

VÁCLAV HAVEL'S "THE TRIAL"

As some of you hopefully know, the prologue of my book ends with these words:

But the real reason I dedicated so much time to this story is because I believe it matters. I said I'm an ordinary citizen, but I do bring a particular perspective to the story. For a PhD at the University of Michigan, I studied a literary-journalistic form called the feuilleton. The feuilleton is a kind of conversational essay that appeared in its own section of newspapers, first started in response to Napoleonic censorship. In the two hundred years since, feuilletons often became important when political polarization or government censorship degraded the traditional news into ideological talking points. At such times, the feuilleton served as a place where writers, speaking in ordinary language, could tell of important events in a more meaningful way.

One example I studied was how, during the 1970s in Communist Czechoslovakia, a group of citizens started writing and sharing feuilletons among friends, telling an unofficial version of events, copying them over and passing them on in a form of self-publishing. These citizens would go on to lead a Revolution, the peaceful Velvet Revolution. One of these citizens would even become president.

You see, I came to this story knowing the power of ordinary citizens speaking the truth.

I thought it an appropriate time to share with you a fairly important feuilleton, one written

by Václav Havel in response to the trial of the Plastic People of the Universe. Havel was never a big feuilletonist—his specialties are absurd drama and ponderous essays. But he wrote this back in 1976, when they were still in the early days of *samizdat*. The trial of the band, Plastic People, was a kind of last straw. It led directly to the foundation of Charter 77 (just over thirty years ago now), which in turn eventually led—after many setbacks and much pain—to the Velvet Revolution.

Here's the feuilleton that Havel wrote after the trial. It's my own crappy adaptation of a translation I did for a different purpose (couldn't find my professionally translated copy at home before I left). But you'll get the jist.

Something that originally was in no way out of the ordinary suddenly illuminated the time and the world we live in with an unexpected light, bringing its fundamental questions surprisingly to the fore. On the surface, nothing special happened: the trial took place at the specified time; it lasted as long as it was supposed to last and ended in the way it was supposed to: the accused were found guilty. Yet everything to which man was a witness here so obviously and urgently transcended itself that even those who had the fewest reasons to admit such a thing to themselves sensed it.

Havel, the playwright, goes on to describe the trial as if it's one big catastrophic play.

What is even stranger, nothing could be done about it: the play, once it started had to be played through to the end, thus finally showing how terribly its initiators had entangled themselves in the net of their own prestige. They did not dare to halt the whole thing and admit their error, but rather went through the embarrassing spectacle to

the very end. At the same time the actors in this spectacle found themselves in a paradoxical situation: the more honestly they played their parts, the more obviously they uncovered their unforeseen meaning, thus becoming the co-creators of an entirely different performance than they had thought they were playing, or had wanted to play.

The description really resonates for me—the thought of a bunch of people launching “a play” that they thought they controlled, but one that ended up entangling them in totally unexpected ways. I see Libby, refusing to flip on Cheney, going through the “embarrassing spectacle” to the end. And David Addington, totally honest in his unfiltered babble of data, exposing the Unitary Executive for the farce it is.

And all of this, for Havel at least, provided a totally new view of the world.

A new view of the world opens out for us, and with it a new view for our own human possibilities, of what we are and what we could be.

The trial of the Plastic People, according to Havel’s description, exposed the whole facade of power of Communist Czechoslovakia such that those who witnessed it looked on their own lives and actions differently. By seeing their lives—and the falseness of the power the government exercised over them—differently, it freed them to act. It empowered them to launch whole new kinds of actions.

Now I’m not saying *this* trial is definitely going to be the beginning of the end for the evil direction our country is headed in. Only time will tell whether this trial acquires more significance, finally, than Anna Nicole Smith’s death.

But sometimes trials like this can be a beginning—the start of something important. I,

for one, will think of this trial as a
beginning, not an end in itself.