

When Our Enemies Got Free

sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Sunday, October 20, 1019

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento



Berlin Wall (graffiti on west side only)
photo Emille Guillemot, unsplash.com

A note about the instrumental music

Our pianist, Irina, has chosen pieces of music today by three composers of the Soviet Union in the 20th Century. The slide (1940) shows them in the order in which I describe them, from left to right.

Sergei Prokofiev was the most prolific composer of the 20th century and a leading figure in Russian culture. He was awarded a Lenin Prize and 6 Stalin Prizes. He died in 1953 on the same day as the dictator Joseph Stalin. Yet because of the crowds that gathered outside his house, Prokofiev's body could not be moved from the house for three days.

Dmitri Shostakovich was the most brilliantly inventive Soviet composer. His 7th Symphony was finished during the Siege of Leningrad, when Nazi forces confined and assaulted the city for 900 days. Around the world the symphony inspired confidence that the Nazis would not win in Russia. After the war, however, Shostakovich came under the suspicions of Joseph Stalin, who showed disfavor with his novelty and inventiveness. He took a turn and composed crowd-pleasers to avoid harsher punishment by the State.

Aram Khachaturian, a Russian and Armenian, was the most colorful composer, who made a notable contribution to the world of music in preserving the robustness of Armenian culture. In spite of his own

Communist ideas, Khachaturian could not be shielded from condemnation for his style.

Indeed, in 1948, all three men were accused by the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party of having bourgeois tendencies in their music and betraying the Soviet peasants and workers. They were put on trial and forced to apologize and admit their guilt. They did this in order to survive and be restored to prominence. They are now appreciated around the world as giants of 20th century music.



Reading: "Dear Dr. Husak" by Václav Havel 1975

This reading is from Václav Havel, a dissident writer and activist in Czechoslovakia, in 1975. He wrote it as an open letter to Dr. Gustav Husak, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

In 1968, on orders by the Soviet Union, six hundred thousand troops had crushed a people's uprising and ended a brief period of reforms in Czechoslovakia. By 1975, the repression was complete, and hardliners of the Party were in control again. Havel is warning of the dangerous consequences of the repression of normal life in society—dangers to the human soul.

In "Dear Dr. Husak," Havel writes:

If every day someone takes orders in silence from an incompetent superior, if every day he solemnly performs ritual acts which he privately finds ridiculous, if he unhesitatingly gives answers to questionnaires which are contrary to his real opinions, and is prepared to deny himself in public, if he sees no difficulty in feigning [or putting on] sympathy or even affection where, in fact, he feels only indifference or aversion, it still does not mean

that he has *entirely* lost the use of one of the basic human senses: the sense of dignity.

On the contrary: even if they never speak of it, people have a very acute appreciation of the price they pay for outward peace and quiet: the permanent humiliation of their human dignity.

Sermon: When Our Enemies Got Free

From the end of the Second World War until 1991, the Soviet Union controlled much of Central and Eastern Europe. The United States maintained alliances with Western Europe and other countries around the globe. The *Cold War*, we called it. The nuclear arms race threatened all the time to turn the Cold War into a *hot* one. In my hometown, the air-raid siren went off at noon every Tuesday. A test, in case there should be a nuclear attack. My parents built our house in 1950. Among its features was a bomb shelter. It looked like a garage in the basement. You could enter the concrete-reinforced room through a door in the basement or go down a steep concrete ramp from the back yard. By time I was growing up in the 1960s, there was no food or water stored in the shelter, and it was no longer a radiation-protected environment. That is, at the bottom of the ramp, the shelter was covered by an ordinary garage door. Go figure.

Even with such relaxed vigilance by my family, I recall from the 1960s and 70s and 80s there was a widespread fear that our world could end in a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, or perhaps with China. No doubt, our American fears were matched by the fears of people in the nations of our adversaries. We not only thought of those *countries* as our enemies; we thought of their *people* as our enemies. This is what I saw and heard and learned growing up. The Communists would kill us for power, so we needed to be ready to kill them first. Their populations were not people like us. They were *not* victims of repression, they were enemies. Thus, one of the achievements of Communism was to scare us out of our own sense of any common humanity.

The Cold War made U.S. policy cold-hearted. In the name of stopping Communist expansion, the United States aided or engineered the overthrow of legally elected officials in Argentina

and Chile in the 1970s, and then supported the new dictators. We allowed or abetted the abuse of human rights by pro-American governments in South Korea and the Philippines. We allowed South Africa's white government to attack anti-apartheid activists as Communist insurgents rather than consider their legitimate claims to racial justice and freedom. The United States aided right-wing militaries and paramilitary forces in El Salvador and Guatemala, where hundreds of thousands of ordinary people were killed or tortured. The U.S. war in Vietnam was a war against Communism. It didn't stop Communism, but it killed millions of Southeast Asians, and it took 58,000 of our own service members.

The Korean conflict was brutal as well, with many civilian deaths as well as military casualties, and long-lasting misery after the war. Yet it must be noted that it was Communist North Korea which had invaded the South, violating the rules of the United Nations. It also must be noted that the Soviet Union interfered brutally in other nations. The bloodshed included, for example, the suppression of a revolution in Hungary in 1956. It included invasions of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1980. Furthermore, not only did the Soviet government regard the United States as its enemy, it also treated *its own people* as potential enemies.

Now, nearly 30 years after the Cold War ended, I'm appreciating the varieties of courage demonstrated by many Americans. I appreciate those military service members who did their duty for this country, keeping watch on the skies for missiles, or quietly patrolling the seas, tracking Soviet ships and submarines, or staffing military bases in Europe and Asia. They served, knowing that in the event of even a limited nuclear conflict, they would surely perish. I also appreciate the intelligence agents who served in risky jobs, or in tedious ones, to gather and analyze information about U.S. adversaries. I appreciate the diplomats who negotiated relationships and maintained communications with adversaries as well as allies. I appreciate the scholars and the journalists who provided us with context and perspective on the cultures, politics, economic systems and languages of lands beyond this one.

I also appreciate those ordinary people who called for peace. Many U.S. American citizens dared to pursue international friendships with Soviet citizens—people-to-people connections. Tireless anti-nuclear activists in the United States protested against weapons of mass destruction. They prayed for the arms race to end. They pled for international cooperation. Such activists have been criticized or derided as foolish, naïve, or unpatriotic, but in spite of ridicule they found the courage to remind us all of our common humanity. They asserted the moral and spiritual truth of human kinship. During the Cold War’s long season of dread and fear, there were so many varieties of courage embodied and enacted.

In the next few months, there will be several 30-year anniversaries of dates when countries in Central Europe got free of Soviet control. I hadn’t thought about this anniversary until my visits to Poland and the Czech Republic last summer. At a museum, countless photos from 1989 showed the faces and bodies of those who risked their safety in non-violent actions.



They protested to make elections free and fair, to allow freedom of speech and of the press, to open up the barbed-wire borders between countries, and to break down the Berlin Wall. *People power*, it’s called. The fall of the Iron Curtain *was* a miraculous moment in history. To many people, it had seemed impossible. Now, in retrospect, to some people it seems inevitable. It wasn’t. Liberation is never inevitable. It involves risk. It involves courage.

Consider the courage shown by the dock workers in Poland’s Solidarity movement in the 1980s—they went on strike against their Communist government. In July, when I was on a Unitarian history tour in Poland, our local coordinator told me he had been a university

professor but after he joined Solidarity, he lost his job. Since then, he’s been a travel agent. In January of 1989, Solidarity gained the power and the status to negotiate an end to one-party rule in Poland. In the spring of 1989, Solidarity won parliamentary elections by a landslide. By August, its candidate became the first non-Communist Prime Minister in Poland in 40 years.



In the center of Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, there’s a monumental statue in bronze—the legendary King Wenceslas on horseback. It’s at the top of a broad boulevard, which slopes down past hotels, cafes, and shops. During my short stay in Prague, around Wenceslas Square I had a Middle Eastern meal, tried on a pair of Czech-made shoes, bought a shirt on sale, visited museums, and marveled at buildings in art deco style, painted pastel green or blue or mustard yellow.

The square is now filled with tourists and locals. Yet in November of 1989, it was filled with protestors—college students, workers, homemakers, academics and artists, demanding the end of Soviet-backed rule. One of their leaders was a playwright and novelist, Vaclav Havel. For years, Havel had been organizing, writing and speaking for freedom, and sometimes he was in prison for those actions. In 1989, however, in the first free elections in half a century, Havel became president of a free Czechoslovakia. He presided over the peaceful separation of Slovakia and the Czech Republic. He led his new country toward engagement with Western Europe and North America. Thanks to his commitment to political honesty, human freedom, and social justice, he’s been an inspiration to the world, as well as to his own people. Once an enemy of the state, the now-deceased Vaclav Havel has the honor of Prague’s International Airport bearing his name.

None of this was inevitable. People power finally did overthrow tyranny in Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary and so on—but in earlier times People Power had not been enough. Many dissidents never got out of prison; many protests were crushed and brushed away and ignored by government media.

Yet even in failed attempts for justice and freedom, the risks taken by courageous people are a demonstration of human dignity. Their courage is an argument for human decency. It is an inspiration to those who are now working and speaking against the anti-democracy trends in those same Central European countries that got free in 1989. And it can be an inspiration to people in this nation, where the future of democracy is at risk.



There is another monument on Wenceslas Square. Cast in bronze, a rough looking Christian Cross is embedded in stones on the ground and roped off from the sidewalk. I should give you some background about it

In January of 1968, Prime Minister Alexander Dubcek lifted censorship of the media and made other liberalizing reforms in Czechoslovakia. The people took a liking to freedom and protested for more of it. That moment is known as the Prague Spring, but it lasted only eight months. Dubcek was forced out. The Soviet Union ordered 600,000 troops from Poland and Hungary to invade and restore order. The purges, killings and return to a hard-line rule were called “normalization” by the government. But the people knew it wasn’t normal.

The cross in the stones marks the spot where, in 1969, a 21-year-old college student set himself on fire to protest the normalization. He died three days later; Jan Palach was his name. His

memory motivated the leaders of the struggle that led to revolution of 1989. It’s known as the Velvet Revolution to Czechs and Slovaks.

So much happened in 1989. Hungary opened its borders, then Bulgaria, then East Germany. People could climb over the Berlin Wall without getting shot by guards in East Germany. They could even tear it down. On November 9, they did!

In Romania, it wasn’t until the cold month of December when the people deposed their dictator. Adrian, a member of our congregation, was part of it. He has told me some of his story so I can tell it to you, and he’s found some photographs for us. At age 25, Adrian was a student and an employee at a university in Bucharest, the capital. Yet the protests began in western Romania, closer to Western Europe and its diverse music, arts, and political ideas.

In the city of Timisoara, the Reverend Laszlo Tokes was a Lutheran pastor who led an ethnic Hungarian church. Due to his activism, Romanian officials tried to remove Tokes. To protect him, ordinary people gathered at his house. Each day, crowds grew larger. Eventually filling the streets, they began protesting the government. On the third day, the military opened fire, killing several. Adrian said some people died on the steps of the Orthodox cathedral, as a Romanian priest had locked them out. Two days later, however, the army in Timisoara joined the protestors. Together they declared Timisoara “a communism-free city.”

There were killings also in Cluj, which is the main city of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania.



In the capital city of Bucharest, the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu blamed the violence on foreign spies and urged the people to fight them. On the contrary, more and more people were surging toward the main square to confront him at the national palace. In Bucharest, the Army remained

loyal, and it blockaded the square and started arresting people. Soldiers killed several people.

Adrian knew a young man who died--the recently married husband of a classmate and friend. Soldiers grabbed hold of another protesting friend, but she slipped out of her coat and ran through the freezing December air to the University. Adrian said, "She came to my office in shock.... I took her home, ... we didn't know what was happening downtown." They heard automatic weapons and helicopters and concluded the protests had been crushed.

His classmate said: "The thing I am most angry about is that tomorrow will be a day as if nothing had happened." That is, the government would keep its violence out of the news and history books. Things wouldn't get better. Another day as if nothing had happened.

But this time, something else happened. The next morning, waves of laborers began moving toward the city center, shouting against the dictatorship. At 7:30 AM, a colleague came by to take Adrian to join the protest. As they marched, standing alongside them was an army unit. They heard its commander order, "Prepare your weapons!" Adrian said, "I had the impulse to get down and take my colleague by the hand.... But then the commander had them fire into the air." Perhaps a warning shot, perhaps a noise to deceive the dictator. After this, the people cheered, "The Army is with us!" They kept marching. At 9:30 AM, the soldiers received an order to withdraw, to leave the area. Adrian said, "All the soldiers were crying. People hugged them...gave them food from their pockets, and cigarettes.... That was the moment Ceaușescu was left alone by the Army."

A crowd walked past a bread factory with an upper-floor balcony. Adrian said, "Women came out and threw us bread. In other places, they threw us white handkerchiefs so we could bandage injured protestors." A government helicopter, on the other hand, dropped leaflets with propaganda.

By 11 AM nearly 200,000 people were in the city center. Ceaușescu came out on the palace balcony with other officials. He began to speak. Adrian said: "He was met with an overwhelming, unbearable noise" from the crowd. Soon, Ceaușescu fled by helicopter from the palace roof.

His chief Army general had wisely decided to skip the trip; he'd had a cast put on his leg to appear to be injured. Ceaușescu and his wife were condemned in a show trial on Christmas Day. They were executed on live television.



After the fall of the Berlin Wall, U.S. President George H. W. Bush and Soviet Communist Party Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev met a number of times. The Soviet leader promised never to start a *hot war* with the U.S. He also announced that the Soviets would not interfere with political reforms then taking place in the states of Central and Eastern Europe.

In 1991, in Moscow, hardline Communist leaders waged a coup attempt in order to stop Gorbachev's reforms. Thanks to civil resistance, it failed in two days. Ironically, the coup added to the instability and hastened the breakup of the Soviet Union. Soviet leaders granted independence to the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. The Soviet Union came to an end in 1991.

None of this was inevitable. But it did finally happen. Perhaps it was the inspiration from earlier struggles which gave people the courage, again, to risk their safety and assert their human dignity. Perhaps it was the lessons from earlier failures which gave strategists enough knowledge to risk demanding freedom and justice once again.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the liberation of Central Europe, and the end of the Soviet Union, the record of progress has been mixed. The fragile structures of democracy are under threat in several of those countries.

In Russia, democracy and human decency have been twisted and trampled by the murderous Vladimir Putin. Democracy is fragile everywhere, including here. Freedom is not inevitable, but it is possible to achieve it and reclaim it.

Coming later this month and in the next few months are the dates of the thirtieth anniversaries of those great occasions in Central and Eastern Europe when ordinary people gained liberation for themselves and their nations. In this anniversary season to take some time to consider what liberation means to you. And let us consider what we could be doing for the cause of liberation and human kinship.

In these times, when so many of us perceive democracy to be at risk, what can we do to bring people power—ordinary power, our power—to the cause of protecting democracy and extending liberation? It could be learning more and paying attention more. It could be letting our voice be heard--speaking up. It could be showing up. It could be providing our time, talents, money or other kinds of support to other people or groups as they engage in the work of showing up. Everybody can play a part in putting people power to work. Let us reflect on the opportunities available to us all and let us go forward, together.

And let us remember the courage of the people of 1989. Let us be inspired by the people who brought their nations to the point of possibility and the place of liberation. They did this by asserting their own human dignity and the dignity of all who long for justice. By risking their comfort, their safety, and their lives, they reminded us of the moral and spiritual truth of human kinship. May all people—all of us—find the inspiration we need. May all people find the courage to face the struggles of these times, together. May all people be blessed with faith and courage, blessed with liberation and peace. Amen.

