

Interview between William Luers and Lenka Kabrhelová:

Biography: William Henry Luers was born on May 15, 1929. He served as American ambassador to Czechoslovakia between 1983 and 1986. In his role as ambassador, Luers hosted a range of American artists and writers in the Czechoslovak capital, in a bid to “change the vision” of American power from that of a military to a cultural force. Through such cultural diplomacy, Luers made contact and struck up friendships with prominent Czechoslovak dissidents, including Václav Havel. Luers witnessed Havel’s transition from dissident to president first-hand and, later, hosted Václav Havel in New York City on his first visit in office. Luers has also served as American Ambassador to Venezuela, and as a diplomat in the former Soviet Union. Today, he teaches at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. Luers refers to Havel as a “unique soul” and “probably the most powerful legacy that the Czech people [will] ever have.”

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Chapter I: Context – 00:00:32

Lenka Kabrhelova (LK): This conversation is going to be about Václav Havel – his legacy, his thoughts, and your thoughts about him. How did you meet Václav Havel? How did you get to know him?

William Luers (WL): I think about him a lot, and I just think he is one of the people who... I’m glad he was alive, and... He’s a unique soul in the history of humankind and I just think he’s a

very special figure in my life, and I think in the life of the people who experienced the person and his ideas. He's unmatched.

LK: So you were the ambassador in Czechoslovakia in the '80s?

WL: So I went – I arrived as ambassador in Czechoslovakia in 1983, and he had just that year gotten out of prison and... He had reemerged, and when I arrived in December of '83, I was anxious to find out how to see him, because he was such a phenomenon. And I had always been interested in the dissidents' side – when I was in the Soviet Union, I knew a lot of people – but he was a particular case that was already known about. So when we arrived we met Michael Žantovský; he's one of the first people we met when we were there, and through Michael we got to know Havel. We invited Havel to a vernissage of a new exhibition of contemporary art that we had in the residence – the collection arrived I think in February or something. So we had a vernissage and we invited him. It was the first time I met him and the first time he came to the residence. And it was a large group, we... The Museum of Modern Art sent us these boxes of contemporary art newspapers, magazines and books that we put out on the shelves and told people to take them – they were gifts from all of us. And there were probably 100 people there, mainly people from the art community, the artists' community, and some of the Charter 77 people and they arrived right on time: 6 o'clock, and they were all out lined up around the block, practically. So they came, and Havel came a little late and, I remember, I was coming down the stairs, and I looked into the library, and here was Havel. Actually, he was talking to Francine du Plessis Grey, who was visiting us at the time; she is a writer (a French-American writer) and Cleve Grey, her husband, is a painter. And they were our first real visitors, and they were in their day quite well-known in the country. And they were talking with Havel, and I saw this group of people around, and this short, little man was standing there and I thought 'Is this Havel? Could this be this great

figure?’ And I sensed an aura around him that is just rare, you know? And I think it was this static, the electricity, coming from people who just wanted to be near him. It wasn’t that he was charismatic or terribly imposing, but he was a presence, and people liked to be in that presence. I’ve often thought from that first moment up to now what it was that made people want to be with him, and that is sort of what we will be talking about, I think...

LK: So what do you think was that first draw-in moment for people who wanted to be around him? You said he wasn’t especially charismatic, but at the same time he had this aura. Was it his behavior?

WL: I think it was his stature from his tenacity as a man of ideas during this difficult period in Czech history. I think it was his humor, just his charm. I mean, he believed in community – and Charter 77 had already been founded, of course – the community that was created around his sort of universal thinking; not a Social Democrat, not a priest, not identified with any of the famous wings so much as somebody they could all relate to. So he sort of had this capacity to make people feel he’ll listen to them, and his humor had a lot to do with it - uniquely Czech humor. And he didn’t take himself so very seriously. He had no pomposity, he was just this humble power.

LK: How much do you think he himself was shaped by his context, his upbringing, maybe the social context in which he grew up and then which changed, obviously, during the time? How much did this influence the way he behaved?

WL: He talks about this in one of his early letters. By the way, I think – I like his letters because they are all... The essays are wonderful, but the letters are focused. And in one of his early, I guess essay or letter, he wrote about that. And he talks about because he came from a bourgeois family, he was placed at the bottom, and he said – I think he said something like – ‘I was able to relate so much because I look from bottom up.’ He didn’t look from top down, he was placed at the bottom,

and so he got to know a lot of life based on his perception as a young man, as a child, really. And I think he was... You just read his essays and he is a loner in the sense that he, he really felt – at one point he goes and lives in Hrádeček for quite a while. I guess this was in the '70s, or whenever it was; he and Olga went and stayed there, they found themselves living there, and he wanted to be out of the dynamic of the in-fighting within the dissident movement and the political environment, and he just wanted to be separate from it. So I think that his sort of private thinking, his being brought up never wearing a tie, his marrying Olga who was from a working family - they developed a sense of community (he did, particularly he) that was anti-power. And I think that idea, his hostility toward the power of the Communist Party, and of political authorities in general, grew during the period particularly after '68, but before as well. This shaped his whole framework of the individual being the center of the universe.

LK: Some of the oral histories, or even the perception of Havel as a politician, is that he wasn't such a great politician because of personal traits; that he was very shy, that he was a loner, basically as you mentioned. Do you think that is a valid point?

WL: Yes, it is a valid point. Let me talk a little bit about that issue. I remember when he was inaugurated. Wendy and I, my wife and I, were in Ladislav Hall when he was inaugurated president in this great space where the kings and former communist presidents were inaugurated. And we were standing upfront, because we were his guests there, and he came in, walking down the aisle, and sort of shuffling the way he does, a little bit bent over, all of the people around him much taller than he was, and not looking very presidential. And I said to myself 'Václav? President of this country?' He got [to] the podium, and he had to be sworn in. And when he did it, he stood up, and his voice came out forcefully, and I said 'My god!' You know, he'd been created before our very eyes! 'He's been transformed!' And for me it was always this memory of that moment, that I

always had to remember that he was a man of the theater. And he loved ceremony. And he loved the thought that he could play this central role in the world. And he didn't like being the center, but he was playing a role of being a voice for reason and humility. And I think that always was a trap for him, when it came to actually making some of the tough decisions he had to make as president.

Chapter II: Havel as Playwright/ Writer – 00:12:07

LK: When we go back to Havel before he was a politician: Havel - playwright, writer... You were there in the '80s. What was the audience of Havel's work at that time?

WL: Well they didn't perform his plays. The plays I think stopped being performed in the '70s, which was frustrating for him. They were performed in the United States. Joe Papp (who was head of the Public Theater here in New York) would go off and get the new play and would publish... He would do practically any play that Havel wrote. But Havel himself, after those early days at Na zábradlí when he worked there and was so happy being part of a theater in a group that he liked... As far as I know they were done in bedroom and you know, in apartments, rather, and they were not allowed to be played in the theater, and so he was deprived of that experience of seeing how people reacted and having the feel that a playwright wants. Because playwrights are unique; they have an audience that is there, and they want that audience to demonstrate to them how's the play going. And he didn't have that experience. And it frustrated him.

LK: Which is understandable.

WL: Oh, absolutely.

LK: How did, then, the American audience understand the plays, because of course they are universal in their message, but at the same time, sometimes it must have been very difficult to understand the context of a totalitarian country here in the U.S., with a history of democracy?

WL: Yeah. Well, I think it is right that it was very difficult for Americans to understand the oppression under which he was living, and the subtlety of his discussion of these antiheroes in all of Havel's plays. But on the other hand I do think... He was never a big, popular playwright in the country. Joe Papp, Public Theater is good, and it takes on issues like Havel's role during the communist era. And people who go there are people who care about these issues. But as far as I know, none of his plays were ever on Broadway; he is not a great popular playwright. He was a symbol as a playwright, and his plays were admired by those people who cared about what was going on in that part of the world. And I think those people understood.

LK: So for you which part of his writing was the most interesting. Was it the essays?

WL: Well I think the plays are not... The moments for him that were the best were during the '60s and the '70s – that letter to Husák which, I don't know if you know the letter, but it was a letter he wrote to Husák after I guess the... Well he wrote a letter to Dubček first about how Dubček should have performed during the end of the Prague Spring, and how he hoped he would perform. But later, in the '70s, he writes to Husák and tells him what he, what Czech society, what Czechoslovakia needed. And it was a long letter, and it was quite a statement of opposition, but in his elegant, well not elegant, but in his thoughtful way, and that kind of letter positioned him to be the power he was within the opposition. And he said things in ways that were not angry, but so penetrating. It is hard for me to imagine that Husák ever read that letter, on the other hand it is a letter that was only symbolically to Husák. It was a statement for what has to happen for a society, why don't you do it?

So I think that is where he was, to me, the most interesting, when he was motivated to act. I've got one story about that: when he came to New York, I organized – Wendy and I organized his... A full day of activity – this was after he became president. And Madeleine Albright had organized

his visit to Washington (Madeleine who hadn't known him before, you know). And then he asked us to organize his visit here, and we did it through Ivan and Martin Palouš and a few of the, Ivan Havel and... He didn't want to work with the – the embassy, the mission or the consulate didn't want to, so we did it. And we spent a full day, one full day seeing everybody. He saw Amnesty International, he saw the cardinal, I took him to the Metropolitan Museum where I was president. We had an event at St. John the Divine, I mean we were going in a car from place to place all the time. And he said one time, 'Why are you doing this to me?' He said, you know, 'Why do I have to give a talk every place I go? This isn't what I do – I write essays, I write letters, and I have to have time to think about it. But every place I go they expect me to be so eloquent, and my English isn't that good!' And he really, he was frustrated that he was asked to be a speaker. He had given his speech to the Congress and he just didn't want to give a talk every ten minutes. And I told him 'You don't have to say something different every time, but they just want your presence. You are a phenomenon, and think of it that way!' And you know, I think that issue for him was always a problem. It was so difficult for Václav to write. He struggled with writing. He struggled with putting the words together, making the sense out of the context of what he was writing. When he wrote letters he had a purpose, but very often the other essays and... He felt that he was expected to be interesting and new [in] almost everything he wrote. And I think that frustrated him a lot, because he had more or less said most of what he had wanted to say through his letters and writing before the revolution, so...

LK: When you mentioned the letter, it is one of the famous letters where he points out the problems with... Where he basically asked for the basic civil rights and human rights. How involved were human rights in his work, in your opinion?

WL: Well, I think it was so core. It wasn't human rights in that sense. It was individual rights. It wasn't a generic thing. I mean his philosophy was so anti-power and so believing in the role of the individual taking responsibility; identifying themselves as a player. And it was that that was so telling, because it was so contrary to everything that Marx and others had designed, that people are part of a structure in which they are guided and they are moved, and they are told what to think, what to do. And his ideas about... In the core of *The Power of the Powerless* and, frankly, later, are somewhat different from human rights. They became a human rights cause after, but he had a more profound, I think.... It's not how do governments treat people, which is the human rights agenda, it's how do people themselves identify their role and responsibility in society, which is quite different in a certain sense. And it morphed into the other as he became more and more a prominent figure in the world.

Chapter III: Dissident, Politician, Playwright – 00:22:10

WL: His message was always 'We Czechs... We Czechoslovaks have to take responsibility ourselves, I am trying to show the way to do that.' Actually, he never really put himself in that position: 'Follow me.' That isn't what he was saying. But he was saying that 'We have to be bold and courageous and honest and straightforward with ourselves.' And when, you know, after the revolution, his response to this new situation was to create the Občanské fórum (the Civic Forum) and we went... We were there at the inauguration and we talked to the people who were running it, we knew them all, and they said 'Václav doesn't want a political party, he just doesn't want one. And he doesn't believe in political parties.' So he believed the Občanské forum would be a new type of way in which human beings would relate to each other in a new, free, open system. And that individuals would begin to take responsibility, work together, and built a community sort of not unlike the spirit of Charter 77. We all had differences, we got along, and we had an objective.

And our objective should be to create a fair, open and democratic society. And democracy is not based on political parties, it is based on individuals. And that is a philosophically profound thought, and I don't think many people really understand that.

So then when he became president, he cared about having other societies have this opportunity to live in freedom, so it became against the opposers, the tyrants, and not for the people, very often. And many of his advocates, many of the people who worked with him, and who promoted human rights around the world, I think missed his own, more profound thought, that this isn't just the oppressors, who very often are there because the people don't do what they should do. And I know that over the years, he and his legacy has been a fighter for human rights. But he was a fighter for human souls, for human individuals – he was a fighter for having people take responsibility. And that's what I loved about him.

LK: When you mentioned the early '90s, and the time straight after the Velvet Revolution, the formation of Občanské forum – do you think his idea of how society should work proved viable?

WL: No, it proved wrong, because people are not good. People have interest in power, people are corruptible, and are constantly being corrupted. And I think [that is] what happened in 1990-91 with Václav Klaus and the sort of emergence of Klaus realizing that it is about power, it is not about individuals. And, sadly, Klaus was right. Societies function based on power, and that was what bothered Václav, and I think his realization that he had to create a (far too late) political party to carry forward his ideas, which in a certain sense were anti-parties, they were a much broader idea... And the Czechs found that they wanted to get at money; they wanted to get at securing their own family and their own environment, and they chose to do it in ways that were not always respectful to others.

I mean he... Again, one of my favorite stories about the challenges to him: I don't know if you remember, but I guess it was September of '89, before the revolution began, Havel wrote a letter to the president of Germany. A wonderful man. He wrote a letter to the president of Germany, and he said 'As a dissident'... Von Weizsäcker was his name, and he said 'I think that Czechoslovakia should apologize to the German people for what they did after the war to Germans who were living in the Sudetenland. And I think that the two Germanies should be reunited.' This was before that was... And most Europeans thought that was a very bad idea, the Italians didn't want Germany to be reunited at all. So he wrote this letter. And then, you know, Wendy and I gave the dinner for him the night before his inauguration. We had a huge dinner at U sedmi andělů in... No, they didn't have it, we had another hall in Prague Old Town. We had probably 100 people there; most of the cabinet came, and many, some Americans who were around. But before the dinner started, Václav came in with his leather jacket and he sort of jokingly said – he would come to our dinners a couple of times a year, this went on for years, since '83-'84 – and he said 'It's the first time I've come and the secret police are protecting me, not following me.' And he had these guards around him, all with leather jackets. Wonderful.

He came in, and suddenly the German ambassador came in to see me and said 'I have instructions to talk to President Elect Havel,' and so he went off in the corner with Havel, and I think Saša Vondra was there. And the German ambassador was telling Havel that when he goes to Germany the day after his inauguration; you know he was going to fly to Munich and to Berlin, and it was a statement of reconciliation. The German ambassador said to him 'We would like you, when you arrive in Munich, when you get off the plane, that you would say that "We think the Czechoslovak people should apologize to Germany for what they did," and secondly that you should call for the unification of Germany. We would like you to do that in Munich.' And here was a man who would

believe that, but now he was president, could he say it? And so we talked a little bit after that, and I said ‘Václav, you’re president of Czechoslovakia. You will be tomorrow. For you to tell the Czech people to apologize to Germany, which you have in your heart and your soul, is probably not smart politically. And also the unification of Germany is a very contentious issue within Europe, and how will you handle that?’ And I think he began immediately to realize that his instinct for reconciliation, which I think is probably his strongest driving movement – he wanted to reconcile. You know, ‘How can I achieve my goal of reconciling Europe and talking in those terms, and at the same time represent my people who would find it odd to apologize to the Germans? It’ll take a while for them to understand what we did, why we did it, why that was unfair and unjust even though they’d done the terrible things they’d done to us.’ And so I think he began early on finding his core thinking – in this case about reconciliation...

LK: He was many times criticized for his stance to the Communist Party after the Velvet Revolution. Do you think the urge to reconcile was a driver for his stance towards the party?

WL: Here it’s interesting. It’s complicated, and that’s one of the most subtle things that he did, I think. When after the... And I’m going to tell you another story: after his inaugural address, he was sworn in in Ladislav Hall, and then he went up to a balcony in the Castle and spoke to the people. It was a wonderful speech, and funnily I was down right under where he was speaking, and I ran into the former communist foreign minister, who was there! He was a Slovak from Ruthenia, I’ll tell you his name... And so, after that Havel walked across for the first time since the kings of Bohemia, and he went into Saint Vitus, and he was... There was a Te Deum that was given, Dvořák, and the cardinal was there. I was standing for a few reasons just behind Olga, and standing next to me was the minister of defense, who was the communist minister of defense. And when after the Te Deum the cardinal was lifted down (he could hardly walk then) and all these

dissident priests who were working for him, and brought him to Havel. And they came together, the country was coming together, like in the old days. And this guy, this minister of defense was crying, the communist minister of defense. And so Havel realized, unlike what happened in Iraq, when we fired the whole army of Saddam Hussein, rather than using them as a national force, Havel realized that the military would more likely support the nation than the party, and he was right. He was criticized for a long time about that, but he kept the communist prime minister, he kept the minister of defense, he kept so many people in office, because he knew that they didn't know how to govern. 'How do you govern? We don't know how to govern! We've never had this!' And he knew that particularly his gang were, had no experience doing this, and a very important aspect of running a government is governing!

And so I think that Čalfa, who was the prime minister - and he was criticized for keeping him on, and it wasn't a particularly happy experience... But had he named somebody like Saša [Vondra], or some of his pals, it wouldn't have worked. I mean, he needed guidance, he needed understanding of 'What do I do as president? What is my day like? How do I read all these stupid papers that I've got to read? And respond to presidents from around the world?' Never mind make decisions on economics, which was the major, major thing that they needed; they needed to sort out how to run the economy. So my own sense is that even though his instinct was to free everybody, his other instinct was reconciliation, and the practical business of running a country.

LK: What do you think his relationship to communism as an idea was?

WL: Well, he says at one point that he was a socialist, but that didn't mean the Socialist Party. I think he was socialist in the sense of being fair to how people earn their money and get their money and having everybody have an opportunity, which theoretically is a socialist idea. And I guess my response to that is twofold: I don't think he was, in the traditional sense, anticommunist. But I do

think his whole point of view was alien to Marx. Marx believed in the force of capitalism defining human beings. He believed that human beings defined human beings. A profoundly, profoundly different idea about what it is that makes a society and people work together. And secondly he disliked the idea of a party without opposition. And these two principles I think would govern in many societies. And it wasn't just communist: it was the whole dominance of a political party not letting anybody in, or even, he says in a couple of his essays, even if you let an opposition party in, if it is just an opposition party that has no power, it doesn't translate into democracy – as was the experience in Czechoslovakia. So I guess what I'd say is that he chose not to write against communism, he wrote against the phenomenon of a dictator, or a dictatorial party, and lack of individuals' responsibility.

LK: When we talk about the roles he played – Havel the dissident – how do you think he perceived the idea of being a dissident? How did he relate to the term? And what is your personal take on it, what did it mean for him to be a dissident?

WL: He talks about this too, a lot, the role they played and how people deal with dissidents. I mean, it is fundamental to his view of the role of individuals, that he was an individual, called a dissident, but he was expressing what he believed was a value, [speaking] to the role that people should play in this situation in Czechoslovakia. And he himself wasn't going to go out on the streets, that's not the way he was. Basically it was about ideas, about perpetuating the thought, growing the thought, that we as individuals must stand by what we think.

LK: So when you go back to the '80s, the time when you met Havel, was he in your perception a person who the general public knew something about? Was he a public figure? Because he was dissident number one...

WL: Well, the thing is that a large group of people had no notice of him from the press they got in Czechoslovakia. He was not front-page news ‘Havel does this...’ He was not in the press; they kept him out. They learned from the BBC, from Voice of America, from Radio Free Europe, and the radio reporting on him – your [Kabrhelová’s] media – was extremely thorough. And we... When we were there, my conceptual approach to our role was to keep the light on Havel. So we invited, practically every month or so, we’d have a major writer; we had, you know, Updike and Cheever, we had probably 15 major artists and writers, they’d come. And the deal I had with them was that they’d go back and talk about the fact that they’d met with Havel and who he was and what his role was and so... The major objective we had was to keep his name alive in the press outside, which plays back.

Now how much the Czechoslovaks themselves outside of the group knew about Charter 77 knew about him personally, knew about his group, I guess I don’t know a lot about that. I think since the media was so awful, what was efficient was the voice, rumors, and reports. And in fact, I found in many communist societies the people, when they reported what they heard, were fairly accurate.

LK: In retrospect when you look at the strategy that you chose for your diplomatic work over there in Czechoslovakia in really difficult circumstances which you just described: how important was it a moment for Czech dissent, and do you think that was the thing that kept them alive?

WL: Yeah, terribly important. Terribly important. That’s the one thing they say. Michael Žantovský in his book has some mention of it. Most of them remember that, and when I’m introduced to Czechs today, that’s one of the things that most people who were around then knew – that that was our strategy. And by the way, all the NATO countries, we would meet every month with the NATO ambassadors, and they all knew what I was up to, and they criticized it. They said it was making life difficult for them that I do this.

LK: And then, when we transform it to today's situation, because obviously there are still many countries – for example, Russia – where the opposition is basically completely minimalized and has no influence whatsoever, or Cuba, for example. So do you think this approach remains viable?

WL: I've always felt this. I feel it as strongly today as I did then. I learned this because my first job, when I was in the Soviet Union... Because in those days my Russian was very good, so I got to accompany John Steinbeck on an official visit, he was invited by the Union of Writers, and Edward, I met Edward there, John Updike, I went with John Cheever... And so I accompanied them for almost a month, three weeks, when they'd come, and a couple of major painters, and so I became convinced of how effective it was. And I did that when I was ambassador of Venezuela: I insisted to the media people in the embassy that I didn't want to appear on the front pages ever on military issues or on oil issues. I wanted my face to be around the arts. And it was both a device and the way I believe, the way I think. And so we brought a lot of artists to Venezuela, because the image of the American ambassador... And the American ambassador was a very important role, it wasn't me, it was a very important role because we really were a power in Venezuela. And so I wanted to change the vision of that power and remind people that we also do other things, other than invade countries.

And now, you know I've been very close to Cuba over the years, and I tried to... I established relations with Cuba in 1977, we opened the US Interests Section there and had our first diplomatic presence, even though it wasn't called a diplomatic presence. And I negotiated that deal. And ever since then, I've been sort of passionate about this subject. In 2000, we took Bill Styron and Arthur Miller, you know Bill Styron the writer, novelist, and Arthur Miller, the playwright? We took them and their wives and we met García Márquez, who is a very close friend of ours. You know who García Márquez is? Yeah. And he was there. So we spent almost a week (five days) in Cuba, and

it became a big deal. And Fidel was with us a lot. And clearly it was a major statement. And so now, Wendy and I have started a new program with Cuba, precisely in this area, now that the door has sort of opened a bit. We took Frank Stella (who is a major American painter) there about a month ago, just before the president had his visit. We had a five-day visit to Havana with Frank Stella, and it was amazing. And we tell the government we are doing it, and they support it. And we have a plan to have at least two major artists visit Cuba.

LK: So you are a strong believer in the concept of cultural diplomacy?

WL: Absolutely. Absolutely. Not as a vehicle. Just as a way to get to know people, to relate to people in a different way.

LK: So how important were the lessons from communist Czechoslovakia for you personally, to translate them into events and actions in other countries?

WL: Well I'd had this, the incredible moment that we had during that two, three years in Czechoslovakia was sort of life-transforming. Because I personally had a profound dislike for Marx and what he stood for, and for Lenin, which was basically the Havel view. I already had this. The Havel view was that Marx is completely wrong about human beings, and Lenin is completely wrong about power. And it wasn't necessarily communism as much as the way that societies are organized. And when Havel came along he was just a breath of fresh air for me. He was just everything that I'd thought – I'd never thought anywhere near as profoundly as he had, but they were part of a worldview that had driven much of my career. And he was just the answer.

LK: When we go back to Havel's legacy, do you think that the perception of him has changed since his death?

WL: The issues have changed. The issues have changed. And that's what... The role of the individual is still important, but the problem is the structures of societies are crumbling.

Governments are collapsing. So I guess, I would feel that from a philosophical point of view that Havel's role in establishing a sense of individual responsibility is a big, lasting principle. But you don't have the dictatorial quite in the same way that you did during the communist period, and the fascist period. Certainly in the case of China, you know you have a Communist Party which is authoritarian and a problem. But you also have lifted 30 million people out of poverty, you know. Who is to say that isn't a higher value? And I think the issues are different.

The Power of the Powerless is an idea. And when you read it, it is a powerful idea, which appeals to anybody who thinks. But people who don't think... And most people don't think, most people don't have anywhere near the philosophical understanding that Havel projects onto the world. And it becomes a slogan, which he would have hated!

LK: How do you think he would propose – and again we are speculating – in a time of the internet, Facebook, Twitter, a whole new world basically of people sharing information, and people learning, at the same that information can be manipulated and abused... How would he pursue this thought to teach society?

WL: It's a very good point. And I have no idea whether he would be able to understand, comprehend, the way the internet falsely empowers individuals through a type of group think that I suspect he would find very bothersome. The way the internet has not only expanded communications, but defined groups across borders, where they want to be... And you go, you go with what appeals to you, and then when you go with that line of thinking, and have your Facebooks, and your Twitters and everything related only to people who appeal to you, and it closes the doors to a lot of other things that are important.

Chapter IV: Moral Character - 00:52:58

LK: Havel of course talked about morality, but he was at the same time trying not to be a preacher, not to be someone who just sits there and says what people should do – exactly back to [the point on] responsibility. But when you look at politicians today, how important of a trait do you think morality is for politicians? Do we need morally strict politicians?

WL: Well here we are with Donald Trump facing us, and although I won't go into Hillary – I think she's not anywhere near what they say she is... But I guess I look at Obama, and I think he's a very moral person, and I think he won the election because he stood for a high set of values. Whether he was an effective president, I don't know. But I think I'm very proud of the fact that he was our president. And I don't know... You would never think that he would be corrupt, would you? You would never think that he would be dipping in somewhere, or that he would go out and become a corrupt individual. I think you probably think that he will do what he can for the world, and for American society. So I don't think it is all gone. I mean, I think he cares about a lot of the things that are of value and that Havel would care for. We are in a bad dip right now in this election campaign, and I hope that if Hillary emerges as the president that she will establish a number of new values including women as the president. And I hope that she will be the smart person who figures out what needs to be done now given our situation.

Morality: it is hard for me to judge her morality. I think she is a smart, fair person. She's had some bad moments. She stood by her husband in a very immoral moment for him, but we'll see. And I know a lot of politicians in Washington who are really good people, who care about this country. I wish there were more of them. But I do believe that morality is extremely important I guess, in the sense of... Not whether you're off having a woman here or there, or a man, that is contrary to your familial obligations: this is less disturbing for me, as it was to Václav, than the issue of your social, moral responsibility to your society and to the world. And I think he was an impeccably

moral person, who had some other things that the puritans would suggest wasn't high morality. And part of it [was] he was very Czech, and part of it was he did spend a lot of time thinking about the issues that were the big ones.

LK: So do you think he will be remembered as a person who still kept his strong internal integrity, philosophical thinking...

WL: Oh yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely.

LK: ...And was able to combine it with political power?

WL: No. That's different. I mean, I think that was what really troubled him, and what ultimately ended in a sort of I guess I'd say tragedy. But I think at the end the image of him dying alone with the nuns around him in Hrádeček; without his wife there, without his friends around him – I think it was a sad moment for a man who was a giant of a human being. And he... I think his humbleness was admirable, his self-doubt was admirable. But whether it worked for him as president is something I'll never quite understand. I mean I think that's what unraveled a lot of his approach.

Chapter V: Legacy – 00:58:06

LK: How do you think he would see today's society in Prague, because of course Czech society has undergone big change in past years which concerns his personality as well – the whole complicated relationships of the Czech Republic to Václav Havel... I guess very often the question here is: why are Czechs not appreciating Václav Havel's legacy?

WL: Well I think that was part of his tragedy. He knew when he died that he was not loved in his own country – and then there was this huge turnout when he died. He will be probably the most powerful legacy that the Czech people ever have, including some of your great writers. He really has to stand in the world as a major figure. But also like so many somewhat tragic... He could not... His ideas were great, but he did not know how to execute them, because he didn't believe in power, and had he tried to execute them, it would have changed him fundamentally and probably

not have achieved what he wanted. I mean power can't bring about what he wants, and what he would like human beings to be, because human beings aren't that way. And I think he maybe...

I mean I part with those who believe that people are good. I think that people, basically like the founders of this country felt... That people are given to corruption and greed, and so you have to build into the society through law a protection of individuals from other individuals. Because they're bound to be bad – not bad – they're bound to be self-promoting and corrupting, and they will corrupt you. And there are some great people who believed that people are good, and you just give them a change and they will be great. I don't believe that. So that was a fundamental difference I had with Václav.

I may be wrong, maybe he had somewhere in him that other contention. But I think finding ways to condition people to be more free, and more responsible – nobody's come up with that mode of governance yet. We thought we were getting there in this country, I'm afraid we didn't make it. Whether we can do it, you know, over time... We have a good chance, but we're in a bad period and I don't think we're proving ourselves able to do that. And so I think his frustration and his tragedy was, in a certain sense, the human tragedy, that the world he thought was possible, isn't. And the Czech Republic that he thought should be, cannot be. That is frustrating.

LK: What do you think he would see the role of the Czech Republic today to be?

WL: After he was president he came to Connecticut and Henry Kissinger had a lunch for him. It was a big lunch and Henry admired him a lot, and so sitting at the dinner we were talking about (this was the time that the Czech Republic, by then it was the Czech Republic, was trying to get into NATO)... And he and Henry thought the best thing in the world for Czechoslovakia or the Czech Republic was to get into NATO. And I asked how it would look. 'You've been the leader of reconciliation for Europe. NATO defined the division of Europe, along with the Warsaw Pact.

Why do you want to be part of the new division of Europe?’[It] was always to me difficult to understand why he sort of yearned for NATO, because it was something that he thought was not helpful in terms of his objective. And his answer was ‘It’s the only club I can get in.’

You know, he wanted to join the West. He didn’t want to have anything more to do with the East and be associated with it. And how do you define yourselves in the part of the world you are in one way? And I think he wanted that way... He wanted to be western, and not accommodate the dual nature of the Czech Republic. And I think he was a Europeanist, unlike Klaus, and I think he wanted to be part of Europe, and would have done a lot of the things that were done to remain a part of Europe. And I think he would have found a lot of what is happening in Hungary and Poland quite dissatisfying, or inconsistent with the dream he had for the Visegrad countries (I mean a dream he shared with others – it wasn’t just his dream). So, the region, the Czech Republic, individuals are not as good as he hoped they would be.

LK: And that would be your understanding why the region is going the way it is going?

WL: What? That... People in general! Not those people - I’m not talking about Czechs, Poles, Hungarians! I’m just talking about... People in general do not have the instinct that he had that we can work this out together. I mean, I think that his posture on reconciliation is probably not as... I think that one of the principles that will be his legacy is reconciliation. It will have to be the theme going forward for societies to function together. So many terrible things have happened within societies now. I mean the thought of some groups in, well, in Yugoslavia. How you reconcile those strong national qualities that have torn that area to pieces, and still there are deep, deep distrusts and anger among those little populations? And you transfer that to the Middle East, and unless you can get a spirit of reconciliation within Iraq, and with Syria, I mean never mind Libya, with tribes...

It is just hard for me to imagine how it can happen without a spirit of reconciliation. And they'll need Havel to imbue them with that spirit.