

## a speech by **václav havel**, president of the czech republic

EDITOR'S NOTE: Czech President Václav Havel's speech, transcribed below, deeply inspired me. The speech focuses on peoples' need for experiences that promote a fundamental sense of unity which transcends cultural differences. In the beginning of his talk, President Havel refers to a book by Dr. Stanislav Grof which describes the psychological theories Grof developed out of his twenty years of research into the psychotherapeutic use of LSD. President Havel's talk underscores for me the critical importance of developing legal access to psychedelic experiences, and helps place MAPS' work in the context of the global struggles for peace and democracy. (Special thanks to John McKenzie for sending MAPS this speech on disk.) — R.D.

VÁCLAV HAVEL

*Speech delivered at  
Stanford University,  
Palo Alto, California  
September 29, 1994*

THE HONOR I RECEIVE TODAY FROM your university, this important intellectual center, presents me with an opportunity to set aside the political cares of the day and attempt to make several observations on a very general theme — the theme of civilization as a context for contemporary politics.

Recently I read a remarkable book from the pen of a Czech-American psychotherapist. In it, the author describes in great detail and veracity methods that have enabled him, over the years, to recover from the human unconscious experiences which, until recently, very few were aware of at all: The prenatal experiences of the human embryo from conception until the moment of birth. The author then demonstrates that the wealth of these experiences corresponds remarkably with all the basic archetypes and archetypal visions or stories we find—in thousands of specific forms—in all ancient myths, legends and fairy tales, and above all in all religions. Cultures formed many thousands of years ago, cultures that developed their myths and ritual practices quite independently of one another, operate with the same basic archetypes, the prefigurations of which modern science is now discovering in the depths of the human unconscious as prenatal experiences.

Naturally, there is no claim that this is the only source of those archetypes or of all the tidings contained in the different religions. It is probably only an incidental, secondary source of inspiration, one that helps us fill in the broader picture. Still, I was unusually taken with this finding. It shows that there exist

deep and fundamental experiences shared by the entire human race, and that traces of such experiences can be found in all cultures, regardless of how distant or how different they are from one another.

This, of course, is only a single example, taken from my recent holiday reading. From many other modern studies — and even from comparisons every unprejudiced layman can make for himself — it follows that all human cultures and religions have infinitely more in common than that, infinitely more hidden somewhere deep in their sources and foundations. There are principles, experiences, and what we might call pre-scientific knowledge that are more essential and mysterious than *our prenatal* experiences. At the same time — somewhat paradoxically — it often happens that the leading discoveries of contemporary science themselves provide confirmation of this and so, by a circular route, bring human understanding back to something that all cultures have known intuitively since the dawn of time, something that until recently modern science has treated as no more than a set of illusions or mere metaphors.

It turns out, for example, that many other experiences, far more difficult to explain, slumber in our collective unconscious. In various forms, these experiences surface again and again in the cultural achievements of humanity and often in individual human experiences. In a way that we scarcely understand, they transcend what a person could know himself or inherit from his ancestors. It seems rather as if something like an antenna were picking up signals from a physically indeterminable transmitter that contains the experience of the entire human race.

Or another thing, it would appear that the whole history of the cosmos, and especially of life, is mysteriously recorded in the inner workings of all human beings. This history is projected into man's creations and is, again, something that joins us together far more than we think.

But something else seems to be the most essential of all: It cannot be an accident, or a mere concord of countless misperceptions if, after thousands of years, people of different epochs and cultures feel that they are somehow parts and partakers of the same integral Being, carrying within themselves a piece of the infinity of that Being, whose very relative aspects are not just categories of space and time, but of matter and consciousness as well.

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I do not believe it is merely by chance or with no good reason that all cultures assume the existence of something that might be called the "Memory of Being," in which everything is constantly recorded, and that they assume the related existence of supra-personal authorities or principles that not only transcend man but to which he constantly relates, and which are the sole, final explanation of a phenomenon as particular as human responsibility. Nor do I believe that so many modern scientists who in their work have touched on matters difficult to understand, such as the mysteries of the origin and history of the cosmos, the secrets of matter, and of space-time, and the mystery of life, have taken leave of their senses when they speak of transcendence. On the contrary: It seems to me that such philosophical speculations are an inseparable part of their findings.

KNOW that by saying all this here, I am running the risk that whole armies of scientists and journalists will label me a mystic who is abusing this renowned university forum to spread his obscure opinions. I will not hold it against them, because I am well aware that in the eyes of modern man thoughts of this nature inevitably carry with them a hint of obscureness, and many times this attitude brings complications into my own life: I know that to my own detriment I am too suspicious of many things. The risk of ridicule, however, is insufficient reason for me to remain silent about something I am constantly persuaded is true.

But to sum up: It seems to me that one of the most basic human experiences, one that is genuinely universal and unites — or, more precisely, could unite — all of humanity, is the experience of transcendence in the broadest sense of the word. In the United States, but elsewhere too, discussions are beginning to take place about the conflict of civilizations being the most probable future course of humanity.

I am not sure that "civilization" is the correct term to use in this context. What we usually mean by civilization is historically and geographically defined and distinguished by high degrees of autonomy. In the traditional sense of the word, civilizations tended to have very limited mutual contact and, if they did influence one another, it happened only very slowly and indirectly. Many civilizations had no idea that others existed. Today the situation is radically different. Practically the entire

world is now connected by thousands of political, economic and communication networks and bonds. We are all aware of one another, and we have thousands of common habits, technologies, modes of behavior, civilization forms and aims. It seems to me more appropriate, therefore, to understand the world of today as a single global civilization, and I would call the conflicts that loom in the future merely conflicts of individual cultures or spheres of civilization.

In any case, one of the countless sources of growing tension between these spheres clearly is the fact that they are being forced to live closer and closer together within a single civilization, and thus they are more and more clearly aware of their mutual differences or of their own particular "otherness." I myself have compared this to life in a prison cell, in which the inmates get on each other's nerves far more than if they saw each other only occasionally.

Let me give you an example. In Europe today, thanks to the recent liberation of a large number of its *nations*, the border between the world of Orthodox Christianity and the world with Catholic or Protestant traditions is suddenly becoming more obvious than before. When I travel around Greece, for instance, I clearly feel that I am surrounded by different historical, cultural and political traditions than those I know from my own country. Yet I would never dare to say that Greece belongs to a different civilization than the Czech Republic.

This modification in terminology, however, does not change the fact that the differences between individual cultures or spheres of civilization in the modern world are playing an ever-greater role and are even beginning to show up in international politics. This process was extraordinarily accelerated by the fall of communism and the end of the bipolar division of the world. The unnatural, bipolar system imposed upon the world, which concealed or directly suppressed historical and cultural differences, has collapsed. And these differences are now manifesting themselves with sudden and nearly explosive force, not just in the post-communist world but also in the West and many other areas of the globe. I fully agree with those who see in this reality the seeds of one of the most serious threats to humanity in the coming era.

The role of the intellectual is, among other things, to foresee like Cassandra various threats, horrors, and catastrophes. The role of

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the politician is to listen to all the warning voices, take stock of the dangers, and at the same time think intensively about ways to confront or avert them. I cannot imagine that a politician could simply live with the knowledge that everything will turn out badly and still go on being a politician. That is why I too often think about ways to avert the threat that has been called the "conflict of civilizations."

At FIRST GLANCE, the solution is so simple and so obvious that it appears banal: The only salvation of the world today, now that the two biggest and most monstrous totalitarian utopias humanity has ever known — Nazism and Communism — fortunately have collapsed, is the rapid dissemination of the basic values of the West, that is, the ideas of democracy, human rights, the civil society and the free market. The most dynamic civilization of the last millennium, evolved from a blending of classical, Christian and Jewish elements, has spread and has imprinted its character on the entire global civilization. It has created and developed these values and demonstrated that respect for them will guarantee the greatest degree of human freedom, justice, and prosperity. Yet even if this blueprint appears to Western man as the best and perhaps the only one possible, it has left much of the world unsatisfied. To hope in such a situation that democracy will be easily expanded and that this in itself will avert a conflict of cultures would be worse than foolish.

It may, for instance, be observed that many politicians or regimes espouse these ideas in words but do not apply them in practice. Or they give them an entirely different content than the West gives them. Very often we hear it said that these concepts are so closely bound to the Euro-American cultural tradition, that they are simply not transferable to other milieu, or that they are only a lofty-sounding disguise for the demoralizing and destructive spirit of the West. The main source of objections would seem to be what many cultural societies see as the inevitable product or by-product of these values: moral relativism, materialism, the denial of any kind of spirituality, a proud disdain for everything supra-personal, a profound crisis of authority and the resulting general decay, a frenzied consumerism, a lack of solidarity, the selfish cult of material success, the absence of faith in a higher order of things

or simply in eternity, an expansionist mentality that holds in contempt everything that in any way resists the dreary standardization and rationalism of technical civilization. At the same time, people in many parts of the world are of two minds. On the one hand they long for the prosperity they see in the West; on the other they reject the importation of Western values and life-styles as the work of the devil. *And if some distant culture does adapt to contemporary technical civilization and prospers, it frequently happens in a way that gives Western democrats goose pimples. In short, democracy in its present Western form arouses skepticism and mistrust in many parts of the world.*

ADMIT that I too am not entirely satisfied with this recipe for saving the world, at least not in the form offered today. Not because it is bad, or because I would give preference to other values. It does not satisfy me because it is hopelessly half-baked. In fact, it is really only half a recipe. I am convinced that if this were not the case, it would not evoke the great mistrust that it does. The reason for this mistrust does not, I think, lie in some kind of fundamental opposition in most of the world to democracy as such and to the values it has made possible. It lies in something else: the limited ability of today's democratic world to step beyond its own shadow, or rather the limits of its own present spiritual and intellectual condition and direction, and thus its limited ability to address humanity in a genuinely universal way. As a consequence, democracy is seen less and less as an open system, that is best able to respond to people's basic needs, that is, as a set of possibilities that continually must be sought, redefined and brought into being. Instead, democracy is seen as something given, finished, and complete as is, something that can be exported like cars or television sets, something that the more enlightened purchase and the less enlightened do not.

In other words, it seems to me that the mistake lies not only in the backward receivers of exported democratic values, but in the present form or understanding of those values itself, in the climate of the civilization with which they are directly connected, or seem to be connected in the eyes of a large part of the world. And that means of course that the mistake also lies in the way those values are exported, which often betrays an attitude of

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superiority and contempt for all those who hesitate to automatically accept the offered goods. What then is that other, missing side of the democratic solution? What is lacking in the only meaningful way of dealing with future conflict of cultures? Wherein lies that forgotten dimension of democracy that could give it universal resonance? I am deeply convinced that it lies in what I have already tried to suggest — in that spiritual dimension that connects all cultures and in fact all humanity. If democracy is not only to survive but to expand successfully and resolve those conflicts of cultures, then, in my opinion, it must rediscover and renew its own transcendental origins. It must renew its respect for that non-material order which is not only above us but also in us and among us, and which is the only possible and reliable source of man's respect for himself, for others, for the order of nature, for the order of humanity, and thus for secular authority as well. The loss of this respect always leads to loss of respect for everything else — from the laws people have made for themselves, to the life of their neighbors and of our living planet. The relativization of all moral norms, the crisis of authority, reduction of life to the pursuit of immediate material gain without regard for its general consequences — the very things Western democracy is most criticized for does not originate in democracy but in that which modern man has lost: his transcendental anchor, and along with it the only genuine source of his responsibility and self-respect. It is because of this loss that democracy is losing much of its credibility.

The separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers, the universal right to vote, the rule of law, freedom of expression, the inviolability of private ownership and all the other aspects of democracy as a system that ought to be the least unjust and the least capable of violence — these are merely technical instruments that enable man to live in dignity, freedom, and responsibility. But in and of themselves, they cannot guarantee human dignity, freedom and responsibility. The source of these basic human potentials lies elsewhere: in man's relationship to that which transcends him. I think the fathers of American democracy knew this very well. Were I to compare democracy to life-giving radiation, I would say that while from the political point of view it is the only hope for humanity, it can only have a beneficial impact on us if it

resonates with our deepest inner nature. And if part of that nature is the experience of transcendence in the broadest sense of the word, that is, the respect of man for that which transcends him, without which he would not be and of which he is an integral part, then democracy must be imbued with the spirit of that respect if it is to have a chance of success.

**I**N OTHER WORDS, if democracy is to spread successfully throughout the world and if civic coexistence and peace are to spread with it, then it must happen as part of an endeavor to find a new and genuinely universal articulation of that global human experience, which even we, Western intellectuals, are once more beginning to recollect, one that connects us with the mythologies and religions of all cultures and opens for us a way to understand their values. It must expand simply as an environment in which we may all engage in a common quest for the general good.

That of course presupposes that first, our own democracies will once more become a place for quest and creation, for creative dialogue, for realizing the common will, and for responsibility, and that they will cease to be mere battlegrounds of particular interests. Planetary democracy does not yet exist, but our global civilization is already preparing a place for it: It is the very Earth we inhabit, linked with Heaven above us. Only in this setting can the mutuality and the communality of the human race be newly created, with reverence and gratitude for that which transcends each of us, and all of us together. The authority of a world democratic order simply cannot be built

on anything else but the revitalized authority of the universe. The effective expansion of democracy therefore presupposes a critical self-examination, a process that will lead to its internalization. More than that, this seems to be the key to saving today's global civilization as a whole, not only from the danger of a conflict of cultures but from the many other dangers that threaten it. Obviously, this is easy to say but hard to bring about. Unlike many ideological utopians, fanatics and dogmatists, and a thousand more or less suspect prophets and messiahs who wander about this world as a sad symptom of its helplessness, I do not possess any special recipe to awaken the mind of man to his responsibility to the world and for the world.

Two things, however, appear to me to be certain:

In the first place: This internalization of democracy today can scarcely take the form of some new doctrine, that is a collection of dogmas and rituals. This probably would have exactly the opposite effect: To all the mutually distrustful cultural currents there would only be added others, ones that would be very artificial because they would not have grown out of the nourishing soil of myth-making eras. If a renaissance of spirituality does occur, it will far more likely be multi-leveled and multi-cultural, with a new political ethos, spirit or style, and ultimately will give rise to a new civil behavior. And secondly: Given its fatal incorrigibility, humanity probably will have to go through many more Rwandas and Chernobyls before it understands how unbelievably shortsighted a human being can be who has forgotten that he is not God. •

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