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HUMAN
RIGHTS**

SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

**HUMAN RIGHTS
DEFENDERS WHO
ARE CHANGING
OUR WORLD**

**VACLAV HAVEL: WHAT DOES FREE EXPRESSION
MEAN?**



VACLAV HAVEL

(HE/HIM/HIS)

“YOU DON’T WANT TO BECOME INVOLVED WITH THE DIRT THAT IS AROUND YOU AND ONE DAY, ALL OF A SUDDEN, YOU WAKE UP AND REALIZE THAT YOU ARE A DISSIDENT, THAT YOU ARE A HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST.”

Václav Havel was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1936. He completed his required education in 1951, but the Communist government did not allow him to continue to study formally because of his bourgeois background.

Havel wrote more than 20 plays and many works of nonfiction in his literary career. He was also a perennial victim of state repression under Communist rule, a fact that permeated his writing. He became famous for the human rights manifesto “Charter 77,” and his 1978 work, “The Power of the Powerless,” is considered among the best political essays ever written. In late 1989, Communist rule came to an end during the Velvet Revolution, followed by the reestablishment of a democratic parliamentary republic. Havel became the 10th and last president of Czechoslovakia. In a total of 13 years as president, he led Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic to an open democracy. He was also one of the first to sign the 2008 Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism.

Václav Havel came to be seen as the soul of the Czech nation, armed with a strong moral compass and the honest voice of a dissident. He died in 2011 at the age of 75.

INTERVIEW WITH VACLAV HAVEL

INTERVIEW FROM KERRY KENNEDY'S BOOK *SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER*, 2000.

ON LEADERSHIP AND COURAGE

The crisis of authority is one of the causes for all the atrocities that we are seeing in the world today. The post-Communist world presented a chance for new moral leaders, because at that time of transition in these countries there were no professional or career politicians. This gave intellectuals an opportunity to enter into politics, and, by entering, to introduce a new spirit into the political process. But gradually people were suppressed—the mill ground them down—and much of that opportunity was lost.

There are certain leaders that one can respect, and I do certainly respect, leaders like the Dalai Lama. I appreciate the fact that, although very often they have no hope, not even a glimpse of success on the horizon, they are still ready to sacrifice their lives, to sacrifice their freedom. They are ready to assume responsibility for the world, or at least for the part of the world they live in. I have always respected these people and appreciated what they do. Courage in the public sphere means that one is to go against majority opinion (at the same time risking losing one's position) in the name of the truth. And I have always strongly admired historic personalities who have been capable of doing exactly this.

Becoming a dissident is not something that happens overnight. You do not simply decide to become one. It is a long chain of steps and acts. And very often during this process, you do not really reflect upon what is happening. You just know that you want to avoid any debt that would put a stain on your life. You don't want to become involved with the dirt that is around you and one day, all of a sudden, you wake up and realize that you are a dissident, that you are a human rights activist. With me the story was rather similar. It was only much later, while I was in prison, that I started reflecting on the process and why I had done what I had done. There must be some, call it "transcendental," source of energy that helps you overcome all these sacrifices. Now some people may disagree with this idea of a transcendental source, but I feel it. While I was in prison, I often thought about why a man decides to remain decent,

a man of integrity, even in situations when he or she is on his own, when nobody knows your actions and thoughts—except you yourself. Even in these situations, a man can feel bad, can have a bad conscience, can feel remorse. Why is this? How is it possible? And my answer to this is that there must be another eye looking on—that it's not just the people surrounding you that make the difference. I have no evidence of the existence of such an eye, but am drawing on the archetypal certainty of such an existence.

ON FEAR

I have experienced, and still experience, a whole spectrum of fears. Some of my fears have had greater intensity than the fears of the others. But my efforts to overcome these fears have also been perhaps more intense. The major fear is imagining I might fail somebody, that I might let somebody down and then have a very bad conscience about it. For example, when I am thrown into an unknown Latin American country, I could be asked to speak, to address the parliament. I give a talk, I try to be flowery, impressive. I deliver. But once this is over, I always turn to somebody and say, "What was it like? Was it good? Did I deliver?" I have always felt this uncertainty; I have always been a person suffering from stage fright, from fear. Fear is with me, but I act in spite of it.

ON HUMOR

When a man or woman is ready to sacrifice everything for very serious matters, what happens in the end is that such a person takes himself or herself extremely seriously. His or her face then becomes very rigid, almost inhuman, and such a person becomes a monument. And as you know, monuments are made of stone or of plaster and it is very difficult for monuments to move. Their movements are clumsy. If one wishes to retain humanity, to stay human, it is important that you keep a certain distance. To keep this distance you need to be able to see that there is a certain element of absurdity, even ridicule, in one's deeds.

ON HOPE

Often people confuse hope with prognostics. Prognostics is the science of studying whatever happens around you in the world. With it either you will make a positive prognosis (because you are an optimist) or a negative prognosis (which would have a pessimistic impact on the people around you). But it is very important to differentiate. Hope is not prognosis. Hope is something that I see as the state of the spirit. If life had no sense, then there would be no hope, because the very sense of life, the meaning of life, is closely linked with hope.

ON FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Freedom without responsibility is perhaps something that is a dream of almost everybody, to do whatever you want to do and yet not to assume any responsibility for what you did. But of course, that would be a utopian life. And also, life without any responsibility would not make sense. So I think the value of freedom is linked with responsibility. And if freedom has no such responsibility associated with it, then it loses content, it loses sense, and it also loses weight.

WHAT DOES FREE EXPRESSION MEAN?

LESSON GRADE LEVELS 9 TO 12

FREE EXPRESSION

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

- **ARTICLE 19:** Right to freedom of opinion and information.

TIME REQUIREMENT

90 minutes

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What does freedom of expression mean?
- Why did the authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights include free expression in their document?
- Do we need access to information to live in a truly free society? Why or why not?

OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will:

- Define and contextualize the term “free expression.”
- Recognize the importance of maintaining free expression as a universal human right and as the foundation of a democratic society.
- Examine and analyze the role of writers, poets, playwrights, journalists, and essayists in the maintenance of free expression as a human right.
- Recognize the challenges faced by those who exercise and defend the right of free expression as it is used to enact social change.
- Understand the ways in which those who speak up to enact social change are silenced.

COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.9
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.9

VOCABULARY

- Dissident
- Universal
- Social justice
- Repression
- Defender
- Power
- Enact
- Impart

TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED

- Interactive whiteboard
- Internet access
- CD

MATERIALS

- [Text list of Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)
- [Biography of Vaclav Havel](#)
- [Definition of “freedom of expression”](#)
- [History of freedom of expression](#)
- [“The Power of the Powerless” by Vaclav Havel](#)

TEACHER TIP

- Students often need clarification of terms that seem familiar. A helpful context for the idea of free expression is noted in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- Students must first understand that democracy can only exist if there is a free and open flow of information, and that those who seek to control others often try to repress criticism.

ANTICIPATORY SET

- Instruct students to read Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, then rephrase it in their own words.
- Have the students share what they've written, then start a class discussion about their answers.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1

- Distribute copies of the articles describing free expression and the history of free expression.
- Divide the class into three groups.
- Assign each group to read, analyze, and discuss one of the following: (1) Article 19, (2) The general idea of freedom of expression, (3) Interpret freedom of expression.
- Groups should come up with a contextual understanding of each article, making notes that represent the point of view of the group.
- Have students report their findings to the class. Other groups should take notes on each group's report.
- Instruct the groups to draft a freedom of expression section of a new government's constitution.
- Have the groups reconvene as a class and merge all drafts of the freedom of expression ideas into one document.

ACTIVITY 2

- Distribute to the class the interview of Vaclav Havel featured in this lesson plan.
- Distribute to the class the reading "[The Power of the Powerless.](#)"
- Ask students to keep the following questions in mind as they read the two pieces:
 - What might a group that has control do to someone who speaks up against it?

- Why would Vaclav Havel's government have made a move to silence him?
- What in his essay "The Power of the Powerless" might have upset his government?
- What are some less obvious ways to silence criticism?
- During a teacher-guided, student-centered Socratic analysis of the interview and essay, talk about which passages might have been considered dangerous to Havel's government.
- Lead a discussion about the ways in which Havel was abused and why he was jailed for his views.

CULMINATING ACTIVITY

- Ask students to analyze current cases related to freedom of expression.
- Have the students write a short paper comparing the experience of Vaclav Havel with a case they select, using the Guiding Questions as a base.

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES

- [Human Rights Watch](#): a human rights monitoring group that tracks abuses of human rights.
- [Free Child](#): suggests ways students can get involved in activist projects addressing a variety of issues.
- [Washington Youth Voice Handbook](#): a guide for students who want to get involved in government policy-making and contribute to addressing social issues.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

Since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, many other international documents—also called treaties, covenants, resolutions, or conventions—have been drafted to develop these rights further. Countries commit to protect the rights recognized in these treaties by ratifying them, and sometimes a specific institution is created within the UN to monitor their compliance.

Here are examples of relevant international documents:

INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS (ICCPR)

- **ARTICLE 18:** Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- **ARTICLE 19:** Right to hold an opinion without interference and to freely express it.
- **ARTICLE 25:** Right to participate in government without discrimination, to be elected to public office, and to have access to public services.

For more information, visit the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' website: www.ohchr.org.



BECOMING A DEFENDER

- To address the question about other less obvious ways to silence criticism, research the following topics (I = international issue, D = domestic issue):
 - Government licensing of journalism (I)
 - Issues regarding fair use and intellectual property rights (I, D)
 - Uses and limits of the Freedom of Information Act (I)
 - Free speech zones (D)
 - Telecommunications Act of 1996 (D)
 - Daniel Pearl (I, D)
 - Hate speech legislation (I, D)
 - Deaths of journalists in the early part of the 21st century (I,D)
 - Free speech rights granted to corporations (D)
 - Propaganda (I, D)
- Create a chapter book with your essays to distribute among students; publish your papers on the school website; or write a short play highlighting the importance of free speech.
- Come up with your own version of the Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and distribute them to your school community together with the original versions.
- Hold after-school seminars to discuss the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the U.S. Bill of Rights.
- Invite your congressional representatives or their state senator or assembly person to speak about the First Amendment and any pending legislation that may restrict free expression at a student assembly.
- Join an international or national human rights, civil rights, or social justice organization to learn more about domestic and international threats to freedom of expression and to human rights in general.
- Create and maintain a media watchdog site that keeps track of censored news stories, abridgement of freedom of expression, and persecution of journalists in the U.S. and elsewhere. Compile a list of journalists and others whose right to freedom of expression has been repressed and invite them to be guest writers.
- Research people whose rights to free expression have been abused and invite them to speak to their schools and communities.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

FAIR—FAIRNESS AND ACCURACY IN MEDIA

<http://www.fair.org>

This national media watch group works to invigorate the First Amendment by advocating for greater diversity in the press and by scrutinizing media practices that marginalize public interest, minority, and dissenting viewpoints

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

<http://www.cjr.org>

Critical analysis of U.S. and foreign journalism.

HOW TO WATCH TV NEWS BY NEIL POSTMAN (PENGUIN, N.Y., 2008)

Sociological analysis of television broadcasting.

THE TRUTH TWISTERS BY RICHARD DEACON (MACDONALD AND CO., LONDON, 1987)

An analysis of media spin and distortion

INVENTING REALITY BY MICHAEL PARENTI (ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, N.Y., 1993)

An analysis of media spin.

“THINGS THAT ARE NOT IN THE CONSTITUTION”

<http://www.usconstitution.net/constnot.html>

Examines myths about constitutional rights

PROJECT CENSORED

<http://www.projectcensored.org/about>

Project Censored teaches students and the public about the role of the free press in a free society—and talks about the news that didn't make the news and why.

AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION (ACLU)

<http://www.aclu.org>

The ACLU works in courts, legislatures, and communities to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties that the U.S. Constitution and laws of the United States guarantee American citizens.

CULTURAL ACTION FOR FREEDOM BY PAULO FREIRE (HARVARD ED. REVIEW PUB., CAMBRIDGE, MASS., 2000)

LITERACY: READING THE WORD AND THE WORLD BY PAUL FREIRE AND DONALDO MACEDO (ROUTLEDGE, N.Y., 1987)

DARING TO DREAM BY DONALDO MACEDO, ANA LUCIA DE FREITAS SORZA, PETER PARK (PARADIGM. N.Y. 2007)

COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

<http://cpj.org>

Founded in 1981, CPJ is an independent nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide by defending the rights of journalists to report the news without fear of reprisal.