Disturbing the Peace
Lessons from Vaclav Havel on the Peaceful Road to Democracy

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Abstract: This paper considers Vaclav Havel’s role in directing a peaceful secession to democracy. It examines other factors like Soviet leadership, global shifts and whether there is a “Havel Effect”. The important influences from Havel’s family and prominent philosophical and artist voices also form pivotal parts of this story. Havel’s orchestration offer insights for strategic approaches to social movements considering: leadership, collaboration, planning, communications, and achieving desired goals.

Introduction
Havel’s work and writings provide insights to the significant elements of social movements: credible leadership, a coordinated effort, a detailed plan, a stellar approach to communications along with achievable, observable results.

Velvet Revolution Background
Few examples exist in the world where revolutionary change in government is managed without significant human toll. Czechoslovakia’s peaceful 1989 secession is one. This paper reviews the roles of Soviet leadership and other global shifts had on this non-violent transition to democracy. It also considers the influence of the affluent Havel family and common Czechoslovakians. Conscious and conscientious philosophers and artists too helped mediate successful socio-political change. Revolution, Havel cautions those who would undertake it, is messy and cannot be easily planned. In the book, Disturbing the Peace, Havel (1990) suggests that, “These things don’t happen quite so simply. What does happen, though, is certain hidden shifts in the communal spiritual and moral sensibility, and subtle atmospheric changes whose causes they may not be aware of, but which have their impact all the same” (p. 85).

Creating Freedom
Czechoslovakian democracy arose through it becoming a personal matter of principle. Small and large public events were formulated to draw attention and inspire action. One catalytic event was the outcry to the unlawful incarceration of the band, ‘the Plastic People’. Havel was moved and used their incarceration to sound louder alarms. “There was disturbing magic in the music and a kind of inner warning…an experience that everyone who had not become completely obtuse must understand” (Havel, 1990, pp.126-127). Havel, and a growing number of Plastic People Supporters, classified the attacks as “…genuinely alarming: they were an attack on the spiritual and intellectual freedom of man, camouflaged as an attack on criminality, and therefore designed to gain support from a disinformed public” (Havel, pp. 128-9). With the publicity this case generated people came to see this confinement as “something far worse: an attack by the totalitarian system on life itself, on the very essence of human freedom and integrity” (Havel, p. 128). The public were awakened to the encroachment on their own freedoms.
The Havel Effect

How does monumental social change happen? The Havel Effect is as much a question as it is a proposal. Havel’s leadership seemed to disturb enough people to get them thinking while he remained respectful enough to keep them open to dialogue. Following is my interpretation of the Havel Effect.

Credible leadership. Havel earned the confidence of his fellow citizens through leading, for most of his life, a moral and philosophical strategy against the totalitarian regime. Havel maintained his creativity, energy, and enthusiasm. Havel remained respectful of all leaders, recognizing them as equal among equals. Leadership requires generating respect, effective communications and the ability to transform misunderstanding into clarity and support. Ambassadors were trained as “binding agents” and not confrontationists. Havel guarded against casting himself or anyone in the roles of victim or accuser. He also urged the regime to take a critical look at itself and he offered avenues for their dignified retreat.

Collaborate. By November 1989 the scene had been set and the actors were well rehearsed. The actors who would form Charter 77 spent decades preparing for the part. In 1976 it was, “…a time when we were beginning to learn how to walk upright again, a time of “exhaustion with exhaustion,” a time when many different groups of people had had enough of their isolation and felt that, if something was going to change, they had to start looking beyond their own horizons. Thus the ground was prepared for some kind of wider community activity. If the regime’s attack on culture had taken place two years earlier, it might have gone unnoticed” (Havel, p.130). Havel skillfully brought together disparate but related voices. They found common ground around: freedom and human rights, dignity, tolerance and openness.

Plan. The plan included a succinct, attractive vision and a campaign with short and longer term goals. It also included seizing pivotal opportunities. They used strategies that were politically realistic and never destructive. After years of preparing “What We Want,” the Civic Forum in one week, provided the Soviet Regime with a succinct paper precisely articulating concrete outcomes not abstract philosophies.

Communicate. Language used was clear, strategic, and framed not to upset people. For example, members of Charter 77 initially called themselves a “citizen initiative” to avoid legal challenges. The language had to arouse passion and vision, like helping citizens appreciate that government attacks on others are an attack on their own personal freedom and dignity. Citizens became engaged through compelling political, moral and intellectual arguments in letter writing campaigns, petition signing and by using ‘samizdat’ – underground communiqués. Havel demonstrated that leaders need to be well prepared to communicate, to challenge people in power and, if required, bolster confidence with cognac. Havel and his colleagues were inventive in furnishing stories to authorized media and reaching the masses through grassroots methods.

Achieve. Results needed to be communicated so successes could be widely shared. The release from jail of most of the Plastic People was a tremendous coup for the musicians and the public who rallied.
Conclusions
Havel practiced what he asked of others: to be unrelenting, purposeful, and professional. Havel offers succinct ways to arouse sympathy and move towards social change. By employing more power rather than force, the conditions finally culminated for Communist Rule to be replaced peacefully by a budding democracy.

References