

LIVING THE TRUTH

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SPIRITUAL BELLIGERENCY TO COMBAT INDIFFERENCE

Vaclav Havel made the exposure of tyranny the great task of his life. In his great 1978 essay, 'The Power of the Powerless', written just as his career as a dissident had begun in earnest with the signing of the Charter 77 manifesto, he warned against "the attractions of mass indifference" and the "general unwillingness of consumption-oriented people to sacrifice some material certainties for the sake of their own spiritual and moral integrity."

Havel feared that one's indifference to the question of the freedom of others would ultimately result in a well-fed indifference to the question of one's own freedom.

"A big danger of our world today is obsession", he told the audience at a 2007 conference of international dissidents in Prague. "An even bigger danger is indifference."

He believed these attitudes naturally lead to extremism and tyranny if free people did not resist the temptation to acquiesce to them in order to avoid conflict.

A proper attitude may not require physical belligerency, as the use of force may be counterproductive or unethical, but it does require a constant posture of spiritual belligerency - a refusal to accept illiberal attitudes and actions that directly or indirectly harm others as a normal fact of life, no matter who the perpetrator.

Havel believed an integral part of such a posture or

attitude is truth telling, and stressed the need to speak uncomfortable truths, which he described as "Living the truth."

Unless you have the courage to speak the truth as you see it you cannot frame the questions needed to hold the powerful to account for their actions and expressed beliefs.

This is a moral catastrophe that naturally leads to serfdom and tyranny.

Speaking the truth can be uncomfortable, painful, even dangerous, and can require great courage, but the alternative is too terrible to contemplate.

This is why it is crucial that political free speech is protected, and why the young must be encouraged to develop their analytical skills so they can see through the sophistry of governments, religious organizations, corporations and other interest groups who wish to further their desires at the expense of the public interest.

Even more important is instilling the values needed to exercise their political freedom and put such skills to good use. Thus youths must be taught that it is in their interest and society's interest to protect the public interest by exercising their democratic right to challenge authority, by speaking truth to power



and demanding answers to their questions.

A free press is necessary to disseminate truth, the questions they frame and subsequent dialogue.

A free society must allow free political speech and a free press or it will quickly cease to be free.

This is not to say one should not be tactful in expressing the truth as you see it and your questions, as being unkind would not elicit the civil dialogue needed to produce positive outcomes.

It is all too easy to vilify people if you feel you are right and they wrong, but if their actions or beliefs are truly terrible then there is nothing more effective than simply revealing the truth.

"I know you won't believe me, but the highest form of human excellence is to question oneself and others."

- Socrates

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

One can only hold power to account by being willing to speak truth to power.

RECOMMENDATION

We must maintain an attitude of spiritual belligerency in order to combat assaults on our freedom.

"Let us now imagine that one day something in our greengrocer snaps... He begins to say what he really thinks... In this revolt the greengrocer steps out of living within the lie... He discovers once more his suppressed identity and dignity. He gives his freedom a concrete significance. His revolt is an attempt to live within the truth."

- Vaclav Havel
(*The Power of the Powerless*)

FURTHER READING

The Art of the Impossible, Vaclav Havel, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

The Power of the Powerless, Vaclav Havel, 1978.

