

VACLAV HAVEL

Vaclav Havel is one of democracy's most principled voices. Armed with a moral compass that points true north and an eloquence unsurpassed in the political arena, Havel speaks with the honesty of a dissident from the halls of the presidential palace in Prague. Czechoslovakia's leading playwright and a perennial victim of state repression under Communist rule, he is celebrated for his absurdist plays, including *The Garden Party*, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, *The Memorandum*, *Largo Desolato*, and *Temptation*. Havel, who was born in 1936, was a founder of Charter 77, a human rights and democracy organization that challenged the Soviet takeover. He wrote compelling texts on repression and dissent, and his 1978 work, *The Power of the Powerless*, is one of the best political essays ever written. In 1979, in retaliation for his human rights activism, Havel was sentenced to four and a half years of hard labor, during which he wrote *Letters to Olga*. As chief spokesperson of Civic Forum, which he cofounded in 1989, Havel, through his leadership, political savvy, and moral persuasion, helped bring Communism to its knees and negotiated a peaceful transition to democracy. Out of the ashes of Soviet control emerged a new state, based on free expression, political participation, civil society, and commitment to the rule of law. In 1989, Havel was elected the first non-Communist president of Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic) in more than forty years. In 2002, he was the third recipient of the Hanno R. Ellenbogen Citizenship Award presented by the Prague Society for International Cooperation. In 2003 he was awarded the International Gandhi Peace Prize, named after Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi by the government of India for his outstanding work related to the achievement of world peace and human rights standards in the most difficult situations through Gandhian means. In 2003, Havel was the inaugural recipient of Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award for his work in promoting human rights. In addition, in 2003, he received the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom and in 2008, the Europe-based A Different View cited Havel as one of the 15 Champions of World Democracy, along with Nelson Mandela, Lech Walsza, and Corazon Aquino. Vaclav Havel died December 18, 2011 at the age of 75.



Vaclav Havel, © 2000 Eddie Adams

“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.”

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?

VACLAV HAVEL

LESSON GRADE LEVEL: 9–12
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE:
FREE EXPRESSION

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

- **Article 19:** 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?
- Why do we need access to information to live in a truly free society?

OBJECTIVES:

After this lesson, students will be able to:

- 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 REQUIREMENT

- Interactive whiteboard
- Internet access
- CD

MATERIALS:

- Text list of Universal Declaration of Human Rights http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf
- Biography of Vaclav Havel <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vaclav-Havel>
- Definition of “freedom of expression” <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/free-speech-freedom-expression-human-right>
- History of Freedom of Expression <http://democracyweb.org/node/78>
- “The Power of the Powerless”—Vaclav Havel <http://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/165havel.html>
- *Speak Truth To Power* interview with Vaclav Havel www.RFKHumanRights.org / Click on *Speak Truth to Power* / Click on “Defenders” tab

TEACHER TIPS:

- Students often need a clarification of terms that, though familiar, may not be entirely clear. 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.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

ANTICIPATORY SET:

- Instruct students to read Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- After reading, instruct students to rephrase the Article in their own words.
- Ask students to report orally to class via teacher- facilitated discussion.

ACTIVITY 1:

- Distribute copies of the article describing free expression and the article describing the history of free expression.
- Divide the class into three groups.
- Assign each group one of the following activities:
 - Interpret Article 19.
 - Interpret the general idea of freedom of expression.
 - Interpret freedom of expression.
- Instruct students to read, analyze, and discuss the articles.
- After analyzing the materials, groups should agree upon their 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 from the *Speak Truth To Power* website:
www.rfkhumanrights.org / click on **Speak Truth to Power** / click on **“Defenders”** tab
- Distribute to the class the reading “The Power of the Powerless.”
- Instruct students to use the following questions as guidance when reading the two pieces:
 - What might a group that has control do to someone who speaks up against it?
 - Why would Havel's government have made a move to silence him?
 - What is it about his essay “The Power of the Powerless” that might have upset his government?
 - What are some less obvious ways to silence criticism?
- During a teacher-guided and student-centered Socratic analysis of the interview and essay, students will indicate which passages might have been considered dangerous to Havel's government.
- Lead and involve students in a discussion about the ways in which Havel was abused and 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. Ask the students to use the Guiding Questions as a base for both their analysis of and paper on their case.

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES:

- Human Rights Watch—A human rights monitoring group that tracks abuses of human rights—<http://www.hrw.org>
- Free Child—suggestions about how students can get involved in activist projects regarding a variety of issues—<http://www.freechild.org>
- Washington Youth Voice Handbook—a guide to how students can get involved in government policy-making and have a voice with regard to social issues—https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Resources-Youth-youth_voice_handbook.pdf

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

- **Article 18:** freedom of thought, conscience and religion
- **Article 19:** right to hold opinion without interference and to freely express it
- **Article 25:** right to participate in government without discrimination, to be elected to public offices and to have access to public service

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

BECOME A DEFENDER

- To address the question about other less obvious ways to silence criticism, students can research the following topics.
 - I—indicates international issue
 - D—indicates domestic issue
 - Government licensing of journalism (I)
 - Issues regarding fair use and intellectual property rights (I, D)
 - The uses and limits of the Freedom of Information Act (I)
 - Free Speech Zones (D)
 - The 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)
- Students will “publish” their essays as a chapter book for distribution among students; publish their papers on the school website; or write a short play which highlights the issues regarding abridgement of free speech.
- Students can study and interpret, in language appropriate to students’ lexicon and specific interests, write and distribute within the school community their version of the Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, together with the original versions.
- Students can hold after-school seminars to discuss the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the U.S. Bill of Rights with students.
- Students can reach out to and invite to their school their congressional representatives or their state senator or assemblyperson to speak at a student assembly regarding the First Amendment and any pending legislation that may restrict free expression.
- Students can become members of an international or national human rights, civil rights or social justice organization in order to inform themselves about domestic and international threats to freedom of expression and human rights in general.
- Students can create and maintain a media watchdog site to report to the school, community and global population issues regarding censored news stories, abridgement of freedom of expression and persecution of journalists.
- Students can compile a list of journalists and others whose right to freedom of expression have been repressed both domestically and internationally and invite them to be guest writers for their website.
- Students can research persons whose free expression rights have been abused and ask them to be guest speakers in their schools and communities.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

“The New Threat to Freedom of Expression:”

<http://www.csmonitor.com/commentary/opinion/2009/0330/p09s02-coop.html>

FAIR—Fairness and Accuracy in Media:

<http://www.fair.org>

A national media watch group working 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 American and foreign journalism

Postman, Neil. Powers, Steve. *How to Watch TV News*. Penguin. NY. 2008:

Sociological analysis of television broadcasting

Deacon, Richard. *The Truth Twisters*. Macdonald and Co. London. 1987:

An analysis of media spin and distortion

Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality*. 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

“Seventeen Techniques of Truth Suppression:”

By Dave Martin—text available at <http://www.learn-usa.com>

Outlines the subtle and not-so-subtle dialectic techniques used to silence dissent

Project Censored:

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

Project Censored works to teach students and the public about the role of the free press in a free society—and to tell the news that didn't make the news and why.

ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union):

<http://www.aclu.org>

The ACLU is our nation's guardian of liberty, working daily 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.

Freire, Paulo. *Cultural Action for Freedom*. Harvard Ed. Review Pub. Cambridge, MA. 2000:

Freire, Paulo and Macedo, Donaldo. *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. Routledge, N.Y. 1987:

Macedo, Donaldo, de Freitas Sorza, Ana Lucia, Park, Peter. *Daring to Dream*. Paradigm. N.Y. 2007:

Committee to Protect Journalists:

<http://cpj.org>

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