

**Discussion Questions and ideas for:
Havel, “The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World”
Bill Felice**

Havel’s essay is a thoughtful example of the “integration of knowledge” and the application of his liberal education to understanding the complex post-modern world. We end this section on the liberal arts with this reflective, helpful statement of purpose and meaning. This essay is so rich with ideas that it should provoke a lively discussion.

Discussion questions:

*What does Havel mean by “postmodern”? Why does he assert that the “modern” age has ended?

Note: Laura last year assigned her students come to class with definitions of “postmodern” as distinct from “modern” and pre-modern.” Since this terminology can be confusing to students, she found it useful to spend some time sorting this out. She asked her students to consider how have human worldviews/understandings of trust & knowledge have transitioned through the modern to the postmodern period Laura notes that “even though the distinctions and purported timing transitions among these [periods] are not exact (and cultures or people following all three general worldview characteristics exist side-by-side into the present day),” Havel’s essay hinges on a basic understanding of these terms.

*In what ways today are “value systems collaps[ing]”? Where is “new meaning” emerging? (p. 47)

*What is Havel’s critique of “science and modern civilization”? Has modern science “exhausted its potential”? Is science “now more a source of disintegration and doubt than a source of integration and meaning”? (p. 48)

*What does Havel mean when he writes: “Man as an observer is becoming completely alienated from himself as a being.” “Experts can explain anything in the objective world to us, yet we understand our own lives less and less.” (p. 49)

*Read entire paragraph in the middle of p. 49: “Cultural conflicts...constantly grows deeper.” Discuss the dichotomies Havel describes here—do students agree? Is Havel correct?

*What role does Havel believe “values” will play in the creation of a “new model of coexistence among the various cultures, peoples, races, and religious spheres...” What are those “values”? Are they American values, e.g., liberties and inalienable rights (Independence Hall)? Or are they global values, e.g., international human rights defined at the U.N.? Both? (p. 50)

*Discuss and explore the “Anthropic Cosmological Principle. (p. 51)

*Discuss and explore the “Gaia Hypothesis. (p. 51)

*Havel ends with a discussion of “self-transcendence”. Read paragraph in middle of p. 52 beginning “Yes, the only real hope...and thus honor their rights as well.” What is “transcendence” to Havel? What is your response to his religious/metaphysical conclusion? Do you agree? (p. 52-53)