

Interlude*

The Anatomy of Hate

Vaclav Havel

When I think of those who have hated me in the past, or of those who still hate me, I can see that they share various characteristics which, when grouped together for the purposes of analysis, suggest a possible general interpretation of the origin of hatred.

Such people are never superficial, hollow, passive, indifferent, or apathetic. Rather, their hatred seems an expression of an unsatisfiable desire, a kind of hopeless ambition. In other words, it is the result of a necessary evil. In a sense, their hatred is stronger than they are. I do not share the belief that hatred is the pure absence of love or humanity, a simple gap in the human spirit. On the contrary, hatred shares many of the characteristics of love, especially its self-transcending aspects: the fixation on another, which turns into dependency and finally the relinquishing of a portion of one's own identity to the other. Just as the lover sighs for the beloved, and can't live without him or her, so does the hater sigh for the object of his hatred. Just like love, hate is essentially an expression of a burning and absolute desire, although here tragically inverted.

Haters, at least the ones I've known, seem to suffer a pain that nothing, absolutely nothing, can assuage: a feeling that, quite naturally, does not correspond to reality. It is as though these haters wanted to be endlessly honored, loved, and respected, as if they constantly suffered from the painful feeling that others were not

*The editors have asked prominent personalities from around the world to contribute to the theme of this issue in order to give it a more personal flavor. These contributions appear as Interludes. The following text is taken from a speech delivered by Vaclav Havel, then President of the Czechoslovak Federal Republic, at a conference on "The Anatomy of Hate," held in Oslo, Norway, on 28 August 1990.

sufficiently grateful toward them, were unpardonably unjust because their honor and love was not boundless, which was the way it should have been: indeed it is as though the others are altogether unaware of their merits.

Hatred – like unhappy love – conceals a type of transcendentalism. The hater allows himself to be consumed by his yearning for something unattainable. And it is unattainable because of the unworthy world's fault – the world that prevents him from reaching the object of his desire. Hatred is a demonic attribute of a fallen angel, a state of mind that aspires to replace God, even believing itself to be God, and whose torment lies in the knowledge of not being God and never being able to be Him. It is the trait of a creature who is jealous of God and beats his breast because, as he sees it, he lives in an evil world conspiring against him, blocking his way to his rightful place next to the throne of God.

The hater so overestimates his value that he is constitutionally incapable of seeing himself as the cause of his metaphysical defeat. Instead, as he sees it, it is the surrounding world that deserves the blame. The problem is that the world is too abstract, too vague, too incomprehensible. He needs a personification of his feeling because hatred, this special kind of tumescence of the soul, requires an equally singular object. The hater is thus in search of an offender. Clearly, this offender is but a stand-in: arbitrarily chosen, he is easily exchanged for another. For the hater, as I've said, the hatred is more important than its object. And these objects can be rapidly replaced without prompting any fundamental change in the hater's relationship to them. This is not difficult to understand: the hatred is directed not against a particular person but against what that person represents: so many obstacles on the path to the absolute, the path to absolute acknowledgment, absolute power, to total identification with God, with the Truth and the world's order. Hatred of one's neighbor thus proves to be nothing other than the physiological incarnation of a hatred of the universe, perceived as the cause of one's universal defeat.

We can go farther. The hater does not smile: he puts on airs. Incapable of joking, he knows only bitterness and sniggering. Unacquainted with self-irony, he can never be truly ironic. Only someone who can laugh at oneself can truly laugh. The hater's

chief identifying characteristics are: a sad expression, quickness to take offense and make outrageous statements; he's prone to yelling and incapable of the distance from oneself required to take note of one's own irrationality.

These qualities betray something of much significance. The hater is altogether lacking in feelings of belonging and taste, shame and objectivity. He is incapable of doubting or asking questions, and lives without any awareness of his ephemerality and that of all things. The experience of authentic absurdity – the absurdity of one's own existence, the feelings of alienation, awkwardness, and failure, and the sense of self-limitation and guilt – is totally foreign to the hater. Obviously, the common denominator to all this is a quasi-metaphysical absence of any sense of proportion. The hater never grasps the measure of things, nor of his own possibilities or rights; he has never understood the nature of his own existence, nor of the existence of gratitude and of the love for which he might hope. He understands only that the world belongs to him; and he expects from that world an unlimited acknowledgment of this fact. He does not understand that the right to miracle and the acknowledgment of this miracle are things that must be earned by actions. On the contrary, the hater sees only his eternally guaranteed and unlimited rights, which can never be challenged. In short, he thinks that he possesses an unconditional and universal pass, which will even get him into heaven. Anyone who dares to challenge that right becomes an enemy who has wronged him. Understanding his right to existence and acknowledgment in this way, he is always angered by anyone who does not go along with him.

All haters accuse their neighbors – and, through their neighbors, the entire world – of being evil. The source of their rage is the feeling that an evil world and nasty people refuse to yield them what belongs to them by right. In other words, they project their anger onto others. In this sense, haters are like spoiled children, unable to understand that there are times when one must be worthy of receiving what one gets; and even when we don't get everything we think we're entitled to, it is not due to the malice of others.

* * *

Hate is one. There is no difference between individual and collective hate. Anyone who hates an individual is almost always capable of collective hatred, and even capable of spreading it. It can even be said that collective hate – whether religious, ideological, doctrinal, social, national, or any other kind – is like a funnel that ultimately engulfs anyone who is actuated by hate. In other words, the basic resource of all collective hatred is the ability to hate individuals.

There is still more though. The collective hate that people capable of hating share, spread and deepen, exercises a magnetic attraction over a multitude of people who would not otherwise seem inclined to become haters. We are speaking here of small and weak people, egotistic and lazy-minded, who are incapable of thinking for themselves and therefore subject to outside influence.

The attractiveness of collective hatred – a form that is infinitely more dangerous than the hate of one individual for another – is based on several seeming advantages.

Collective hatred eliminates feelings of isolation, weakness, and powerlessness, the impression of being ignored and abandoned. By providing a sense of cohesiveness, collective hatred makes up for the lack of success and recognition. Collective hatred creates a strange brotherhood, based on a form of mutual understanding that demands nothing more from the hater than his hate. It is not difficult to belong to such a group, and there is no fear of being left out. Indeed what could be more simple than sharing a common hatred for a particular object and accepting a common “ideology of prejudice” toward this object? It is so easy, for example, to say that Germans, Arabs, Blacks, Vietnamese, Hungarians, Czechs, Gypsies or Jews are responsible for all the miseries of the world, and especially for the despair that gnaws at the injured soul of the hater! There will always be enough Vietnamese, Hungarians, Gypsies and Jews to stand in as responsible for all the world’s ills.

The community of haters offers another advantage to its members. By indulging in exaggerated expressions of hatred toward whatever group of offenders is currently being blamed, and in worshipping symbols and rituals that celebrate the hating group, the members can find unending comfort and reassurance about

their own value. Brought together by uniforms, insignias, flags and hymns, the participants both confirm their identity and confirm, increase, and reinforce their value in their own eyes.

While individual aggression is always risky because of the specter of individual responsibility, a society of haters in a sense legitimizes aggression. The collective expression of hatred creates an illusion of legitimacy, or at least a spirit of "common cover." Concealed in a group, crowd, or mob, the potentially violent person is emboldened; each one eggs on the other, and all because of their large number, feel justified.

Finally, by offering an object of hatred that is uncomplicated and therefore immediately recognizable, the principle of collective hatred fundamentally simplifies the haters' lives, incapable as they are of thinking for themselves. It is so much easier to condemn the world's general injustice when the "offender," the group to be hated, is immediately identifiable by the color of its skin, name, language, or area in which they live.

Collective hate offers a final, insidious advantage: the modest circumstances in which it can grow. There are numerous mental states which, although appearing to be innocent and common enough at first glance, in fact prepare the ground for the almost unnoticed growth of hate: a ground that is vast and fertile, and in which the seed of hate sprouts quickly and takes deep root.

* * *

All forms of hate, even the most incipient, must be combated with all our strength: both because as a principle hatred must always be faced, and also because it is in our own self-interest to do so.

Bherunda, a mythical bird of Hindu legend, is depicted as having one body but two necks, two heads, and two distinct consciousnesses. After sharing an eternity together the two heads begin to hate each other and decide to cause harm. Both consume stones and are poisoned. The results are predictable. Bherunda is overcome by spasms and dies in terrible agony. Krishna, in his infinite mercy, brings him back to life in order to teach men once and for all where hatred leads.

Vaclav Havel

All of us who live in the young democracies of Eastern Europe should keep this legend constantly in mind. Bherunda's fate will be ours if we succumb to the temptation of hatred of the other.

But with this difference: for us there will be no Krishna to save us from our new misfortune.