

“The power of the powerless”

Guest sermon at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Oneonta

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In putting together this morning’s comments, I’ve found that “The Power of the Powerless” could mean a lot of different things. The phrase itself comes from a context far from our own, but I believe it has something to say to our own present condition.

The phrase is the title of an extended essay written in 1978 by the Czech playwright and former dissident Václav Havel, part of a series of writings where he worked out his analysis of the system he was living under and his thoughts on how one ought to respond.

He called the last years of the Soviet system the “post-totalitarian” state. They wouldn’t usually put you in jail for disagreeing with the state’s ideology or prerogatives, and they would rarely kill for political reasons. Instead, it was understood that saying the wrong thing could get you moved to a less desirable job. If you were a college student you could be expelled. If you had kids, *they* could be kicked out of university or lose their chance to go in the future. They could even put pressure on your boss in that new, less desirable job, to fire you, and send signals to others not to hire you. Then they *could* put you in jail—not because of your politics, oh no, of course not that, we’re a civilized country, we don’t do such things—but because you didn’t have a job. And in the worker’s paradise where officially there was work for everyone, Czechoslovak law defined an unemployed person as a social parasite, which was punishable by incarceration.

This is what Havel means by “the powerless”: people living in this system, where they have to watch themselves every step of the way, for fear of life-altering consequences. It’s hard to trust friends, because there are secret informants everywhere. Certain bands or types of music or poets or novels are frowned upon, and liking them is suspect. This is not the out-and-out brutality

of Stalin or Hitler, but a daily existence that is hard to imagine for those of us fortunate enough not to have experienced it. **2:00**

In this setting Havel introduces his parable of a greengrocer who puts in his display window a sign, "Workers of the world, unite!" He doesn't actually care about the international proletarian movement one way or the other. The sign came from the warehouse with his produce, so he put it up. His customers don't care either. If you stopped a shopper a block down the street and asked what was in the window, she'd say, "Cucumbers, but they were out of garlic." If you asked her about a sign, she might remember there was one there, but couldn't tell you what it said.

And yet the sign is far from meaningless. The grocer isn't actually saying anything about the workers, but he is signaling to his superiors that he knows what's expected of him and he'll do it. You couldn't expect him to put out a sign with those exact words—human dignity wouldn't allow it. But you can implicitly communicate the same idea as long as the words are about something else.

As for the shoppers, even though they pay no attention to the signs, they come to expect them as part of their public space, and they would notice the absence.

So what if one day the grocer decided not to put out the sign of the week? As Havel continues, "He stops voting in elections he knows are a farce. He begins to say what he really thinks at political meetings. And he even finds the strength in himself to express solidarity with those whom his conscience commands him to support." Havel calls this new experience "living in truth," and as he says, the bill is not long in coming. All the consequences I mentioned before may come his way. And the people carrying out the sanctions don't do it from any conviction that punishing him is right, but from the same motive of compliance that used to compel the grocer to put the sign in the window.

But still, “living in truth” is powerful, because it reveals the underlying nature of the post-totalitarian system. In Havel’s words, “He has said that the emperor is naked. And because the emperor is in fact naked, something extremely dangerous has happened. ... Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal. ... Therefore everyone who steps out of line *denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety.*” [55-56] **4:10**

Not only is living in truth a powerful act—for Havel it’s the most effective action under a post-totalitarian state. To overthrow the system directly, you’d have to do things that would bring you down to its level. Fortunately, the most effective way to undermine it is to be true to yourself and your conscience.

Havel himself spent five years in jail and several more under *de facto* house arrest. But twelve years after writing “The Power of the Powerless” he was installed in Prague Castle as president of a newly free Czechoslovakia.

And there’s precedent for this sort of thing in Czech history. A century earlier, when the Czech lands were a restive part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the philosopher Tomáš Masaryk crafted a program aimed at freeing his nation. He called his party the Realists, while insisting that meaningful independence could only arise from moral actions, not just expediency. 25 years later an independent Czechoslovak Republic was cobbled together from pieces of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, with Masaryk as its first president. When he stepped down after 17 years in office, Czechs still called the “President-Liberator.” Nice work.

Obviously the experience of a post-totalitarian state is remote from most Americans’ experience. We live in a democracy and can say and write what we please, criticize the government bitterly if that’s what we think. We don’t fit well with what Havel means by the powerless. But throughout his writings Havel drops hints that the East European experience is not something totally alien to the West, but the logical working-out of tendencies present in all modern societies. Just looking

at the example I just gave, here in this democracy a majority no longer support our presence in Iraq, but that presence continues. A majority who knew about is opposed FISA revisions, putting new surveillance powers into law, yet those revisions were passed and signed. And that same law may yet be used against our democracy. (If you're looking for troubling signs, there's the "No Fly" list, a group of people for whom apparently we don't have enough information to arrest them and put them on trial, but we know for sure we never want them on an airplane again.)

But my aim this morning is at what strikes me as a deeper question of power and powerlessness.

From a material perspective, we in the rich countries are part of the most fortunate generation in the history of the world. Our houses have heat at the touch of a button, hot water at the turn of a faucet. We think nothing of traveling 10, 20, 30 miles a day just to get to work. Most people can travel hundreds or even thousands of miles for vacations. We eat strawberries in January, seafood in Chicago, watch baseball games at night. **6:50** We are well dressed, extravagantly housed, and endlessly entertained, all with far less physical labor than our ancestors spent for an existence that would strike us as meager.

In economics textbooks this phenomenon is blandly described as the result of technological innovation and the wonders of capitalism. They have their place to be sure, but on a moment's reflection our material abundance flows predominantly from one material source, and that is cheap energy from fossil fuels. (The studied neglect of that issue in textbooks is one reason I don't use them.)

Think about all that we can do that our ancestors could not have imagined—fossil fuels have made us astonishingly powerful.

And yet ... the bill takes longer to come than in the case of Havel's greengrocer living in truth, but it's there. For in the pursuit of fossil fuels, place after place is sacrificed.

- Appalachia for coal—the mines provided jobs that were good compared to the alternatives, but they left in their wake poverty and disease.
- Some of California’s orange groves turned to oil-soaked dirt, on which we later built schools and wondered why children got sick.
- The gaping open-pit mines of Wyoming’s Powder River Basin, sending forth mile-long trains of coal to power plants in the eastern U.S.
- South-central Appalachia again, this time with mining through mountain-top removal, where the whole top of a mountain is dynamited into the valley below, in order to expose the valuable coal inconveniently placed beneath the top instead of on it.
- The tar-sands of Alberta, where we consume vast quantities of water and natural gas to get more fuel for our cars, leaving behind oil-laden ponds that lure unsuspecting birds used to feeding on the abundant landscape.

The image of a Faustian bargain is overused, but I think it’s entirely appropriate here. We are given incredible power, with the cost being paid somewhere else, and later.

Now the bill is coming due for the world in the form of global warming, and it may be coming due much more directly and intensely for us here in central New York with horizontal drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus shale. The Department of Environmental Conservation assures us that this can be done without significant damage to our local environment. People who have lived in gas-drilling areas have far less reassuring stories to tell.

There are efforts to prevent the drilling or limit the harm, but we might not be successful. We may be powerless to protect the place we love, as others elsewhere have been before. And the bitter irony is that what makes us powerless is the very power that others—and we ourselves—derive from what lurks far below our feet.

In the face of this situation, what would be analogous to Havel’s “living in truth”? **9:40**

If it exists, I suspect it is the simple—but surprisingly hard—act of radically reducing our own reliance on fossil fuels. When you start to catalog all the ways—direct and indirect—that this stuff makes our lives more comfortable it's a daunting task. Personally, I do what I feel I can, and perhaps I do better than average for somebody of my income, but in the end it doesn't amount to much.

In fact, I think this difficulty of our modern "living in truth" is one of the parallels to Havel's concept. Judging by how few people really do it without being forced into it by poverty, maybe it's even harder than living true to yourself in a post-totalitarian state.

Another parallel is that East European dissidents were admired by their compatriots to an extent, but also dismissed as impractical and simultaneously resented for showing up everyone else who was just doing what the regime asked of them. Think about the connotation of being "off the grid" and you may see the similarity.

The last parallel I want to highlight is the precarious odds of success. Czech history lends itself to fable-making: the success of Masaryk and Havel shows that if you do what's right and get your own house in order, you will be crowned with success. This is a nice story, but arguably both men were lucky. It's not plausible that Masaryk's brand of realism could have wrested the Czech and Slovak lands free from the Habsburg Monarchy had that empire not exhausted itself in World War I. Similarly, Havel would have spent a lot longer in jail had the Soviet economy not been on its last legs in the 1980s.

What about our own odds? Set aside the difficulty of doing it—would it keep our region whole? One individual doing it makes no material difference. Even a whole county doing it—imagine that!—wouldn't significantly cut into the global desire for the gas under our feet, though it would give us a firmer moral platform for demanding more say over what is done around us. Really

protecting our surroundings, whether from damaging drilling or from climate change, takes moral change not just on the level of the county, but the country. That looks like a tall order.

But Masaryk and Havel *did* succeed. It's true that they ended up being lucky, but they were also prepared, and the governments that arose from their lucky breaks were much better because they and others of like mind had done what was right. I don't think I have a roadmap of how to get where we need to go. But I feel like I'm learning more and more of the pieces that may help. And I think if we want to live well with less fossil fuel, or when the fossil fuel is too expensive to use in a profligate way, we're going to need vital communities that meet our material needs in simple ways, and that fulfill us socially so that we can keep our material desires in check. (That's "c-h-e-c-k". There's no point in stating your desires in a hard-to-pronounce foreign language.) If a saving opportunity does come along, the country will be able to catch it because of the kind of community built in this church and others.

I'd like to close on a note of optimism, of a sort. You've all heard the phrase "the greatest generation," Tom Brokaw's name for the Americans who got us through the Great Depression and then won World War II. And we are subjected to repeated Jeremiads that the boomers, or Generation X, or Generation Y, or whoever, is not up to the challenges that face us.

We are facing serious challenges, but it's wrong to write off our ability to meet them. After all, who are these worthless slackers of generations X, Y, and Z other than the grandchildren and great grandchildren of the Greatest Generation? If they were so great, how'd they have such miserable offspring? What's more, they didn't start off great. When they were growing up, their parents and their pundits weren't saying, "Ooh, look, it's the greatest generation! ... Aren't they cute." Those people who brought our country through hardship, despite their flaws, were raised up to greatness by the challenges they faced. May we be so lucky.

This I believe.

but he suggests that in some ways the experience of life in the Soviet bloc was not the polar opposite of life in the democratic West, but merely the extreme of what we could become in the modern world.

Havel's term "post-totalitarian" refers to a society that is still quite clearly not free, but no longer relies so much on the brutal totalitarian tactics of Stalin or Hitler. In those earlier regimes, political dissent could very easily land you in jail, or get you killed without too much difficulty. The post-totalitarian state was more subtle. It had jail terms and even political executions as sort of back-up measures, but it preferred to work through subtler mechanisms. If you weren't cooperative you wouldn't immediately be landed in jail; you might, instead, lose a job in your chosen field and have to work in something less pleasant and less well paid. You would certainly lose the privilege of traveling outside the country. If you were in college you could be kicked out. If you had children, you might jeopardize *their* chances of going to college. You could be moved down on the waiting list for housing, which was hard to come by.

Under these various pressures, most people went along and did what the state wanted. But not everyone.

Havel's central parable in his essay is a greengrocer who puts in his display window a sign that says, "Workers of the world unite!" On one level the sign has no meaning. The grocer actually has no opinion one way or the other on the international worker's movement. The sign came with a shipment of produce, so he put it out. The customers don't even notice the sign. If you caught up with a shopper a block down the street and asked her what was in the window, she'd say, "Cucumbers." If you asked her about a sign, she probably wouldn't have noticed it was there, and even if she noticed, she's unlikely to be able to tell you what it said.

But the sign isn't actually meaningless. While the text is irrelevant, the act of putting the sign out is highly significant. It tells everyone, "I'm a person who knows what's expected of me in this society, and I can be counted on to do what's expected of me." Human dignity would make us feel ridiculous were we to put up a sign with those very words, but we can easily do the same thing when the literal text is about something else.

And while the shopper doesn't notice the sign itself, she would notice its absence (because she would have subconsciously noticed it in all the other stores).

So what if the grocer in fact didn't put out the sign?

The post-totalitarian state relied on the illusion that it had the consent of the people.

For Havel, this is the power of the powerless—that you always have the option (even if at some expense) of living in truth, an act that threatens the fundamental nature of the regime.

What's the relevance of all this for us? Calling ourselves "powerless" is bad form, and flies in the face of a couple of basic realities.

Shortly before Havel was taken to jail, a friend interviewed him and asked about an earlier piece of political writing, an open letter to Gustav Husák, the country's leader. What made you write that?

“I was tired of being forced to react to situations created by *them*. I wanted instead to put *them* in front of a situation to which *they* would be forced to react, for a change.”

“We must honor with the humility of the wise the bounds of the natural world and the mystery which lies beyond them, admitting that there is something in the order of being which evidently exceeds all our competence.”

My topic is only in its initial form. So far as I can tell at this point, it'll include reflection on my experience living in Czechoslovakia; I went over with an image of Czechs as this hero nation, who fought a war for religious liberty 100 years before Luther, and were the sole democracy in central Europe between the world wars. Living there I learned that modern Czechs are ... people like any others, no more (or less) exalted than other groups. Then more study of their history further complicated the story of their fight for religious liberty.

This ties in with notions of our grandparents or earlier generations exhibiting a virtuous lack of materialism, as they lived full and fulfilling lives without the material appurtenances we take for granted and even come to consider necessary.

But we are their own descendants. This is essentially a narrative of the Fall, structurally related to Adam, Eve, and the apple (talk about getting a bad rap). If our ancestors were such paragons, how did they raise such wastrels as us? If they knew how to appreciate and foster the non-material things in life, how did they fail to pass on those deep virtues to us?

No, we are clearly formed to a great extent by circumstance, and our circumstance has been that we have had the option of great material prosperity, which we have seized hungrily.

This is essentially a Marxist view, that cultures don't determine economies, but economies shape cultures. Our ancestors lived in an economy that was physically constrained by the sun. It falls abundantly overall, but in any one place its flow is meager.

Something counterpointing, where there can be degradation. Havel worried about the degradation of the Czech national character from living for so long with the necessary lies of communism, but in fact the degradation arguably goes much deeper, back to the Habsburg period, where "Czechness" could be defined as being to some extent against Austria, avoiding the question of what Czechness itself really was.

Havel's explanation that he wanted to present Husák with a situation *he* would have to react to, instead of himself always being the one needing to react.

What pieces of the East European experience of totalitarianism are relevant to us? We're clearly not faced with the same sort of lack of political freedom as was the daily norm in that part of the world. There certainly are troubling signs in such things as the no-fly lists, which are hard to get off of and which you can get on for reasons that aren't entirely clear—and therefore may include perfectly legitimate action that someone in the government finds inconvenient or distasteful.

Even more worrisome is the administration's claim that it can declare anyone—even a US citizen—an enemy combatant and effectively strip them of all rights. It appears that this power has not yet been used to simply lock people up as was the norm in the former communist countries, but it certainly has the potential for that. I don't mean to minimize the problem with this, but I think it's also a mistake to claim that it's of the same order as the daily reality that East Europeans lived with for 40 years.