

The Power of the Powerless

Vaclav Havel (1978)

Vaclav Havel was a Czech playwright, dissident, and later President of Czechoslovakia who examined the nature of truth, lies, and individual responsibility under a communist regime built on falsehoods. In this passage from 1978, he uses the metaphor of a greengrocer to illustrate how everyday conformity sustains an oppressive system, and how choosing truth in small acts can begin to undo it.

“The manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: *Workers of the world, unite!* Why does he do it? What is he trying to communicate to the world? Is he genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world? Has he really given more than a moment’s thought to how such a unification might occur and what it would mean?

“I think it can safely be assumed that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it has been done that way for years, and also because someone might make trouble for him if he did not. And he knew this quite well.

“What does the poster say? Does it say *Workers of the world, unite!* (which is what the text really says) or does it say *I am a loyal employee of the enterprise*? I believe it says the second. The first is a transcendental, political idea; the second is an objective condition: *I live within the system, I accept it, I conform.*

“The greengrocer’s sign is therefore not a spontaneous expression of a life-commitment; it is the emblem of survival in a system that demands conformity. He does not himself embrace the ideal *Workers of the world, unite!* – but he knows enough to realize that by putting up the poster he will remain safely invisible; by failing to put it up he will become visible, become a risk. And for what? The simple act of omission: of not displaying the sign.

“And yet this simple act of conformity is no mere individual weakness – it is precisely what makes the system function. Individuals confirm the system, fulfill it, make the system. They do it by living within lies, by participating in the rituals of the system, by silently accepting the slogans and the appearances without believing them, without thinking them through, without owning them.

“On the other hand, living in truth means the act of refusing to display the poster when one does not accept what it says; it means refusing to live the lie simply because it is easier or safer. This refusal is small, but it carries within it a seed of liberation. Because when a person refuses to play the role assigned, refuses to pretend what he doesn’t believe, he begins to create a space of authenticity, a sphere of truth, within which he exists not as a mere object of the system but as a subject of his own life.

“That sphere may seem modest. But it is real. And the system fears it – not the loud protest of a few, but the quiet refusal of many to live the lie. For what is the system’s power if not its ability to make everyone do what he does not believe, to conform to what is false? Remove that conformity and the system loses its foundation.

“Living within the truth is not grandiose; it is a matter of everyday actions. It is moments of personal integrity: refusing to say that which is false, refusing to participate silently in what one knows is false, refusing to decorate one’s own life with the slogans of others. These moments add up. They illuminate the human capacity for responsibility and freedom – and they remind us that powerless people, acting truthfully in small ways, can change the world.”

A Talk to Teachers

James Baldwin (1963)

James Baldwin was an American novelist, essayist, and social critic whose searing honesty about race, morality, and identity reshaped 20th-century public discourse and demanded that America confront the gap between its ideals and its realities. In this address to New York City schoolteachers, Baldwin urges educators to face historical truth, resist comforting myths, and prepare the next generation to live as conscious moral actors in a turbulent democracy.

“Let’s begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced, not by Khrushchev, but from within. To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible – and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of children – I ask you to examine the situation with honesty._

“The question before us is whether we want to be dealers in ‘hope’ or in ‘truth.’ There is, of course, without question a place for hope, as there is a place for love and for faith – but none of these is a substitute for the hard work of seeing and reporting the facts, of understanding the structures of power and the meaning of freedom, or of examining the

infinite complexity of each human life. One of the immense uses of our schools is to help children deal with the burden of history – not just the dates and names, but the living consequences of the past, and the moral responsibility of the present.

“The students you teach are not simply future citizens. They are living now in a world saturated with illusions – of color, of class, of power – and they often sense, better than we adults do, the inconsistencies between what is taught and what is lived. If they grow up believing that the past is ‘safe,’ or fixed, or simply to be memorized, they will never be ready to grapple with the duplicities of the present. If they are not taught how to critique the stories they are told, they will become incapable of critique at all.

“What the schools must teach is not only what is right and what is wrong, but how to ask the question: Who says so? Why? What aim? And to whose benefit? Without this training, the very idea of freedom becomes an empty formula. A child may learn how to “get ahead” in society, but if that means learning how to comply, how to accept half-truths, how to disguise his real feelings and hide his real selves, then freedom will evade him – and democracy will be shallow.

“We have turned the minds of our children into counting machines, test-taking machines, production machines – but what we cannot afford is to turn them into belief machines.

“And yet, this is the almost tacit condition of our educational system: to produce citizens who will obey, rather than question; who will adapt, rather than transcend; who will accept the comfortable myth rather than live in the disturbing truth.

“I ask you to teach them not only how to live in the world as it is – but how to imagine the world as it might be, and how to work to make it true. For unless we teach the young how to refuse the false, to speak the real, to live the un-easy truth, we risk living under a tyranny of illusions.”