

So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut's Humanism
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Not surprisingly, given its lineage, Harvard University maintains an archive on Unitarians and Universalists (UUs). It's a database and an historical record. In it, you'll find an eclectic bunch – some seminal folk like second President John Adams and Red Cross founder Clara Barton; Harvard's founder, John Harvard, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Horace Mann, who established our first public education system. Huzzah. The crew also includes Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the World Wide Web and Rod Serling of "Twilight Zone" fame.

Amongst the entries that would need to be listed with a small "u" and another small "u" is writer Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., an avowed humanist who has expressed an affinity for our freethinking faith. He explained it this way when he gave the prestigious Ware lecture at our UU General Assembly in 1984. He said, somewhat tongue-in-cheek (and with cringe-worthy insensitivity): "In order to not seem a spiritual paraplegic, to strangers trying to get a fix on me, I sometimes say I am a Unitarian Universalist." True to form, in the same talk, Vonnegut described himself as a "Christ-loving atheist." On another occasion in 1980, he told the congregation of St. Clement's Episcopal Church that he was a "Christ-worshipping agnostic." More on that later.

Vonnegut, who was born in 1922 and died in 2007, was descended from a long and illustrious line of free thinkers. His great grandfather, Clemens Vonnegut, founded the Freethinkers Society of Indianapolis, and Kurt himself has been named an Honorary President of the American Humanist Association.

Humanism is the dominant strain in Unitarian Universalism. Vonnegut defines it well in his novel, *Timequake*, explaining, "I am a humanist, which in part means that I have tried to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishments after I am dead. The creator of the Universe has been to us unknowable so far. We serve as well as we can the highest abstraction of which we have some understanding, which is our community." Doesn't that sound like how most of us would describe our theology as UUs? That it's what we do here on Earth, "farting around" as Vonnegut once said, that demonstrates, in bold relief, an evolving spirituality grounded in reality and infused with love and justice?

They say every minister has one signature sermon, preached many ways – I would say this is mine. What will we do with this one wild and precious life in a world overflowing with both joy and sorrow? Will we savor the world and save it? Will we just talk of thoughts and prayers and not live out a faith that dares? How can I be a good human? Sometimes I feel like a naïve goodie-goodie, tilting at windmills with this message, but I keep on.

Vonnegut has been called a satirist with a heart, a moralist with a whoopee cushion." (Jay McInerney) His vehicle for expressing his own brand of freethinking humanism was a remarkable body of work, including such renowned novels as *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Breakfast of Champions*. In that latter, he

remarked with characteristic directness: “We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane.”

Yet, Vonnegut’s perspective was hard won. It didn’t spring from some genteel Indiana perennial garden or NY café society. Vonnegut experienced first-hand how obscenely inhumane humankind can be. In 1945, Vonnegut was taken prisoner by the Germans and barely lived through the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden, in which 135,000 people died (nearly twice as many as perished at Hiroshima.)

Vonnegut was held in a makeshift underground prison that had been an actual Slaughterhouse – Number 5 - and he was tasked with salvaging dead bodies after the bombing. He experienced evil, madness, the shadow side of humankind. His novel of that name, written in 1969, is a tribute to the horror of his experience, the strain imposed on his conscience that he survived, and his increased awareness of the scope and variety of death.

The book, like war, like wanton killing, like inhumane behavior, is a lament and protest in the disguise of a simple fable with no moral. In a piece for the New Yorker, writer Susan Lardner explains that “to account for his show of coolness, he invents an alter-planetary civilization called *Tralfamadore*, in which all events, including death, are perceived simultaneously, rather than in succession. The hypothetical consequence of such a mode is the ability to focus exclusively on pleasant moments and to be indifferent to the unpleasant ones, such as death.”

“The evangelist on Earth of the Tralfamadorian doctrine is the protagonist Billy Pilgrim, a mirror of Vonnegut’s wartime history and whose experience produces the famed catchphrase used by the author to mark each reference to death in the book: “So it goes.” The inanity of the phrase and its nonchalant use, underscores how futile it is to try to respond to a single death, 135,000 or even the death of a bottle of champagne. “So it goes.” Something about this short, flat statement conveys shock and despair better than any effusive mourning.

But the refrain is not meant to convey indifference to suffering. Like Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and author of the classic, *Man in Search of Meaning*, Vonnegut is a tragic optimist. He battled depression throughout his life and has a history of mental illness throughout his bloodline. He was not *indifferent*; he just didn’t see the point in prettying up human ugliness. The phrase reminds us: Do what you can when you can and let go when you must.

I can’t say what Vonnegut would make of our current world and society. Five people shot in Tulsa – so it goes? 21 people, including 19 young children shot and killed in Texas....so it goes? Climate crisis, baby formula shortages, LGBTQ rights and reproductive justice under duress, voter suppression and book banning, a senseless war in Ukraine – so it goes?

If Billy Pilgrim were to apply his famed catchphrase to these demoralizing current events, it would emanate from Vonnegut’s core humanist perspective; namely that no use will come of shrinking away when the worst has happened. “Questioned repeatedly over decades about whether he thought Dresden should have been bombed, Vonnegut’s most significant response was that it had been bombed; the question for him was how one behaved after that.”

That's the question for us, too, isn't it? Here today, in the wake of stunning inhumanity in our world. And so, what is the answer to that question for us— how will we each behave in the face of what we abhor, what destroys life, democracy, humanity, dignity? What challenges our courage and willingness to act? It's far too easy to position these harsh realities as far away as Dresden from our relatively comfortable lives.

In her recent piece for *UU World* magazine, our President, the Rev. Susan Frederick Gray, asks a core question: "How are we to live?" She writes that this query calls us to courage to continually grow and learn and adapt in ways that foster love and justice. She reminds us that this is not a weak or sentimental love. But rather, that it is a fierce love that burns at the center of our chalice, a symbol that came into being as a clarion of resistance to evil during WWII, compelling us to keep on loving, keep on learning, and to show up for radical practices of welcome, compassion, forgiveness, and belonging."

Vonnegut's books reflect this ethos for us today. In a 2019 essay commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the equally famed and controversial writer Salman Rushdie ponders what the novel can tell us now. He observes: "It may be impossible to stop wars, just as its impossible to stop glaciers, but it's still worth finding the form and the language that reminds us what they are and calls them by their true names. That is what realism is." Rushdie goes on to say that *Slaughterhouse Five* is also a novel humane enough to allow for the possibility of hope."

You see, Vonnegut was not a corpse cold humanist – all rational thought and reason. Despite his freethinker-humanist guideposts, no other major writer of the post WWII era expressed such a fascination with Jesus, nor referred to him as often in his work. This fascination began when he met Powers Hapgood, a fellow Harvard grad, and a nationally known labor organizer. Vonnegut asked him why a man from such a good Indianapolis family with an Ivy League education would choose to live as he did? "Why?" Hapgood replied, "Because of the Sermon on the Mount, sir."

That famed sermon from Matthew 5 became a surprising moral touchstone for Vonnegut. And in essence, it is quite humanist, isn't it? He told one assembly, "I am enchanted by the sermon on the mount. Being merciful, it seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far. Perhaps we will get another idea that good by and by – and then we will have two good ideas." Vonnegut mused that the Beatitudes should grace the walls of government buildings, instead of the Ten Commandments. A better, more aspirational message, he figured.

Does this unsettle you? A humanist who loves Jesus? A free thinker who wrestles with divinity? You see, true free thinkers are not confined to a single-track narrative or coerced creeds. They freely think. And in tandem, they allow themselves to deeply feel. I'd like to believe we freely think and deeply feel, here at Beacon, and in UUism, in general.

Vonnegut explains himself this way: "If Jesus hadn't delivered the sermon on the mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I would not want to be a human being." He lifts up Billy Pilgrim as a Christ-like example, who endured the horrors of war. Towards the end of the book, the narrator tells us: "Billy cried very little, though he often saw things worth crying about, and in that respect at least, he resembled Jesus."

Vonnegut saw morality as a wellspring of the intrinsic quality of human character which ought to be nourished and cultivated early, continually and carefully. He spoke openly and often about the value of community, including congregations, to comfort and to inspire right relationship, character, and humanist values. He cautioned folks to pick the right church to join (such as our progressive one, presumably) so that, in his words, they wouldn't "join the wrong one and end up in jail for blowing up an abortion clinic."

Throughout his library of memorable novels, Vonnegut tells us something we may already know – "that most human beings are not so bad, except for the ones who are, and that's valuable information. It tells us that human nature is the one great constant of life on earth, and it beautifully and truthfully shows us human nature neither at its best nor at its worst but how it mostly is, most of the time, even when times are troubling."

What sources inspire you? Ground you? Enable you to express your humanism fully; to, in Vonnegut's words, "live by the harmless untruths that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." We're not here seeking answers to unanswerable questions. We're here seeking inspiration on how to be good humans. I reckon I'll keep preaching my signature sermon, after all.

For Vonnegut, this is not all that complicated. In his book, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, he writes: "Hello babies, welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside babies, you've got about 100 years here. There's only one rule I know of, babies – "God, damn it, you've got to be kind."

So it goes, and so may we be. Kind tragic optimists in the here and now.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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