

## **“Unitarian Universalist Voices: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.”**

[All quotations are taken from the works of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.]

On the occasion of the hundredth anniversary celebration of the completion of Mark Twain's house in Hartford, Connecticut, Kurt Vonnegut, “simultaneously a humorist and a serious novelist,” as he described himself, was asked to speak.

“As a special honor to me,” he wrote, “balls had been racked up on Mark Twain's pool table on the third floor. I was to be allowed to break them with Mark Twain's own cue. I declined. I did not dare give Mark Twain's ghost the opportunity to tell me, by sending the cueball into a corner pocket without touching anything, say, what it thought of me.”

In the course of his remarks, Vonnegut said

“I am, of course, a skeptic about the divinity of Christ and a scerner of the notion that there is a God who cares how we are or what we do. I was raised this way - in the midst of what provincial easterners imagine to be a Bible Belt. I was confirmed in my skepticism by Mark Twain during my formative years, and by some other good people, too. I have since bequeathed this lack of faith and my love for the body of literature which supports it to my children. ...The ideal my parents and Twain and the rest held before me, and which I have now passed on...is this: ‘Live so that you can say to God on Judgment Day, “I was a very good person, even though I did not believe in you....” We religious skeptics would like to swagger some in heaven, saying to others who spent a lot of time quaking in churches down here, “I was never worried about pleasing or angering God - never took Him into my calculations at all.”’ [Palm Sunday]

Some years later he described himself as “an Atheist (or at best a Unitarian who winds up in church quite a lot).”

The day Kurt Vonnegut wound up in heaven, or the atheist's facsimile thereof, was a sad day for those of us who read his books and essays, and loved his way of being “a good person” in the world - a wry, irreverent, twisted, and down-to-earth voice of reason, making us laugh about the deepest things, enabling us to get on with the good struggle. Vonnegut died on April 11, 2007.

He was born 84 years prior, on the holiday that has become known as Veteran's Day, November 11. Vonnegut was, himself, a veteran of World War Two, but he reminded his readers that this day was originally known as “Armistice Day.”

“When I was a boy” wrote Vonnegut “all human activity in Indianapolis... stopped for one minute [on Armistice Day]. That was the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It was during that same minute back in 1918 when World War I stopped....On Armistice Day, children used to be told how horrible war was, how shameful and heartbreaking, which was right. The proper way to commemorate any war would be to paint ourselves blue and roll in the mud and grunt like pigs.” [Palm Sunday]

When I lived in New York City, back in the early 1980s, on two separate occasions, I saw two famous people walking along the street in the City - Tiny Tim (who, as you may recall, enjoyed a brief flash of fame with his hit single “Tiptoe through the Tulips”), and Kurt Vonnegut. I probably crossed paths on the street with other famous folks, but didn't recognize them. But both Tiny Tim and Vonnegut cut quite distinctive figures. Vonnegut was a tall, lanky, haggard, distinguished, tweedy looking man. I'd seen him before, when he came to speak at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, which is where I went to Church when I lived in New York.

I remember, on that Sunday morning, he seemed out of his element in the Cathedral - he was somewhat awkward standing high up in the gothic stonework pulpit, leaning over the lectern and peering down at us, trying to spin sense out of and through the nonsense prevailing in our common contemporary world. His hands were large, and as he spoke he motioned with them as if he were juggling his ideas in front of him for all of us to see as well as hear. The main thing I got from his speech, which went on quite a long time, was this: He had just returned from a trip to the Galapagos islands, where he had seen the blue-footed boobies. He said we humans may be arrogant and stupid enough to think it worth killing each other off for causes and honor and nationalistic glory. But we have no right to kill off the blue-footed boobies, and all the other forms of life, just to serve our own greedy purposes or preserve our flags. That's my memory of what he said, anyhow. He ended his address, as he customarily ends his addresses, with "Thank you for your attention." And I felt he was really grateful for the attention the congregation had given him.

After the service, I stood in line to shake Kurt's hand. Those were the days when I was rather an ephemeral presence in church. I went to the cathedral, and left the cathedral, and generally I never spoke to anybody. But on that Sunday I stayed. When it came my turn to shake the hand of one of my genuine heroes, I realized that he was a shy man, for all his larger than life fame, his literary bravado, and his great place in my estimation. He was humble. He was human. I liked him all the more for that.

Later, I came across that speech he gave at the Cathedral in the Spring of 1983. It's in his book Fates Worse than Death. He had this to say about it:

"Here is how I happened to have the use of the high pulpit and public-address system of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine...: The management invited several persons famously opposed to nuclear weaponry to preach on sequential Sundays in the spring of 1983. I was one of those, and I must have blown a gasket while solemnly mounting the pulpit stairs. Why do I say that? I was so blitheringly optimistic!... What I should have said from the pulpit was that we weren't going to Hell. We were in Hell, thanks to technology....And it wasn't just TV. It was weapons which could actually kill everything half a world away. It was vehicles powered by glurp from underground which could make a hefty old lady go a mile a minute while picking her nose and listening to the radio. And so on....

...I was already friends with the Cathedral's bishop....He and his wife Brenda and Jill and I had gone to the Galapagos Islands together. One night when we were right on the Equator, I asked him to point out a constellation I had never seen, the Southern Cross. He had seen it, I knew, because he had fought as a marine well south of the Equator, in Guadalcanal. (That was where he got religion. If I had had one, I would have lost it there.) The Southern Cross was a teeny-weeny thing, not much bigger than the head of a thumbtack from our vantage point.

'Sorry,' he said.

'Not your fault,' I said."

Here is how Kurt Vonnegut described himself to the chairman of the Drake, North Dakota School Board upon the occasion of that Board's removal of his novel Slaughterhouse Five from the school library:

"Certain members of your community have suggested that my work is evil. This is extraordinarily insulting to me. The news from Drake indicates to me that books and writers are very unreal to you people. I am writing this letter to let you know how real I am....I am in fact a large, strong person, fifty-one years old, who did a lot of farm work as a boy, who is good with tools. I have

raised six children, three my own and three adopted. They have all turned out well. Two of them are farmers. I am a combat infantry veteran from World War II, and hold a Purple Heart. I have earned whatever I own by hard work.

I have never been arrested or sued for anything. I am so much trusted with young people and by young people that I have served on the faculties of the University of Iowa, Harvard, and the City College of New York....My books are probably more widely used in schools than those of any other living American fiction writer....I am a good citizen, and I am very real."

This is one of the few passages I have found where Vonnegut toots his own horn.

But he did write extensively about his family, and his love of "families." His parents, both affluent, educated offspring of German immigrants, were married in the First Unitarian Church in Indianapolis. By the time of their third child Kurt's early manhood in the Depression era, the Vonneguts were well on their way down the economic ladder. They were an artistic family - strongly socialist in their politics, humanist in matters of religion, practical in the world of business - owning (before prohibition) a brewery and (up until the 1970's) the Vonnegut Hardware Company, which was started in 1852, in Indianapolis.

"The anti-Germanism in this country during the First World War so shamed and dismayed" his parents, as Vonnegut said "they resolved to raise me without acquainting me with the language or the literature or the music or the oral family histories which my ancestors had loved."

In the book Timequake, Vonnegut proposes 4 Amendments to the Constitution which directly reflect the ethics he learned among his family in Indiana:

"Article XXVIII: Every newborn shall be sincerely welcomed and cared for until maturity.

Article XXIX: Every adult who needs it shall be given meaningful work to do, at a living wage.

Article XXX: Every person, upon reaching a statutory age of puberty, shall be declared an adult in a solemn public ritual, during which he or she must welcome his or her new responsibilities in the community, and their attendant dignities.

Article XXXI: Every effort shall be made to make every person feel he or she will be sorely missed when he or she is gone."

He adds: "Such essential elements in an ideal diet for a human spirit, of course, can be provided convincingly only by extended families."

Elsewhere he wrote:

"When I celebrate the idea of a family and family values, I don't mean a man and a woman and their kids, new in town, scared to death, and not knowing whether to [collapse] or go blind in the midst of economic and technological and ecological and political chaos. I'm talking about what so many Americans need so frantically: what I had in Indianapolis before World War Two, and what the characters in Thornton Wilder's 'Our Town' had."

According to Vonnegut, the reason most people join religions is because they are seeking an extended family.

The topic of "family" leads us directly to a constellation of concepts revealed by Vonnegut in his book Cat's Cradle: These are the concepts of the "Karass," the "Granfalloon" and the "Wampater" and they are found in the religion called "Bokononism," after its freethinking founder, Bokkonon.

“We Bokononists” says the Cat’s Cradle’s narrator, “believe that humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God’s Will without ever discovering what they are doing. Such a team is called a karass....If you find your life tangled up with somebody else’s life for no very logical reasons...that person may be a member of your karass....A karass ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries. It is as free-form as an amoeba.”

In his 53rd Calypso, Bokonon invites us to sing along with him:

“Oh, a sleeping drunkard  
Up in Central Park,  
And a lion-hunter  
In the jungle dark,  
And a Chinese dentist,  
And a British queen -  
All fit together  
In the same machine.  
Nice, nice very nice...  
So many different people  
In the same device.”

...“A wampeter is the pivot of a karass. No karass is without a wampeter,” Bokonon tells us, just as no wheel is without a hub.

Further on, we learn:

“Anything can be a wampeter: a tree, a rock, an animal, an idea, a book, a melody, the Holy Grail. Whatever it is, the members of its karass revolve about it in the majestic chaos of a spiral nebula. The orbits of the members of a karass about their common wampeter are spiritual orbits, naturally....

As Bokonon invites us to sing:

Around and around and around we spin,  
With feet of lead and wings of tin....”

Perhaps last Autumn’s day long workshop to hone a vision and mission for the First Unitarian Universalist Society here in Burlington might have been entitled “A Wampeter for the First UU Society Karass.”

It is interesting to give these ideas some play, and to speculate about who is in your karass - knowing that the ties of such a bond would be completely independent of any conventional bond, cultural or economic similarity, or logical connection. Have you ever known someone who just kept crossing your path for no apparent reason, or have you ever noticed a stranger who seemed strikingly familiar, or had an acquaintance with whom you shared a special resonance of perspective? Maybe they were in your karass. The karass, keep in mind, is the means by which the Bokononist God accomplishes his will in the world. And what’s your wampeter? What are you spinning around? Does it matter? Is the Creator’s will accomplished regardless of how you see the hub, or not?

These are all good questions.

The final element in this constellation is the granfalloon, and to understand Vonnegut’s definition, I need to remind you, or to tell you if you haven’t already heard the term, that a “Hoosier” is a person who was born in Indiana. Kurt Vonnegut was a Hoosier, as he put it “along with James Whitcomb Riley and the man who wrote Ben Hur.” Vonnegut wrote:

"[The] obsession with Hoosiers around the world was a textbook example of a false karass, of a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of the ways God gets things done, a textbook example of what Bokonon calls a granfalloon. Other examples of granfalloons are the Communist Party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, the International Order of Odd Fellows - and any nation, anytime, anywhere.

As Bokonon invites us to sing along with him:

If you wish to study a granfalloon,  
Just remove the skin of a toy balloon."

Kurt Vonnegut was a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and held the office of Honorary President of the American Humanist Association. Families, karasses, granfalloons - he loved them all.

When I first became acquainted with Unitarian Universalism years ago, it seemed to me to be a very dry religion. My first readings in our tradition were of prim and wordy rationalistic Boston Brahmins of the 18th and 19th centuries.

I must admit that my initial impressions of "humanism" were not much friendlier. No mysticism, no transcendent Spirit, no truth beyond what we can see and know in this life - that didn't seem to me to be a very promising or creative perspective. This was my shallow understanding.

And ever since I plowed through the requisite pages of Immanuel Kant in academia, I have been wary of German writers, I have to say. They can sometimes go on and on in multisyllabic throes ad nauseum.

Which just goes to show how wrong preconceptions can be. I loved Kurt Vonnegut's writings before I knew he was any of those things - German, Humanist, or Unitarian Universalist. He drew me in as his writings draw in many folks; he was, as he said, a very real person, and he was family.

Here's a favorite quote - to end this sermon on a note of simple, eloquent truth from the pen of Kurt Vonnegut:

"Dogs still seem as respectable and interesting as people to me. Any day."  
AMEN

#### BENEDICTION from Timequake

"I got a sappy letter from a woman a while back. She knew I was sappy, too, which is to say a northern Democrat. She was pregnant, and she wanted to know if it was a mistake to bring an innocent little baby into a world this bad.

I replied that what made being alive almost worthwhile for me was the saints I met, people behaving unselfishly and capably. They turned up in the most unexpected places. Perhaps you, dear reader, are or can become a saint for her sweet child to meet.

I believe in original sin. I also believe in original virtue. Look around!"