Václav Havel’s politics of encounter

by Emina Melonic

It has become fashionable to give name to the cultural age in which we currently find ourselves. We do this either to simplify the complexity of current trends or to clarify their importance. But whatever the present moment might be called, one thing is certain: it is overwhelmingly driven by a superficiality begotten by identity politics. Everything—from discourse to commerce—is shaped by mindless sloganeering, groupthink, and indiscriminate labeling. Political discourse skews dangerously towards the theatrical, at the constant expense of the substantive. The media, in each of its many platforms, revels in trivial froth.

Václav Havel (1936–2011), a Czech dissident who helped found “Charter 77,” an anti-Communist human rights organization, and the president of the Czech Republic from 1993–2003, saw the inherent danger in a political culture obsessed with these sorts of institutionalized ideologies. Against the authoritarian culture imposed by the Communist Czech government, Havel proposed a political philosophy that disregarded the ideological in favor of the personal. His outlook revolved around the idea of the “human encounter,” a moment of interpersonal contact and reciprocal recognition of humanity that helps man step outside the reach of institutionalized repression.

Havel, who was also a playwright and a philosopher as well as a statesman, articulated many such ideas in his essay The Power of the Powerless (1978). Though he was not a systematic thinker and likely would have eschewed the title of philosopher, Havel’s writings evince a mind that sought truth with intellectual honesty and integrity.

This same authenticity can be found in letters to his wife, Olga, that he wrote while imprisoned as “an enemy of the state” by the Communist regime. Over the course of their correspondence, the two discuss mundane trivialities (daily tasks, complaints about the guards), but also dive deep into the extraordinary, deep professions of love for Olga, formulations of complex philosophical ideas.
Given his imprisoned status, it is only natural that Havel was concerned with the meaning of man’s freedom (or lack thereof) and the concept of individual identity. He was interested in how humans relate to one another, what that relation is based upon, and how it affects us.

Although the idea of “the human encounter” had been bubbling inside of Havel’s mind for some time, he had been unable to articulate its importance coherently. Only after reading an essay by the Jewish-Lithuanian-French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95) titled “Without Identity” could Havel solidify his thinking. In a letter to Olga, Havel wrote:

I had a fruitful week: Levinas’s text, which Ivan copied out for me, set my thoughts aspinning, but after two or three days they gradually began to fall into place until finally a reasonably precise scheme for another cycle of meditative letters came out of it, along with great eagerness to get started.

Levinas made his mark as a phenomenologist by rejecting Heidegger’s metaphysics and assertion of the primacy of Being. He changed the notion of metaphysics by calling ethics the first philosophy. For Levinas, philosophy begins with a face-to-face encounter. By association, so does politics.

Havel understood this on an intellectual and instinctive level. Levinas’s philosophical articulation provided a fertile ground for Havel’s ruminations on the need to fight Communist ideology. Havel was an astute observer of the conditions that face humanity. In a letter to Olga dated August 21, 1982, he wrote:

We live in an age in which there is a general turning away from Being: our civilization, founded on a grand upsurge of science and technology, those great intellectual guides on how to conquer the world at the cost of losing touch with Being, transforms man its proud creator into a slave of his consumer needs, breaks him up into isolated functions, dissolves him in his existence-in-the-world, and thus deprives him not only of his human integrity and his autonomy but ultimately any influence over his own “automatic responses.”

Havel’s words still ring true today. The forms of dehumanization have merely become different.

Ideology is a great pretender, and its biggest lie is that it masquerades as philosophy. It denies man access to his personal, interior life and aims to destroy authenticity. It manifests in different forms from age to age. If statism, one manifestation of ideology, dominates human existence, then why should we be surprised that the metaphysical structure of an individual person will begin to disappear and that such an individual will be forced into a role of non-citizen that has no authenticity or singular voice?

We throw around the term “ideology” willy-nilly, but we don’t realize the power it has. It is precisely ideology that imprisoned Havel, and it is ideology that continuously refuses to see each
human being in his uniqueness and singularity. Instead, it forces people into groups based on superficial designations in order to divide and annihilate the human spirit.

In order to break free from the cycle of ideology, we must begin by acknowledging the cruel crimes perpetrated against the dignity of human life throughout history. But this acknowledgment doesn’t have to make us naive or cynical. By recognizing the reality of evil, we ought to be even more ready and willing to do good.

For both Havel and Levinas, the process begins with a face-to-face encounter, one imbued with vulnerability. For Levinas, to be vulnerable is to take off the masks of false existence and pretense. Vulnerability is not only metaphysical but also ethical in its opposition to the “will to power” that Nietzsche proposed was man’s natural state. Levinas’s ultimate hope was to supersede this state of perpetual conflict and instead embrace an ideal of authenticity.

Havel lived this vulnerability and was especially aware of it in prison. On one occasion, while watching a weather report, Havel was overcome by compassion for the “employee of the Meteorological Institute” who was experiencing several technical difficulties during the broadcast. He recounted the event to Olga, and the letter illuminates that, for Havel, human relationships have a visceral quality. The meteorologist was embarrassed by the difficulties she was experiencing. Havel writes:

Exposed to the view of the millions, yet desperately alone, thrown into the unfamiliar, unexpected and unresolvable situation . . . she stood there in all the primordial nakedness . . . with the desperate question of what to do with herself, how to rescue her dignity, how to acquit herself, how to be. Exaggerated as it may seem, I suddenly saw in that event an image of the primal situation of humanity: a situation of separation, of being cast into an alien world and standing there before the question of self.

Against her own alienation, Havel sees this woman as a unique human being. For Havel, the woman is no construct, idea, notion, or abstraction. His experience is visceral and immediate, and it is her “nakedness” that leads stuns Havel.

Upon Havel’s death, the Czech novelist Milan Kundera said “Václav Havel’s most important work is his own life.” He lived the philosophy he wrote and spoke. Despite the Communist regime’s efforts to destroy him, Havel remained a committed humanist.

Havel’s legacy reminds us of not only the power of ideology and totalitarianism but also the strength of the human spirit. Perhaps most importantly, it speaks to the power of the authentic, interpersonal encounter.

Emina Melonic’s work has been published in National Review, The Imaginative Conservative, New English Review, Law and Liberty, American Greatness, and Splice Today, among others.