

Our Velvet Revolution

by Doris Granny D Haddock

A growing number of Americans are beginning to identify with the pro-democracy activists whose courage opened much of the world to freedom in the final decades of the 20th Century.

We remember and honor the poet revolutionary Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia, where Charter 77 rendered the flowers and songs of a velvet revolution more powerful than the guns of oppression. We remember the shipyard hero, Lech Walesa (Va-len-za), of Poland. We remember those who stood non-violently in Russia, in Yugoslavia, in Tiananmen Square, in East and West Germany. It was their fearless living that ended the Cold War, not Reagan's saber rattling.

When people stand united with certain

courage against oppression, they get their way. That is an axiom in the geometry of world history.

To say we are oppressed in America sounds remarkably like the whining of spoiled children. We live such privileged lives compared to many in the world, it is true. We have our cars and our homes or apartments, most of us, and our television shows and our clean cities and glittering stores, cornucopias--and theaters and a thousand kinds of systems and conveniences and communication devices and all the rest that seem to work and serve us with well-maintained reliability. Living in the midst of such luxury, it is hard to imagine that one might not be free, that freedom might be an illusion, a fraud.

Was the hooped-skirted, ante-bellum Southern Belle, living her life in the plantation mansion amid her luxuries, a free human being--or was she as constrained from independent action as the slaves who served her luxury? Our homes

are now filled with the cheap products of slave societies, and our streets are safe because those who dare move against the system are locked away by the millions, so that their forced labor can serve us, too.

But we are free and happy, we think. We are Americans. We need no Velvet Revolution, for our lives are sufficient; they are velvet couches, made in China, affordable to us because the best part of the price is paid by others, by the young worker in China, by the unemployed fellow in our own town, and by his children who pay in a thousand ways.

So, we have it made. Yes, it is a problem that we Americans use a third of the world's resources, and that global pollution and the balance of our trade are all completely unsustainable, and that we can only get the cheap resources we desire by destroying democracies around the world and installing dictators to whom we can dictate; and all this sowing of bitterness is a harvest of terrorism now and to come, but we can

at least live for today in our freedom and our happiness. We, empire's debutantes, need not look out our plantation house window to the slave quarters in the distance, when the same window will give us our beautiful reflection.) But the small, everyday injustices of a population must flow somewhere; indeed, they gather into great rivers that flow through capitols and pentagons, where the selfish energies combine and become the bombs and machine-gun roar and rattle of our bloody agents in the world. Our vote every four years is a weak ceremony of little importance compared to how we live our personal lives, which empowers either good or evil in the world.

But as for our freedom, what do we have left of it? No man or woman is free whose life is built upon the suffering of others. Slavery enslaves the master more than the slave, for the master is enslaved in mind as well as body. And so we take off our shoes at the airport and are too dumbed-down to

think why, and we send our children to factory schools that are the abattoirs of their tender imaginations and grand potentials, and we are too hypnotized to think much of it. We bow our heads to our bosses, without the clear minds to mourn for our human dignity, for we dare not miss a paycheck or else the credit card and mortgage bales on our backs will come crushing down on us, and that is all that matters, we have been programmed to believe, not think.

Our lives have been stolen; we have no place to go, no meaningful choices--only meaningless, consumer choices. Decide to live the life of a poet, or a farmer, or a vagabond, or a philosopher, and count the cost of that. Can you afford it--can you afford freedom? Are you free to make big changes in your life, or do you have too many obligations to others? Financial entanglements have come to define human relationships, so that the elite may prosper.

Was it not ever so? Did not the frontier

farmers and the townspeople feel the constraints of their position, their obligations to family, church, community? They did so. I remember this life. It was imperfect, but it was different than today: people chose their oppressions and built lives. They were pawns in their own schemes and social hierarchies, and the fodder for the wars of the elites, but there was a sense of freedom that is missing now. Today's oppressions have organized in some inhuman way that serves against our interests and against the interests of society itself more permanently and aggressively. It is evidenced in so many new ways, from unnecessary wars built upon great lies, to election frauds and the dismantling of social programs by the device of other great lies, and the creation of permanent war so that power over us may be extended forever in ways small and grave: our shoes are to come off at the airport, our children are to be shot and blown up, and our debt is to be the great burden that keeps the bales upon our

backs and all of us in our places. There is, in other words, a permanently vicious aspect to life today that was only an occasional visitor to us before, when the wars came, when the union contract expired. The boot of greedy oppression is now always at our necks, it seems. And, like medical companies who own Congress or oil companies who own White Houses, it seem to have become the nature of the beast, widely understood and generally, if grudgingly, accepted.

But the pursuit of happiness? There it is, a phrase central to the world's idea of America. If some people in this country could erase those words from our Declaration, they would do so--and replace them with something more religious or otherwise authoritarian and demanding of obedience instead of the nurturing of our human potential. But the words remain there on that parchment, and indelibly upon our hearts and imaginations. That is why there is a velvet revolution brewing, and it

is not the whining of spoiled children, but the song of freedom of brave men and women who are prepared to let the bales upon their backs fall and mix with the old tea in the harbor.

And this phrase, the pursuit of happiness, the central red magma of our collective political souls, the energy source of all our revolutions including this one, calls not for our selfish enjoyment of other people's labors, but for the freedom to live meaningful lives in a land of justice, where our democracy is our tool to better the earth as a happy human outpost in the cold universe; a warm reprieve from the heartless and fatal logic of time and space, and a reflection here and now of God's love, or, absent that according to your beliefs, our best make-do substitute. For brotherhood is enough, and democracy is our belief in brotherhood and our commitment to it.

I have long admired the Europeans for the fact that they discuss politics constantly.

The sidewalk café conversation is superior for the maintenance of democracy, when compared to our sitting in front of endlessly dumbed-down news broadcasts and newspaper accounts. Even during this recent disclosure of election fraud in Ohio, the news channels all but ignored it, and the main story in the New York Times, even as Senators stood against a sham election, was a long report on the disruption made to Congress's mindless train schedule.

The sharing of email and our occasional standing together in protests is the best we Americans can do to create the community of democracy and raise the barricades of its defense. Or is it?

We tend to fall into the politics of victimization and anger. We are defensive, when in fact our only real success must come from another way: from the promotion and spreading of a lifestyle that we model with lives of joy and justice and sustainable common sense, and from a mending of the

split in American culture that now colors our national map. For we are not reds and blues; we share beliefs in common: freedom, justice, unity, brotherhood. It is only in our information that we differ, and those of us with better information have an obligation to share and, by doing so, widening the unification of the American people, whose interests are much the same.

This we can do if we understand that truth is conveyed and minds are convinced not by our words but by our actions--to live free, to find and share joy, to earn our livings not at the expense of others or of the earth. [Who will not follow, one by one at first, young people first, mothers and then fathers, pastors and then flocks?]

The soulful way forward we seek for our country and the world is to be found in mending the house divided. Not by the whisperings of fear, the shouts of anger or the whining of victimization, but by joy itself, and creativity, and a confident chuckle at the folly of the old, dead-end

ways of life.

War breeds consumer materialism. The Civil War brought the Gilded Age; the First World War brought the Roaring Twenties; The Second World War brought on the material binge we now maintain with ad-hoc wars as necessary. Wars destroy all other values, leaving only materialism. Can the process work backward? Can we bring peace by living in more sensible and beautiful ways? Yes, for the future is always being forged in the present. Lives of joy, if we create them, will bear joyous fruit.

Serving each other is the joy of life. It does us no good to rise up every four years and comb through housing projects and poor neighborhoods, begging for votes, when we were needed there all along--needed to bring joy and education to the children, resources to parents, tools for self-representation and community progress. In the ^{recent} ~~current~~ push in the Democratic Party for a new national chairman, the debate centers ^{ed} on how to better reach more

people with our political message, when our elections are but report cards for how we have served our communities all along. The work of a successful party or movement depends on how well it organizes people every day for the improvement of free and joyful living, for the power to shape their futures and care for their children, for the power to extend their higher values into the world and thus serve their dreams of brotherhood, justice and the peace that comes naturally from brotherhood and justice. And this peace needs no armies nor preemptive slaughters; no torture chambers nor even the taking off of our shoes at airports, as if our old globe were still large enough for us to be safe in an unjust world if only we will take off our shoes!

The poor of this country are so deprived of options that they now flock to churches, where the government money now comes, so that people can be turned away from the idea that government--democracy--is our

common tool for serving each other's needs.

If a party or a movement is to be successful, it must become that place where people go for personal help, like the union hall or the old Grange hall, or the thing we must see next, the party office in every neighborhood that needs help, filled with volunteers who have learned that the joy of life comes only through service.

[My advice to the activist is to look at the work of groups like City Repair of Portland, and of ACORN, and other groups that work to make everyday life more joyful for our people. Get involved with them. There are simply not enough of us to effect dramatic political change as things stand today, so we must labor happily in these vineyards until we are enough.]

And we must open the eyes and minds of our neighbors. Just as the religious groups go door-to-door with their pamphlets, so must we, with pamphlets that fill in the gaps

of information about our government, our environment, and our situation in America and around the world. These activities--working with people who need help and spreading the truth--must be joined, and our political work will come easier.

~~Let us string lights in the trees and bring out tables of food.~~ Let us buy the things we need from the workers here who need the work. Let us invite the musicians and the artists and the academics to do their part. Let us do, in short, what we would do if the present order fell to feathers with all its mortgages and credit cards. It will do just that if we so elect, and this is the election that matters. The things we dislike in the present order are sustained only by our fearful complicity.

Look at me: I am still alive, and I am looking at you, and you are alive. This is our world as much as anyone else's. We who are old enough or wise enough to see the edges of life can understand that we have a choice between fear and joy, and between

victimization and service. All elections and other indications to the contrary, happy days are here again when we but say they are. We do not turn our hearts away from injustice or suffering, indeed we mend them as best we can with our joyful engagement and our courageous non-cooperation with the forces of fear and death. And no one can take away our joy, for even our suffering for justice and brotherhood is joyful.

This is our Velvet Revolution, American style. We resist what we must and what we can, but our victory is not in defense, but in a cultural offensive made irresistible by the power of love and courage, pulling our people together, and our own lives together, over time.

We have tried this before in America. Things got in our way: drugs, wars, fears. We became parents. We became distracted. It is now time to get it right.

Thank you.