



Transcription of Vaclav Havel's Welcoming
Remarks to the Delegates of the 11th
Annual International Leadership
Association Global Conference

This transcript is courtesy of the work of Judy Brown, who offers some brief reflections on Havel's remarks following the transcript.

The following is an English translation of a video recorded in July 2009 by Vaclav Havel to welcome the delegates of the 11th annual International Leadership Association global conference, which would be held in Prague later in November 2009, just before the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. The Velvet Revolution was the non-violent revolution in which Czechoslovakia freed itself of communist rule. Havel, a poet and oft-jailed political leader, was a leader in that revolution and later president of his country. The video of Havel from which this transcription was taken, can be seen at: <http://www.ila-net.org/Awards/DLA/index.htm>.

“You have approached me as a leader although I don't know whether I am a particularly typical one. And I am somewhat reticent about being labeled one. But if I try to step back from myself and reflect on this topic, then I do have after all, one particular insight to share, mainly, that people don't become central persons by their own decision: it is life that lures them and creates them. It doesn't require any particular leadership habits or style. A leader isn't someone who shouts or arouses fear in others, but rather someone that people need to have near them and feel at their backs. I have one personal recollection. At a certain moment during our peaceful revolution, I was already very tired and exhausted from all the endless speculations, decisions, speechwriting and thinking up new things. That I escaped for a couple of days to a secret location—a friend's studio—where I reflected on my coming speeches and tried to relax. Interestingly, I suddenly started to be missed at the Civic Forum, which was then the focus of all the revolutionary events. I was missed not because there was a specific job or task that I had to do without fail or one that I and only I could do. There was nothing that could not be dealt with without me, and yet I was missed. I was missed as a special kind of background support, the sort that we take into account and that we think about, one that in some way helps us to act and not become confused. Without my having realized it, or desired it, it strikes me that in that sense I was able to play the role of a central figure. I find it amazing, because I am the last person to

consider myself to have charisma. However, since I have been invited to talk on this topic, I thought I would share this experience of mine with you. Apart from all other abilities and skills, leaders should also have trust in their coworkers. They should radiate calm. And they should truly be a background support that others can sense. ” - Vaclav Havel former president of Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic.

Judy reflects: I was particularly touched by what Havel (poet and political leader, who has known triumph and disappointment) had to say about "stepping back from himself" and what it means to be a presence that allows others to "act and not be confused." As a leadership educator, I realized that his words are a beautiful framing of what is at the heart of servant leadership, Robert Greenleaf's work, and it also relates to Heifetz's idea about getting on the balcony, and also creating a "holding environment." But mostly what touched me was his telling us the story of taking time to get away, and realizing he was missed not because he needed to do anything, but rather because his presence in itself was encouraging of others.