

Kurt Vonnegut's Wrestling Match with God

Last Sunday I said that Jack Kerouac was *one* of several writers and novelists whose works are especially meaningful to me. He's not the only one. Kurt Vonnegut is another writer whose writings have greatly influenced me. He died ten years ago this spring at the age of 84.

Recently I got drawn into a Facebook inquiry that listed what were said to be the top 50 (or maybe it was 100) novels of the 20th century; and you clicked the ones you'd read. I don't know decided which novels made the list, but among them were Kerouac's "On the Road" and Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five." I don't remember my score, but I didn't do too badly.

Among the many novels and collections of essays Kurt Vonnegut published over the course of his lifetime was one that came out in 1991 titled *Fates Worse Than Death*. It included a talk he gave, as the annual Ware Lecturer, at our Unitarian Universalist Association's 1986 General Assembly.

The Ware Lecture is the "celebrity event" at our GAs, where someone whose name recognition goes beyond UU circles comes in and makes a presentation. In *Fates Worse Than Death* Vonnegut introduced the text of his Ware Lecture presentation in this way: "In order not to seem a spiritual quadriplegic to strangers trying to get a fix on me, I sometimes say I'm a Unitarian Universalist."

I've heard all kinds of reasons as to why people become UUs, but Vonnegut is the only one who ever said it was to avoid the fate of being a "spiritual quadriplegic." Anyway, there you have it.

My one and only encounter with Mr. Vonnegut was at this General Assembly. It was held on the campus of the University of Rochester in Rochester, New York.

Vonnegut had just published his novel *Galapagos* at that time, and he did a signing at the U. of R. student union. I waited patiently in a long line with my newly purchased copy. When I finally got up to the table where he was signing I thanked him for providing me with a lot of sermon material over the years. His response was to look up at me, raise one eyebrow slightly, and say, "Well, that stuff is all copyrighted material you know."

When he asked if I wanted anything written as an inscription I didn't give him my name, and only asked that in addition to his signature he just write the words "So it goes." He did so with a slight smile. If you're a Vonnegut reader you know what that's about; if not, I'll get to it in a few minutes.

So what is it with Vonnegut and me? Well, for openers I have to say I'm quite taken with how Vonnegut, a professed atheist in the sense of not believing in a Supreme Being, still seemed to wrestle greatly with the *idea* of God. For a man who didn't believe in God he couldn't seem to stop talking about him or her or it! He could make more references to God in a given speech that I generally do in two or three month's worth of sermons.

His non-fiction works contain a notably high number of talks given in churches, synagogues, or other religious gatherings and settings. He did not usually make his God references in a dismissive or cynical way, although cynicism is part of his literary stock in trade. He made them instead in the more in a paradoxical way of someone who is honestly searching for something that he thinks isn't there but who believes the search is worth the effort anyway.

This need to search for a God who probably isn't there—which for Vonnegut (and for me, too, for that matter) is really a search for a safe and spiritual home in an often world gone mad—is one of three, by my count, major motifs in his fiction and non-fiction alike. Call it motif One.

Motif Two, for Vonnegut, is the age-old problem of evil, which he saw as human destructiveness, human indifference, human greed, and needless and gratuitous human violence. Vonnegut was a strongly avowed humanist who at the same time could not turn his eyes away from humanity's tragic and shadow side. Paradoxically enough, his way of dealing with evil was largely through humor—often dark and sardonic humor to be sure—but very well done humor nonetheless.

Vonnegut's humor was a foil or a shield that he used to keep himself from being overwhelmed by what he saw as the often-sad plight of humanity. Vonnegut was a moralist of the highest order, and moralists—even when they're right—can still be insufferable. So he would convey his moral outrage at "man's inhumanity to man" (excuse the sexist language) with humor to guard against being insufferable.

Then Vonnegut's Motif Three is madness. Many of his characters have a touch, and sometimes it's more than a touch, of madness about them. In Vonnegut's handling of them, however, they are also persons of great virtue and innocence who come off as crazy because they are attempting to live out what for them is a normal life in a world gone mad.

This is not exactly an original theme in the history of literature, but Vonnegut was especially adept in using it. Vonnegut himself had his own occasional battles with mental illness, which ran in his family. He was subject to periods of deep depression, and in 1984 attempted suicide while in the depths of one such episode.

His son, Mark Vonnegut, who is a prominent Boston area pediatrician, has also had his struggles with mental illness which he, Mark, has chronicled in two books of his own: *The Eden Express* in which Mark describes a schizophrenic breakdown when he was in his early 20s; and then he tells of a much more recent episode of a mental and emotional breakdown he had, in a book he published in 2011, titled *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So*.

Before continuing I'll offer a nickel tour of Vonnegut's life. He was born in 1922 to a comfortably middle-class family of German origin in Indianapolis, Indiana. His family had no religious affiliations and considered themselves free-thinkers. Perhaps it was an absence of religion in his early years that allowed Vonnegut—even as he remained an atheist—to be so open to religious exploration. He wasn't carrying any wounds or baggage from an early religious upbringing because he had none.

He went into WWII at the age of 20 as a private in the Army. He was later captured and made a prisoner-of-war in Dresden, Germany. In Dresden he and his fellow POWs were housed in an abandoned slaughterhouse called Slaughterhouse Five, which later became the title and basis for his signature novel and motion picture.

After the war he attended a number of colleges and universities and eventually earned a degree in anthropology from the University of Chicago. His first job, however, was as a public relations employee for the General Electric Corporation in Schenectady, New York, which became the fictitious city of Ilium, New York in some of his later novels. In the late 1940s and

early 50s he began getting short stories published in popular magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Colliers* which eventually allowed him to quit his job at GE and write full time, as he did for the rest of his life. There were two marriages, with his first wife dying of cancer, and several children, including his aforementioned son, Mark.

Well, that all sounds like a pretty straightforward, middle-class kind of American existence, even with its painful times. Where, then, did Vonnegut's dark humor, and his interplay between madness and sanity, and his search for a God in whom he couldn't quite make himself believe, come from?

Some of it stems from the incident I just mentioned—when he was an American POW in Slaughterhouse Five in Dresden. He was there, an American soldier of German descent, when his own country bombed the purely civilian target city of Dresden, which had no militarily strategic value at all. Since the slaughterhouse facility where Vonnegut was held was underground he was not harmed when the bombs fell. But he and his fellow POWs were given the job of cleaning up the City and carting off the many civilian dead when the raid was over.

This is how David Goldsmith, one of Vonnegut's biographers, describes the effect of all this on the 21 year old kid soldier from Indiana: "Planes from his country did the bombing and he, perpetrator, observer, and target all at the same time, survived... The Dresden bombing, senseless and nightmarish, spelled doom for the comfortable, middle class ideologies of his Indianapolis upbringing."

Another definer for Vonnegut was his mother's mental illness. I mentioned that it ran in his family. When young Kurt was growing up his mother would have fits of uncontrollable screaming and hurl wildly unfounded accusations at his father.

So beneath the veneer of middle class security and living, there was for Vonnegut these encounters with madness; madness on a massive scale in his memories of Dresden; and, closer to home, with the madness of his mother, and for a time, of his son; as well as his own near fatal depression. Out of all this came the heroes of some of his novels; they are innocents, holy innocents, searching for meaning—for God, if you will—in the midst of madness: Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five*, Eliot Rosewater in *God*

Bless You Mr. Rosewater, Winston Niles Rumford in *Cat's Cradle* and the like. They are pilgrims (as in Billy Pilgrim) in a strange and often confusing land looking for a spiritual home.

I've already referred to it several times so I'll focus in now on *Slaughterhouse Five* as it does pull together several of the themes I've cited. The central character is Billy Pilgrim of Ilium, New York: Solid citizen, optometrist, President of the local Rotary Club, with a wife, son, and daughter. Like his creator, Billy is a World War II vet, a former POW, and a survivor of the Dresden bombing.

Billy travels in time. He's a pilgrim in time. At one moment he's in the security and placidity of Ilium, while in the next he's in Dresden, and in the next he's who knows where. He keeps coming unstuck in time. He cannot stay completely in one place or another; or in one time frame or another. And some of his movements are between sanity and madness.

Then there's a, quite literally, "far out" place to which Billy takes his pilgrimages. It brings into play an often-used science fiction component of Vonnegut's writings. Billy gets transported off now and then to a planet called Tralfamadore. It is a planet completely outside of time. From Tralfamadore Billy gets a quite different perspective on life and death and good and evil on Earth. Also while on Tralfamadore Billy gets to consort with a, ah, soft-core pornographic movie actress named Montana Wildhack. She, like Billy, also comes unstuck in time and lands on Tralfamadore.

From his outside of time perspective, out there on Tralfamadore, Billy can see any part of his earthly life that he wants to: Ilium, Dresden, whatever and wherever. He even sees how and when he dies, and he can go to that time and place and die as often as he wants to. So, when back on Earth, Billy writes a letter to the editor of his hometown paper, the *Ilium News Leader* where he describes the perspective of life on Earth he's gained while on Tralfamadore and from the Tralfamadorians. He writes:

"The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past... All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that

interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever...

“Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is ‘so it goes.’”

His letter gets printed, much to the dismay of his grown daughter, who assumes her father has completely lost it; and fears that her father will be labeled the village idiot.

OK, so what is going on here? The best way for me to answer is to say what goes on for me when I read something like this. There is a tension, I feel, a necessary tension, between caring deeply and passionately about something or someone or about certain principles and values; and also being able to say “so it goes.” I care about a lot of things, as I know each of you do as well. I also know that caring can be consuming; consuming, if one is not careful, to the point where there could be no “you” left to care.

At times I have to let go a bit, in order to later re-engage. It a matter of needing to say ‘so it goes’ once in awhile in order to able to then jump back into this sometimes maddening and sometimes very blessed world in which we live and move and have our being.

I also think Tralfamadore is a metaphor for the God Vonnegut sought. This God is not a Being, Supreme or otherwise; and is not found in a place—heaven or otherwise. Rather it is a perspective, a cosmic perspective, in fact. It is a way of looking at “all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains.” What Vonnegut is aiming for is a transcendent view or way of looking at life. It is a view that takes the present seriously, but also says that this is not all there is about me or about my life. It is a way of seeing one’s life as a totality that can be affirmed, even in those particular moments when all one can say is “so it goes.” Vonnegut’s “God’s eye view” of the universe is the place where everything—that is *every thing* is finally all right.

In the Preface to *Fates Worse Than Death* Vonnegut reprints an interview he gave for the *British Weekly Guardian*. I referred to it in an earlier sermon, and I’m revisiting it here. In this interview he’s asked “What is your idea of perfect happiness?” He answers, “Imagining that something somewhere

wants us to like it here.” *Imagining*, please note, that “something somewhere wants us to like it here.”

Later in the same interview he’s asked “When and where were you your happiest?” He answered with a story: “About ten years ago my Finnish publisher took me to a little inn on the edge of the permafrost in his country (Finland). We took a walk and found frozen ripe blueberries on bushes. We thawed them out in our mouths. It was as though something somewhere wanted us to like it here.”

That was an eternal moment for Vonnegut. In the Tralfamadorian sense it was a moment as full and real and present for Vonnegut as the horrors of Dresden, or the time of the madness of his son, or of the time when he lost his first wife to cancer, or when he came close to suicide himself. He still kept alive the idea—the sustaining idea—that someone or something somewhere is wanting him to like it here. That is a perspective and a life stance I try to maintain for myself.

Well, all I’ve been able to do is give you a smattering of his life and work. You’ll have to read him yourself if you really want to “get it” as to what he’s trying to say; and that’s not to say that I’ve completely gotten it myself. But there he is—a humanist, an atheist who still talks a lot about God. He often stated that he took his personal moral code from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He loved life and cared deeply for and about the peoples of this planet, while also laughing at it at times and just saying “so it goes.”

I can only speculate on what Vonnegut might make of the current social, cultural, and political climate in which we now find ourselves. I’ll finish up with some of my speculations. Maybe they’ll be of some help to you. He would see us in this country as living in a maddening time right now. Part of his counsel, I feel, would be to not allow oneself to be consumed by some of the madness around us—by the way in which our country has, for some, become an unsafe, if not scary, place. Face it, he would say, but don’t get eaten up by it. You’re going to need you “so it goes” moments now and then. Not as an escape, but as a way of letting go for a time, and stepping back, and taking care of yourself, before re-engaging in the issues and concerns you feel passionate about. He would probably say that as un-funny as many things are now, don’t lose your sense of humor, even if it’s a dark sense of humor, since that is what keeps you sane.

He might even throw in a little Tralfamadore and note that we are living in a moment in time—a moment we need to engage with, and seriously attend to, to be sure—but still a moment. There have been other moments prior to this one, and still other moments to follow. As much as you may need to attend to it, do not let this moment become all that there is for you.

Unitarian Universalist or not, I don't know that Mr. Vonnegut was familiar with our closing hymn; but it speaks well to his world-view and to our place in this world as it lies in the midst of a vast universe. Like him, we are travelers, all of our lives, in a wide universe, seeking a "Blue Boat Home."

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