

# Planting, Watering and Waiting

By Vaclav Havel, International Herald Tribune

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This is adapted from a recent speech by Mr. Havel, former president of Czechoslovakia, to the Institute of France.

I come to you from a country that had to wait many long years for its freedom. So I hope you'll allow me to offer a few brief thoughts on the phenomenon of waiting.

"Waiting for Godot" - for deliverance or salvation - lies at one extremity of the broad palette that covers the different forms of waiting. The sort of waiting many of us endured under Communist rule was often close to this extreme. Encircled, squeezed, colonized from within by the totalitarian system, individuals lost all hope of finding a way out, lost the will to act and even the sense of being able to act. In short, they lost hope.

And yet they did not lose the need to hope, for without hope life loses its meaning. That is why they waited for Godot. Unable to carry hope in their bosom, they waited for some sort of vague salvation from the outside. But Godot never comes, simply because he doesn't exist. He is a substitute for hope - a piece of rag used to patch a torn soul, but itself full of holes.

At the other end of the palette is another sort of waiting, motivated by the hope that to resist by speaking the truth is a matter of principle. Such waiting is strengthened by the conviction that to repeat the truth has meaning in itself, if only to tear a breach in an uninterrupted tissue of lies; and it is inspired by the conviction that the seed, once sown, will take root and germinate one day, even if no one knows when.

Though I was experienced at the sort of patient waiting practiced by dissidents, during the peaceful anti-totalitarian revolution over the past three years, I found myself sinking into an impatience that bordered on hopelessness. I was tormented by the idea that transformation was coming too slowly, that my country still had no democratic constitution, that Czechs and Slovaks were still unable to agree on their co-existence in a single state, that we were not moving rapidly enough toward the Western democratic world and its structures.

I desperately hoped for at least one of these objectives to be attained. I wanted my work at the head of the country to finally achieve some visible, tangible, undeniable result. It was hard for me to resign myself to the idea that politics, like history, is an endless process.

Today, looking back, I'm beginning to understand that I was succumbing to that form of impatience, so destructive in modern technocratic civilization with all its rationality, that

is wrongly persuaded that the world is nothing but a crossword puzzle in which there is only a single correct solution to the problem; a solution I felt I alone could find.

I thought time belonged to me. This was a great error. The world and history are ruled by a time of their own, in which we can creatively intervene but never achieve complete control.

The behavior of the postmodern political man must flow not from impersonal analysis but from personal vision. He must not stand on his pride but nurture himself on humility.

The world revolts against the order imposed on it by the brain, a brain which seems to have forgotten that it is merely a modest part of the infinitely rich architecture we call the world. The more the world is forced, with rigor and impatience, into rational categories, the greater are the explosions of irrationality with which it surprises us.

I realized with fright that my impatience for the re-establishment of democracy had something almost communist in it; or, more generally, something rationalist. I had wanted to make history move ahead in the same way that a child pulls on a plant to make it grow more quickly.

I believe we must learn to wait as we learn to create. We have to patiently sow the seeds, assiduously water the earth where they are sown and give the plants the time that is their own. One cannot fool a plant any more than one can fool history. But one can water it. Patiently, every day. With understanding, with humility, but also with love.