archetypal spirituality" that is "the foundation of most religions and cultures" — "respect for what transcends us, whether we mean the mystery of Being or a moral order that stands above us."

We must divest ourselves of our egoistical anthropocentrism, our habit of seeing ourselves as masters of the universe who can do whatever occurs to us. We must discover a new respect for what transcends us: for the universe, for the earth, for nature, for life, and for reality. Our respect for other people, for other nations, and for other cultures, can only grow from a humble respect for the cosmic order and from an awareness that we are a part of it, that we share in it and that nothing of what we do is lost, but rather becomes part of the eternal memory of Being, where it is judged.<sup>27</sup>

His intention was to invite the Harvard graduates to accept responsibility for creating "a new order for the world."

Havel's May 15, 1996, address in Aachen, called "The Hope for Europe" (*The New York Review*, June 20, 1996),<sup>28</sup> stands as a provocative

survey of Europe's influences, both destructive and constructive, on human civilization, and envisions the role that the countries of the region might exercise today. The contrast on which he draws derives from an application of key distinctions in Husserl's *Crisis*. (Indeed, the Aachen address can be read as an updated, contemporary response to prior Czech analyses of the principal challenges of European culture.) Havel identifies "the starting point" with "a discussion about Europe as a place of shared values" (recall what he said the previous year at Harvard on this topic). And this is to talk about "European spiritual and intellectual identity or — if you like — European soul." Havel hopes that post-Cold War Europe "might establish itself on democratic principles as a whole entity for the first time in its history." But this will happen only if the "values that underlie the European tradition" are supported by "a metaphysically anchored sense of responsibility." In short:

The only meaningful task for the Europe of the next century is to be the best it can possibly be — that is, to revivify its best spiritual and intellectual traditions and thus help to create a new global pattern of coexistence.<sup>29</sup>

The word "global" is central.

### **A Personal Word**

I have been reading and contemplating Václav Havel's essays for the past several years because I know of no one writing about politics today whose work is more inspirational. A brilliant intellectual, playwright and essayist, he believes with passion that essayists, poets, dramatists, artists, musicians, and philosophers carry responsibility for the well-being of the societies in which they live. In describing the role of politics in the world today, he exhibits a keen grasp of prevailing global dynamics. He knows from conviction and experience why a politics that is not attached to an anchored spirituality carries no lasting promise. When addressing religion, he affirms what believers wish to avow without falling into debilitating dogmatic or parochial traps. In assessing the present conditions of the world, he warns against utilitarian, pragmatic techno-culture. He respects the innate human aspiration to become rooted in that which most profoundly binds us to the core of being. In evaluating the Cold War, he is confident he knows why Marxist philosophy failed. It was not that it was beaten by a rival system but "by life, by the human spirit, by conscience, by the resistance of Being and man to manipulation." Havel expands on this thesis with a Heraclitean corollary: "it was defeated by a revolt of color, authenticity, history in

all its variety, and human individuality against imprisonment within a uniform ideology."<sup>30</sup>

I am not sure I know how to translate such ideas into contemporary American political thinking, or even if it is appropriate to try. After all, Washington is not Prague, and the history of the United States is not interchangeable with the history of communist and post-Cold War Europe. Moreover, I sometimes fear that politics in the United States no longer has a philosophical context, and this is why what content there is derives so directly from ideology or is so swiftly transposed into public relations. I am often suspicious of American calls for more vital moral and spiritual foundations, because we all know how quickly they can dissolve into rancorous requests for audible prayer in the schools. Do our citizens understand that ours is a culture in crisis, not because we are following the misguided counsel of an incorrect politics, but because whatever remains of the flow of life has been overwhelmed by unjustifiable confidence in code, formula, policy, and divisive special interests?

When I consider the fulness of spirit with which Havel believes reality deserves to be engaged, I fear that the weakest of alternatives is to try to live life as an analyst, critic, or spectator. When he strives vigorously to resist depersonalization, I question our depth of commitment to keeping intuitive faculties alive. With profound respect for the priority he accords moral guidance, I ask how we can expect to get by on substitutes for a primary trust that our own subjectivity is linked to the subjectivity of the world. When I hear Havel extoll the needs of the global community, I worry that post-Cold War America has become too isolationist, too shockingly and embarrassingly greedy.

I do not know whether a political philosophy like Havel's can function effectively in a world like ours. But I know that we are deriving less substance and direction from it than we ought. I hear him plead that politics and politicians must cultivate new attitudes if they are to meet the challenges and opportunities of our world. He is surely correct when he observes that it is not enough for us to try to reform political methods and procedures. We must revise not our procedures but our view of reality. We must subject ourselves to an authority now ignored — of real persons in their life-world.

I do not know how this transformation can be effected, but I believe I do know where and how it starts. Václav Havel writes frequently of soul and spirit, and points to where "living in truth" takes place. Whenever he invokes these terms he links them to "the humility that is appro-



priate in the face of the mysterious order of Being." In "The Politics of Hope" we read: "in my own life I am reaching for something that goes far beyond me and the horizon of the world that I know; in everything I do I touch eternity in a strange way." With this grounding, politics becomes "the universal consultation on the reform of the affairs which render man human."<sup>31</sup>

Translating this vision into American terms is difficult. Yet Havel is admired and loved within the United States. His 1990 address to Congress continues to evoke approval and excitement. He lectures often at American institutions. Increasing numbers are becoming acquainted with his writings. Does the fact that more Americans than one might expect attend to his views and support his vision stand as evidence that citizens of this country are searching for alternatives to our prevailing fare of divisive, uninspiring politics? Is it confirmation that people would welcome an intellectually substantive, culturally satisfying, and spiritually nurturing politics?

I do not know, but I am confident that this strong voice of the post-Cold War "new Europe," with its insistence that politics be accorded a transcendental source and foundation, is a resounding testimony to hope.

#### Notes

1. Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).
2. Stjepan G. Mestrovic (with Slaven Letica and Miroslav Goreta), *Habits of the Balkan Heart: Social Character and the Fall of Communism* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1993).
3. Friedrich Tonnies, *Community and Society* [1887], trans. and ed. Charles P. Loomis (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).
4. Edmund Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
5. Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. The last essay, "Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War," appeared in *Telos* 30 (1977): 116–26.
6. Patočka, quoted in Roman Jakobson, "Jan Patočka: From the Curriculum Vitae of a Czech Philosopher," *The New Republic*, May 7, 1977, 27.
7. *Ibid.*, 28.
8. Paul Ricoeur, "Patočka, Philosopher and Resister," *Le Monde*, March 19, 1977, quoted by Jakobson, *ibid.*
9. Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Random House, 1988).
10. Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, ed. John Keane (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1985).

11. For summaries of T. M. Masaryk's writings, see *Philosophy and Political Change in Eastern Europe*, ed. Barry Smith (LaSalle, Ill.: Monist Library of Philosophy, 1993), and Erazim Kohak, *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
12. Václav Havel, "Politics and Conscience," in *Open Letters: Selected Writings*, selected and ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Random House, 1985), 249–71.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Václav Havel, "What I Believe," in *Summer Meditations*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Random House, 1993), 66.
15. Other Czech thinkers and writers make the same distinction. For example, Milan Kundera attests frequently that, directly or indirectly, all of his writings respond to Husserl's *Crisis* questions. Kundera even describes the novel as being "grounded in the relativity and ambiguity of things human" and, thus, "incompatible with the totalitarian universe." In 1985, in his *Jerusalem Address* (subsequently titled "Man Thinks, God Laughs"), Kundera elaborated: "For if European culture seems under threat today, if the threat from within and without hangs over what is most precious about it — its respect for the individual, for his original thought, and for his right to an inviolable private life — then, I believe, that precious essence of the European spirit is being held safe as a treasure chest inside the history of the novel, the wisdom of the novel" ("Man Thinks, God Laughs," *The New York Review of Books*, June 13, 1985.)
16. Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*. trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 72.
17. Ivan Klima, *The Spirit of Prague*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Granta Books, 1995), 185.
18. Havel, *Letters to Olga*, Letter 76, 185–88.
19. Havel, "The Spiritual Roots of Democracy," retitled and published as "Democracy's Forgotten Dimension," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 2 (April 1995): 3–10.
20. *Ibid.*, 3.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 8.
23. *Ibid.*, 9.
24. Havel, "Politics and the World Itself," *Kettering Review* (Summer 1992).
25. Havel, "A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress," *Toward a Civil Society: Selected Speeches and Writings, 1990–1994*, 31–45.
26. *Ibid.*
27. "Commencement Address" (Harvard University, June 8, 1995).
28. Havel, "The Hope for Europe," in *The New York Review*, June 29, 1996, 38, 40–41.
29. *Ibid.*, 41.
30. Havel, "Politics and the World Itself," 10.
31. Havel, "The Politics of Hope," in *Disturbing the Peace*, op. cit., 189.