

WHAT I AM READING

Vaclav Havel, *A Word About Words*, New York, The Cooper Union, 1992.

I generally read three to six books and some 70 to 100 articles of one sort or another each week. Every so often people ask what I am currently reading, so I thought that every so often I would share a few of the books, articles, or short stories that have caught my attention. I'll start with *A Word About Words* by Vaclav Havel.

Vaclav Havel is one of my heroes. I doubt he would enjoy the term but he would certainly understand why I use it. During his life, he became a hero to millions around the world – from his protest writings (often smuggled out of the country), his recurring imprisonment because of those writings, and the miracle day he was released from prison only to (that same day) be voted president of, what was then, Czechoslovakia. Over the next decade the world showered him with awards and honorary degrees; he gave speeches in just about every country imaginable as each of those awards and degrees were conferred. This book contains one of them.

I have a number of his books but recently, while going down rabbit holes on the internet, I came across one I'd never heard of: *A Word About Words*. It's a very large, oversize book (12x17) and quite heavy despite its moderate word count, what might be better called a hardbound folio than a book. Its title is taken from the acceptance speech he wrote for the International Peace Prize of the German Booksellers Association. The speech was delivered by Maximilian Schell on October 15, 1989 as Havel was still in prison. (He was released December 29 and elected president by a unanimous vote of the Federal Assembly that same day. It took him years, he said, before he stopped fearing every knock on the door.)

The speech, first published in the *New York Review of Books* on January 18, 1990, was later included in the book *Open Letters* (NY:Knopf, 1991 – which I also have). The edition I speak of here was published by The Cooper Union (for the advance of science and art) in 1992 in an edition of 500 copies utilizing astonishingly beautiful printing techniques, the design by Jiri Kolar, on very fine paper; it includes both the original Czech with the English translation on facing pages. The folio was issued in a very fragile glassine (cello paper) wrapper, not present on the copy I have. But mine did include several inserts rarely found in the book as well as a signed photograph of Havel.

I write at some length about this particular edition because I believe in the holiness of the word, in fine printing and bindings, in the craft and art of what it means to be a writer and publisher. There is magic in these things, something that connects each of us through time to the origins of storytelling, to the best of what we, as humans, can be. There is, in the greatest of the art, a voice that reaches out to touch us, often from the past, from the dead, that brings alive inside us some living essence that knows little limitation of time and space, that urges the best in us to the fore, that helps us be better than we were (and sometimes are), that passes into us a soul force, a food essential to our humanity, that we, as writers, as human beings, then carry inside us and which, in our own time, every so often, we pass on to others. I believe in the sacredness and importance of the craft and that is why, I suppose, that I have wanted to be a writer for most of my life, to somehow be able to participate in what has touched me so deeply, that calls on some part of my soul to awaken from its sleep and make art out of the living meanings that lie concealed from easy glance inside the words that every one of us uses every day.

A Word About Words, Vaclav Havel

Havel understood the power of words, for he lived all his life in a society governed by those who feared them. And of course, as is always true, many of the citizens of his country, some of them friends, colleagues, and neighbors, remained silent, often colluding with those who feared uncontrolled speech. Those in power, those who desired to control and shape the social structure of the country, to shape the thoughts that were allowed the people who lived there, understood the power of words to disrupt acceptable thought; it's something all tyrants in all times and places know.

During his time in prison, Havel's correspondence was censored. He considered it great training for being a writer. As he once said, "Because I could not say the things I wished to say I learned how to say everything in nothing." It was because of this, I think, that he developed so much sophistication in his use and understanding of language and just how flexible even the best and most honorable of our words can be. He learned, too, over the decades of his life the evil that attends prohibiting speech, of trying to control writers and artists, whether they be comedians or painters or musicians.

As he comments at the beginning of this book, the award is being given by booksellers, "by people whose business is the dissemination of words. It is, therefore, appropriate that I should reflect here today on the mysterious link between words and peace, and in general the mysterious power of words in human history." That's an interesting thought, isn't it? That there is a mysterious link between words and peace, that inside words is a mysterious power, and even more: that someone should say such a thought out loud, pointing our attention in its direction.

As I read, I found myself, given what I know of Havel's history, his writing and the years

spent in prison, already jumping ahead, generalizing, fantasizing, projecting what he might mean by this opening statement. I conceptualized during that imagining a simple juxtaposition. He and many of his compatriots were in prison simply because of the words they uttered. Most lost all social position, standing, work, sometimes their homes simply from uttering words that those who controlled the society found objectionable and dangerous. Havel's goodness was oppressed by the far less noble forces outside him, a powerful majority who controlled what was and was not acceptable speech. So . . . bad government . . . good and noble writer.

But one of the things I love about Havel is that he was never given to such simple extremes of good and evil, black and white. (In consequence, he has taught me much about being a human being.) His intent is much more complex, far more sophisticated. He knows something about words that few of us in America know and which we learn, if at all, much later in life.

He begins, drawing the reader/listener deeper into preconceptions and simple juxtapositions by speaking of instances in his own country of writers being imprisoned for their speech, for their publishing. And he touches, as he must do, given his audience that day, on the not-all-that-distant history of speech and its oppression in Germany. But then he says this . . .

But it is a slightly different matter that concerns me here. . . . We live in a world in which it is possible for a citizen of Great Britain to find himself the target of a lethal arrow aimed at him – publicly and unashamedly – by a powerful individual in another country merely because he had written a particular book. That powerful man apparently did it in the name of millions of his fellow believers.

Is this merely fanaticism, he then asks, this attack on Rushdie? Is it a side effect of colonialism, of an economic impoverishment visited on the less powerful, leaving them with debts they can never repay? Yes, he says, it is all of that. But it is also “a symbol of the mysteriously ambiguous power of words. In truth, the power of words is neither unambiguous nor clear-cut. . . . The point I am trying to make is that words are a mysterious, ambiguous, ambivalent, and perfidious phenomenon. They can be rays of light in a realm of darkness . . . They can equally be lethal arrows. Worst of all they can be one or the other. They can even be both at once!” It is here, with this last line that Havel gets to the crucial point.

Words, even with the best intentions of those who craft them, can be anything at all. Once they are loosed in the world it is impossible to know what will be done with them. And the point he makes is that the very same words can be used for good *and* evil. He speaks then of Lenin’s words in Russia, of Marx and his good intentions, and of Freud. And then, most tellingly of Jesus.

What was the true nature of Christ’s words? Were they the beginning of an era of salvation and among the most powerful cultural impulses in the history of the world – or were they the spiritual source of the crusades, inquisitions, the cultural extermination of the American Indians . . . I cannot ignore the mountain of books which demonstrate that, even in its purest and earliest form, there was something unconsciously encoded in Christianity which, when combined with a thousand other circumstances . . . could in some way pave the way spiritually for the sort of horrors I mentioned.

Then he begins to talk about what actually happens to good intentions and the words they are encapsulated within once they are loosed in the world. As he says . . .

No word – at least not in the rather metaphorical sense I am employing the word “word” here – comprises only the meaning assigned to it by an etymological dictionary: Every word also reflects the person who utters it, the situation in which it is uttered, and the reason for its utterance. The same word can, at one moment, radiate great hope; at another, emit lethal rays. The same word can be true at one moment and false the next, at one moment illuminating, at another, deceptive. On one occasion it can open up glorious horizons, on another, it can lay the tracks to an entire archipelago of concentration camps. The same word can at one time be the cornerstone of peace, while at another, machine-gun fire resounds in its every syllable.

He speaks then of the French Revolution and its Declaration of the Rights of Man, approved by the National Assembly of France, August 26, 1789. “That declaration was signed by a gentleman who was later among the first to be executed in the name of that superbly humane text. Hundreds and possibly thousands followed him. *Liberte’, Egalite’, Fraternite’* – what wonderful words! And how terrifying their meaning can be: Freedom in the speed of the guillotine’s fall on different necks; Fraternity in some dubious paradise ruled by a Supreme Being!”

It is easy for words to become something other than they seemed to be when they were first created, when they first were uttered in service of some good intent, of correcting structural

injustices within a society, for instance, or trying to prevent some future harm. All too often crucial understandings about the nature of words are missed. For we are taught in school the most erroneous of beliefs: that words are a static entity, containing a definable meaning irrespective of context, that they are similar to pieces of lumber and can be used just as lumber is used to build certain kinds of structures . . . houses or thoughts made manifest. There are good and noble houses, we believe, and there are houses of ill repute. But it is rare that we understand that houses are often both simultaneously, that brothels may contain great good within them and that the purist of Christian households may contain evil. . . or that each may, and usually does, contain both at once.

Words have never been what we were taught in our schooling that they are. Words are in reality incredibly thin membranes that hold within them living meanings. And those membranes are highly flexible. Human desire can place any kind of meaning within such membranes, then utilize what's been made to suit any purpose at all.

Confusing form with essence is one of the gravest diseases of the West. Only those who have lived in totalitarian societies seem as a general rule to understand the crucial distinction between the two. And there is something in some of those people, as it was in Vaclav Havel, that refuses to do anything other than feel in their heart of hearts the truth of words, that responds to the essence of their meaning rather than their surface, to the truth inside the form irrespective of what good the words are (supposedly) meant to do.

How easy it is for a well-meaning cause to betray its own good intentions – yet again because of a word whose meaning has not been kept under adequate

observation. Something like that happens so easily that it almost takes you unawares; it happens inconspicuously, quietly, by stealth . . . it is precisely in this way that words are capable of betraying us – unless we are constantly aware of their use. And frequently – alas – even a fairly minor and momentary lapse in this respect can have tragic and irreparable consequences . . .

As Havel goes on to say, Those who have lived under totalitarian regimes have learned something important and it is something which has universal application: “It always pays to be suspicious and wary of words, and we can never be too careful of their use. . . . to be wary of words and of the horrors that might slumber inconspicuously within them – isn’t this, after all [our] true vocation?”

He is insistent that one of the great lessons learned from living under a totalitarian regime, a regime which passed law after law in an attempt to control the words its citizens used, taught him what he considers to be one of the great lessons of life, one of the great truths all writers must understand.

This regime has cultivated in us such a profound distrust of all generalizations, ideological platitudes, cliches, slogans, intellectual stereotypes, and insidious appeals to various levels of our emotions, from the baser to the loftier, that we are now largely immune to all hypnotic enticements . . . The stifling pall of hollow words that has smothered us for so long has cultivated in us such a deep mistrust of the world of deceptive words that we are now better equipped than ever before

to see the human world as it really is: a complex community of thousands and millions of unique, individual human beings with hundreds of faults and negative tendencies. These beings must never be lumped together into a homogeneous mass beneath a welter of hollow cliches and sterile words and then, en bloc . . . extolled or denounced, loved or hated, maligned or glorified.

And finally he comments that once a word, crafted with the best intentions in the world, humble in its noble beginnings, makes the journey to arrogance (as many such words inevitably do), it is very hard for it to make the journey back to humility.

There are many reasons why Havel is a hero to me, why I love him and his work. This is one of them. And although I have read this particular piece before, it has been years since I did. I found it by chance the other day, going down a rabbit hole on the internet. Like many of the books I've found by "chance" in my life, it came when it was most needed, when I needed to be reminded of this truth about words and of our responsibility toward them, the care we must take when we use them. For we are in a time when words are being cast like stones, all in the name of good intentions, to make a more just and caring society. But I am old and I have seen the transformation of words before, seen what they can do when released without sufficient suspicion of what is hidden inside their shadows, the dark places their crafters refuse to go. Havel reminds me, and all of us, what will happen . . . and of the responsibility that we who know the difference between form and essence have – to speak out before it's too late.