

The First Laugh

Václav Havel, translated by Paul Wilson

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The following speech was given by President Havel upon receiving the Open Society Prize awarded by the Central European University in Budapest earlier this year.

Several weeks ago, after the Czech national team won the World Hockey Championship, there were enormous celebrations in the streets of our country. I followed the news of these celebrations and I have to admit that I had rather mixed feelings about them, as I often do on such occasions.

On the one hand I was delighted. Czech society generally tends toward apathy and skepticism, but it is still capable of identifying enthusiastically with its national teams and thus with the country as such. I was glad to see that a kind of elementary patriotism still existed among people; that they were still able to get excited enough about something to take to the streets to celebrate the good news, even though there was nothing in it of direct, personal benefit to themselves.

On the other hand, I felt compelled to ask myself some rather unpleasant questions. For instance, if people were shouting “We won!” in the streets, were they not appropriating other people’s achievements and unjustifiably seeking a confirmation of their own excellence in that victory? Who, in fact, won that championship? All of “us”? And specifically, was it those who were celebrating in the streets? Or was it the players who represented the Czech Republic? Was this celebration a genuine expression of pure joy at the success of some of our fellow citizens, an achievement that brought glory to our country? Or was it, for many people at least, merely an occasion to nurture illusions about themselves? Are not such mass celebrations merely the expression of a distaste for assuming personal responsibility for the world and thus of the need to merge instead with the herd, to share in its collective sense of pride and irresponsibility? Are these celebrations not merely the eruption of a darkly archetypal love of our own tribe, which seems to us the best of all possible tribes only because we happen to belong to it? And the fellows who, during those same celebrations, confirmed the exceptional qualities of our nation by assaulting some people whose skin was a different color—are they not merely a more evident offshoot of something less evident, but all the more dangerous for that, something that lies dormant within the euphoria?

Perhaps the Popperian struggle between the open society and its enemies was also taking place within the crowds that celebrated this hockey victory, and perhaps, in a certain sense, within the spirit of every individual who took part.

I have to admit that Hegel, whom Popper (quoting Schopenhauer) referred to as an illiterate charlatan, was probably right about one thing: reality is ambiguous. In fact, it is very difficult to determine the borderline between the uplifting and natural solidarity that exists within a given community (a national society, for example) and the pack mentality in which thousands and millions of cowardly and dependent “I’s” take refuge behind a kind of “we” that automatically relieves them of any personal responsibility. Where does patriotism end and nationalism and chauvinism begin? Where does civic solidarity end and tribal passion begin? Where does the spontaneous and thoroughly respectable delight in the remarkable athletic achievement of one’s fellow citizens end, and the expropriation of someone else’s achievement by a mob with no ideas and no personal sense of responsibility begin?

And beyond that, it is very difficult to determine the borderline between other phenomena which, in one way or another, relate to the ideal of the open society. How, for example, do you recognize the moment when a set of living ideas becomes a dead ideology? How can you tell when principles, opinions, and hopes start to become petrified into a rigid mass of theses, dogmas, and intellectual stereotypes? How do you know when a serious interest in the truth about the world is replaced by a mere interest in prestige, and by an inordinate pride that does not allow one to alter one’s opinion in the slightest, once it is uttered? How do you recognize the moment when conceptual thought, without which there can be no good politics, starts to become social engineering, the vain attempt by reason to plan the life of a society?

An open society—a society of free and freely associating human beings who are subject not to the dictates of any ideology, or of any particular interpretation of history and its apparent laws, but rather to nothing more and nothing less than the imperative of human judgment and of basic moral principles—assumes open people with open thoughts. It assumes this and, in so doing, helps to form and create such a society.

But once again: How do you know when you are freely classifying and absorbing everything that creates your world, and on the contrary, when you have already begun to give up on your freedom, to succumb comfortably to your own dark passions, prejudices, your simplifying but impressive ideological paradigms, and to surrender unthinkingly to the seductive attractions of demagogues and populists? How do we recognize when a politician ceases to reflect our natural sensitivities and feelings and begins to use and abuse them to his or her own advantage?

Somewhere at the beginning of the present round of Balkan horrors, as we know now, lay the aggressive enthusiasm of Serbian and Croatian football fans. How can we determine when something as pleasing and natural as supporting a local sports club undergoes a subtle transformation to become the dark prelude to ethnic hatred, ethnic cleansing, ethnic wars, and ethnic bestiality?

Europe failed to recognize such a moment when it occurred and so—ten years too late—it was compelled to enforce in a most unpopular way something that in all probability it might have been able to enforce much more easily had it recognized the warning signs in time and drawn the appropriate conclusions.

That didn't happen, and to a certain extent Europe's failure is understandable. Reality, after all, is ambiguous and it is immensely difficult to have to continually distinguish among its different faces and to recognize immediately the point at which the good-natured jubilation of sports fans suddenly becomes the raging of deprived and inferior souls.

Yet now we are entering an era when the ability to make distinctions of precisely this kind will become more and more important because, given the global nature of today's civilization, any tiny outbreak of hatred may easily turn into a worldwide disaster. Where do we look for guidance? How do we make such distinctions?

There are no exact guidelines. There are probably no guidelines at all. The only thing I can recommend at this stage is a sense of humor, an ability to see things in their ridiculous and absurd dimensions, to laugh at others and at ourselves, a sense of irony regarding everything that calls out for parody in this world. In other words, I can only recommend perspective and distance. Awareness of all the most dangerous kinds of vanity, both in others and in ourselves. A good mind. A modest certainty about the meaning of things. Gratitude for the gift of life and the courage to take responsibility for it. Vigilance of spirit.

Those who have retained the capacity to recognize their own ridiculousness or even meaninglessness cannot be proud, and cannot be enemies of the open society. Such an enemy is the person with a stubbornly serious expression and fire in his eyes.

—Translated from the Czech by Paul Wilson

Václav Havel

Václav Havel (1936–2011) was the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech Republic. Havel was one of the six signers of the statement "Tibet: The Peace of the Graveyard."

Paul Wilson

Paul Wilson's translation of Bohumil Hrabal's early stories, *Mr. Kafka and Other Tales from the Time of the Cult*, is published this month. (November 2015)