

Editorial

From the Drawer: To the Wall

"To Marta: From the Drawer" was the title of the September 1987 editorial in *College & Research Libraries*. Dissident Czech writers were discussed—how some felt compelled to put their work in the drawer, while others circulated their manuscripts to friends and colleagues. Knowledge of the circulated manuscripts increased and sometimes acquired a wide circle of readers. Occasionally their works appeared abroad. This is how I discovered a collection of short literary essays by Ludvik Vaculik.

In his introduction to these essays, Vaclav Havel, another well-known Czech writer, voiced concern that his country may have cut itself off from the rest of the world. He wondered if we would still be able to understand one another.

Directly, and forcefully, Havel partially answered his own question. Today he is President of Czechoslovakia. By struggling for and winning freedom, he and his countrymen reached out in a way that we can understand both symbolically and intuitively. The point of the editorial, however, was not focused on the attainment of freedom but on our experiences with and uses of freedom in daily life.

In his first essay, "Free to Use the Typewriter," Vaculik asks,

When did you last read anything interesting in the papers? By that I don't mean interesting reports about matters economic or technical, about natural phenomena or political revolutions, but an interesting idea on any of these subjects. You can progress along the road of discovery without anything really new being said until such time as someone gets a personal feeling about it and tries to put his thoughts into words.

The existence of interesting ideas in a culture is due to factors that lie much deeper than the popular conception of freedom implies. For example, are there societal or cultural constraints on our freedom of expression? Do we use our freedoms either individually or collectively to suppress new ideas, or the people who represent these new or divergent perspectives and experiences?

Some may think that these questions are not relevant to the issues faced in higher education because our "assumed" practice of noble ideals places us beyond reproach. Clark Kerr disagrees. This former president of the University of California finds no evidence that morality is at a higher level on campus than off campus. He is not alone.

Michael Skolnik reviews a body of literature in his article, "How Academic Program Reviews Can Foster Intellectual Conformity and Stifle Diversity of Thought and Method," which raises serious issues about the openness of the university. The conclusions of four scholars are quoted here:

- Intolerance for new and different ideas, although it has no place in the university, is often found there (I. Winchester in a chapter to a book entitled, *The Future of a Mediaeval Institution: The University in the Twenty-first Century*).
- A major theme in biographies and autobiographies of scientists is the intolerance with which ideas are met and not infrequently suppressed (B. Barker in a chapter to a book entitled, *The Sociology of Science*).

- The American university encourages publications largely for the sake of institutional prestige, rewarding mediocrity as often as merit, and exerting enormous pressure on dissident faculty to conform (T. Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America*).
- The critical, the controversial, and the imaginative are not allowed to see the light of day (D. Lindsey, *The Scientific Publication System in Science*).

If accurate, these findings are disturbing. They should lead us to be wary of societal, organizational, or group norms that restrict us from discussing issues openly. They should lead us to wonder about the negative effects of pressures to conform. Indeed, one side effect of the increased participation of employees in organizational decision making may be an increase in the tendency to reinforce the status quo and to coalesce against change. This force or influence may impede an organization's responsiveness to changing client needs or emerging opportunities.

Personally I am concerned about how pressures to conform may limit personal growth. Potentially strong and dynamic personalities may remain dormant. Affirmative, caring, or other life-giving values may be rejected. The creative force may be repressed.

Less than a week after the Berlin Wall opened in November, I took a very spontaneous trip to West Berlin in order to participate in events. I hammered and chiseled at the Wall. Many others joined together in this effort. While we can remove these obvious barriers, there are more subtle barriers that must be torn down before the ideals of freedom are achieved.

Some of us can cry with joy for what has been gained while reflecting in sadness on how far we have to go before understanding, tolerance, and freedom are achieved in their most profound sense.

CHARLES MARTELL



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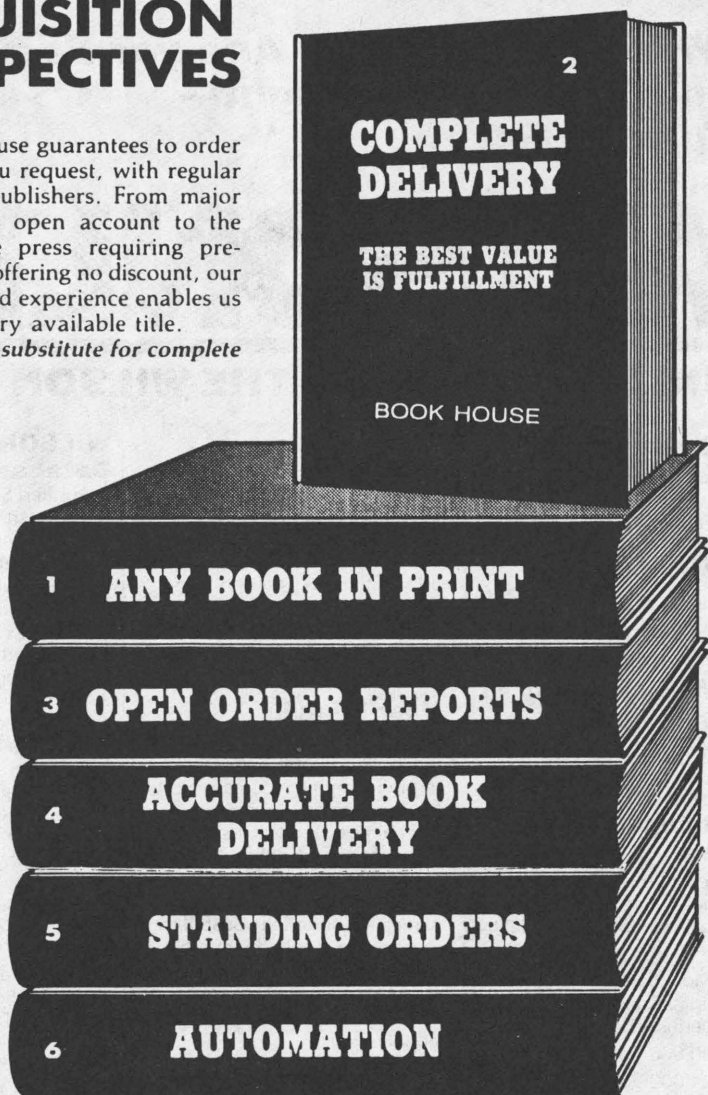


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