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Credo: Tom Palmer

By: [Leah Fabel](#)

Examiner Staff Writer

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In the waning years of the Soviet Union, Tom Palmer stashed copy machines and contraband papers in his luggage, and with the help of local co-conspirators spread the message of personal liberty and free market economics. Today, the 53-year-old is a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute and the director of international programs at the Atlas Economic Research Foundation. Palmer recently published "Realizing Freedom," a collection of his essays on libertarian theory, history and practice. He sat down with *The Examiner* to discuss the beliefs that have driven his life's pursuit of freedom.



(Andrew Harnik/Examiner)

Do you consider yourself to be of a specific faith?

I'm not religious at all, in fact. I have no hostility toward others' religious views, but I don't share them. I'm an old fashioned tolerant atheist -- I don't bother myself about the religious views of other people.

That said, all of us have a common language, which is reason and experience. So whether one is Christian or Hindu or Muslim or Jewish, it's possible for us to come to agreement on important matters of justice, and of right and wrong.

You say that for many people, the idea of right and wrong has been degraded in our culture. Why? When did that happen?

The growth of moral relativism is an interesting thing to chart. Allan Bloom at the University of Chicago argued that it was an unintended consequence of a positive development, which was the integration of different races and religions. As that happened, it became the easiest way to tell schoolchildren not to fight by saying, "Everyone and everything is as good as everything else." It is an easier route to say that there are no moral truths, but the

outcome is not more mutual respect. It undermines the foundation of mutual respect.

Moral relativism was a lazy shortcut for a pluralistic society. A better approach is to say you should respect others because they're human beings, and because they have rights.

Did anyone or any event especially influence your beliefs in life?

When I was young, I had the opportunity to attend a lecture given by [Friedrich August] von Hayek, the great Austrian economist whom I quite admired. And at the end of the lecture, someone asked a question. I'll never forget von Hayek's reply -- he said, "I gather from the form of your question that you believe [such and such]. I also was of the same opinion for about 50 years, but lately I've been thinking about it a great deal, and I've decided it was a fundamental mistake." I decided at that point that I wanted to be like him when I grew up -- to be willing to rethink things.

When you smuggled books into the Soviet Union, you relied upon the bravery and the integrity of people with whom you worked. What did those people share in common that inspired them to remarkable and dangerous acts?

They shared a willingness to think for themselves -- which is not the same thing as being a contrarian, because sometimes the common wisdom is right. But they shared a willingness to think about claims made, and to ask 'Is there a different way to live?' For people who live in deeply oppressive social orders -- well, it often takes a very special person to do this. They're not all intellectuals. Quite often those who stood up for simple decency were not educated people.

Take the example of the people of the Auvergne in France who hid Jewish children during the Nazi occupation -- these weren't college professors, they were simple farmers who said this is the right thing to do, and they risked death to do it. I've met others in Afghanistan -- people who lived there under the Taliban and continued to speak up for women's rights. Imagine that, in Kabul, outspoken under the Taliban. I don't know. It has something to do with human individuality-- it's not just that we think we're individuals with individual responsibility, but we actually are.

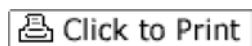
At your core, what is one of your defining beliefs?

I believe that the individual human life matters. I believe that human freedom is a constituent element of a good life -- of human happiness -- and is, consequently, intrinsically valuable.

-- Leah Fabel

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