

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (NRSV). Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen (NABRE). Now faithfulness is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of unseen realities (Hart).*

There is a dispute about the translation of the Greek words *hypostasis* (assurance/realization/substance) and *elenchos* (conviction/evidence). *Hypostasis* usually means “substance” or “being.” Hebrews 1:3 reads *God spoke to us through a son who is the very imprint of God’s hypostasis* (translated *being*). *Elenchos* usually means proof, translated here as “conviction” or “evidence.”

However imprecise the definition, the author of Hebrews makes it clear that our ancestors did the improbable, the unexpected, the seemingly impossible, *by faith*. Hope is realized by faith; faith is hope’s being. Apart from faith, hope tumbles into the well of despondency and turns into pessimism, cynicism, or worse.

A traveling circus caught fire in Denmark. The manager sent the clown, who was already dressed and made up for the performance, into the neighboring village to get help, especially as there was a danger that the fire would spread across the fields of dry stubble and engulf the village itself.

The clown hurried into the village and requested the inhabitants to come quickly as possible to the blazing circus and help put out the fire. But the villagers took the clown’s shouts simply for an excellent piece of advertising, meant to attract as many people as possible to the performance; they applauded the clown and laughed till they cried.

The clown felt more like weeping than laughing; he tried in vain to get the people to be serious, to make it clear to them that this was no stunt, that he was not pretending but was in bitter earnest, that there really was a fire. His pleas only increased the laughter; people thought he was playing his part splendidly—until finally the fire did engulf the village; it was too late for help, and both circus and village burned to the ground.

Harvey Cox cited this story of Kierkegaard’s as an analogy of the theologian’s position today; the theologian is the clown who cannot make people take the message of faith seriously. Perhaps this disturbing image, for all its thought-provoking truth, is still a simplification.

It assumes the theologian/church is possessed of full knowledge and arrives with a perfectly clear message and, conversely, it assumes the “villagers” are completely ignorant. But is it really that simple?

Those who seek to persuade the “villagers” of the reality of unseen things will soon recognize not only the difficulty of the task of interpretation but also the insecurity of their own faith. The

believer is always threatened with an uncertainty that in moments of temptation can suddenly and unexpectedly cast a piercing light on the fragility of what usually seems so self-evident.

Yet, just as the believer is choked by the salt water of doubt constantly washed into her mouth by the ocean of uncertainty, so for the unbeliever faith remains a temptation and a threat to her apparently permanently closed world. Doubt is common to both the believer and the unbeliever.

From June of 1979 to September of 1982, Vaclav Havel, from prison, wrote a series of remarkable letters to his wife, Olga. On December 21, 1980 he wrote, *This letter will probably reach you sometime around the New Year and so some New Year's wishes would be in order.*

*The more I think about it, the more I incline to the opinion that the most important thing of all is not to lose hope and faith in life itself. Anyone who does so is lost, regardless of what good fortune may befall him.*

In January of 1981 Havel tells Olga that his observation about hope and faith is more than an opinion, it is deeply rooted in his experience of the world. He says he doesn't know how "everything" will turn out and therefore he has to admit the possibility that everything—or at least most things—will turn out badly. *Faith, however, does not depend on prognoses about possible outcomes.*

*Genuine faith is something far more profound and mysterious, and it certainly doesn't depend on how reality appears to one at a given moment.* Havel could have been channeling the author of Hebrews: "All these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them."

*Genuine faith, Havel writes, is an intrinsic state of the spirit, an inner direction which raises your entire existence onto a kind of higher level of Being. Faith, with its profound assumption of meaning, has its natural antithesis in the experience of nothingness; they are interrelated and human life is in fact a constant struggle for our souls waged by these two powers. If nothingness wins out, dramatic tension vanishes, and man surrenders to apathy.*

Faith, with its profound assumption of meaning, has its natural antithesis in fear, with its assumption that life is but a cosmic accident and in the end, pointless. A constant struggle for our souls—the soul of the theologian as well as the soul of the "villager"—is waged between these two powers, one the power of life, the other the power of death.