

Never Hope Against Hope (Vaclav Havel)

Allow me to tell you a little story about the nature of hope and absurdity. In 1989, only a few months before I was to become, to my bewilderment, an actual head of state, I survived my own death.

I had arrived in the countryside outside Prague at a place called Okrouhlice to visit artist friends. After a feast by a bonfire, I led a friend who had had too much to drink down a dark path to a house nearby. In this total darkness, though completely sober, I suddenly fell into a black hole surrounded by a cement wall. The fact is, I had fallen into a sewer, into what can only be called, you'll excuse me, excrement.

My attempt to swim in this fundamental mud, this strange vegetation was in vain, and I began to sink deeper into the ooze. Meanwhile, a tremendous panic broke out above me. Local citizens flashed lights, grasped one another's arms, legs, offering limbs, articles of clothing to grab; a chaos of impossible rescue techniques followed. This brave fight for my life went on for at least thirty minutes. I could barely keep my nose above the dreadful effluvium and thought this was the end, what a way to go, when someone had the fine idea of putting down a long ladder. Who could have known I was to leave this unfortunate sewer only to end up in the president's office two months later? I was not, after all, to have the distinction of becoming the first playwright to drown in excrement in Okrouhlice.

What was striking about the sewer experience was how hope had emerged from hopelessness, from absurdity. I've always been deeply affected by the theater of the absurd because, I believe, it shows the world as it is, in a state of crisis. It shows humans having lost their fundamental metaphysical certainty, their relationship to the spiritual, the sensation of meaning – in other words, having lost the ground under their feet. As I've said in my book *Disturbing the Peace*, this is a man for whom everything is coming apart, whose world is collapsing, who senses he has irrevocably lost something but is unable to admit this to himself and therefore hides from it.

Complete skepticism is an understandable consequence of discovering that one's enthusiasms are based on illusion. This skepticism leads to a dehumanization of history – a history drifting somewhere above us, taking its own course, having nothing to do with us, trying to cheat us, destroy us, playing out its cruel jokes.

But history is not something that takes place elsewhere; it takes place here. We all contribute to making it. If bringing back some human dimension to the world depends on anything, it depends on how we acquit ourselves in the here and now.

The kind of hope I often think about (especially in hopeless situations like prison or the sewer) is, I believe a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't. Hope is not a prognostication – it's an orientation of the spirit. Each of us must find real, fundamental hope within themselves. You can't delegate that to anyone else.

Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously destined for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now. In the face of this absurdity, life is too precious a thing to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, empty, without meaning, without love, and finally, without hope. [*Esquire* Oct 1993]