

**“Kurt Vonnegut:
The Religious Legacy of an Iconoclast”**
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For some of you, this sermon is now beginning. For others, there are a couple of brief paragraphs first, before the sermon begins. I have designed these opening words for those of you who are avid fans of Kurt Vonnegut’s writing, and familiar with his curious literary eccentricities. For the rest of you, the sermon begins in about a minute. I’ll let you know.

Like Billy Pilgrim, Kurt Vonnegut has now, thankfully, come “unstuck in time.” Though he didn’t believe in an afterlife, I’m sure he wasn’t too surprised last week when he awakened to find himself on the planet Tralfamadore. He was greeted there, no doubt, by a joyous “granfalloon” of other sardonic humorists and iconoclastic curmudgeons, such as his hero Mark Twain, along with H.L. Menken, Ambrose Bierce, and fellow Hoosier Kin Hubbard. Included in that granfalloon was Abraham Lincoln, who also had a dry sense of humor with a biting critique of the world he found himself in.

Back here on earth his opus of writing remains to enlighten and amuse. His books are filled with “foma.” Like all the best religions in history, foma offers us shameless lies that serve to comfort, and offer far more comfort than mere truth can offer. Foma also helps when facing life’s finitude. And so it goes.

Now, the sermon can begin.

As I said in the newsletter about this sermon, the *Indianapolis Star* announced the death of Kurt Vonnegut with giant headlines calling him “A HOOSIER ICON.” He was always proud to be a Hoosier, but I imagine him protesting in strong language his being indicted on the charge that he is “icon.” The term “icon,” of course, has religious origins, and refers to sacred paintings or images that are revered by the faithful. He was proud of being somewhat the opposite: an “iconoclast,” or “one who smashes religious icons into pieces.”

If he could, I’m sure he would come back from the grave and deny with all his being this shameful and insulting allegation that he is an icon. But alas, if he was right in disbelieving in an afterlife, or even if he was wrong, he can’t come back to correct such slander. And he’s probably just as willing not to. After all, as he once wrote in a story about Lazarus, “It is a very mixed blessing to be brought back from the dead.”

Icon or iconoclast, Kurt Vonnegut has earned a place of honor among Hoosiers in general, and especially among All Souls Unitarians – his childhood church. Indianapolis declared this the “Year of Vonnegut,” and he was scheduled to come and speak as a guest of honor. But the author of the novel *Hocus Pocus* decided, rather, to disappear. We miss him.

He enjoyed his Hoosier heritage. When his friend and fellow author John Updike was once scheduled to give a lecture in Indianapolis, he asked Vonnegut what he should know about Indiana. In his reply, Vonnegut listed famous people, past and present, who have been Hoosiers, starting, of course, with James Whitcomb Riley, but continuing with “Charles Manson, Richard Lugar, Dan Quayle, Kin Hubbard, Booth Tarkington, Jane Pauley, and the Reverend Jim Jones.”

In a 1986 speech to an audience at North Central High School here, Vonnegut was more direct about it. He said:

“All my jokes are Indianapolis. All my attitudes are Indianapolis. My adenoids are Indianapolis. If I ever severed myself from Indianapolis, I would be out of business. What people like about me is Indianapolis.”

In some ways, today’s sermon is a personal “thank you” to Kurt Vonnegut, because he opened up my world in an unusual way. Throughout my growing up, I did a great deal of reading, but kept as far away as I could from fiction. Any fiction. I read histories and biographies and especially about current events. I even read philosophy and religion. But I had no interest in fiction. With regard to fiction, I felt “what’s the point? Real life can be at least as interesting and crazy as any story someone can make up.” When my English classes assigned classics of fiction to read, I struggled – they seemed about as indigestible as the periodic table I had to study in chemistry class.

And then, for whatever reason I forget, I read *Cat’s Cradle*, by Kurt Vonnegut. Then a whole new world opened up. It was a world of stories. What Vonnegut showed me was that good story-telling isn’t just to tell a story. It is to allow you to look at the real world, the non-fiction world around you, through a very different angle. And the angle doesn’t get more different than in his books. Indeed, his stories are more interesting and crazy than life as I’ve ever known it. After all, who can put down a book where the opening words are these:

“Don’t be a fool! Close this book at once!
It is nothing but ‘foma’ (lies)!”

Thus begins *Cat’s Cradle*. I then read all the other books of his I could find. And they opened up a broader path to the world of fiction that I’ve appreciated ever since.

I want to talk about Vonnegut’s religious views, as expressed by a religious iconoclast. To do so, though, it is important to understand the context. When it comes to context in human beings, it means their life story. So I begin with a brief review – as brief a review as possible for an 84 year old – of the story of Kurt Vonnegut.

He was born November 11, 1922 in Indianapolis. He was a third generation German-American, a fact that helped shape his world, though after the First World War his family downplayed their German heritage because there was so much anti-German sentiment.

Kurt often spoke of the family heritage in the “Free Thought” tradition. His grandfather, Clemens Vonnegut, who immigrated here in the mid-1800s, was vocal about his religious skepticism and what detractors called “religious infidelity.” When grandfather Clemens came to America he first settled in a Minnesota village called New Ulm, before establishing roots in Indianapolis. New Ulm was populated entirely by German Freethinkers, and in fact at one point the village took a vote to decide whether to allow a Lutheran family to move in. The vote allowed it. At middle age, Clemens wrote his own funeral eulogy, not because he expected to die soon, but because when the time came he didn’t want that task to fall into the hands of some preacher who would proclaim views that weren’t his.

In Indianapolis, the Vonnegut family opened the most successful hardware store in town, and it flourished until chain stores arrived. In addition, though, Kurt’s father and grandfather Vonnegut were both architects and had a very successful architecture business. They built many significant buildings in town, including the Athenaeum, which was originally the gathering place for those of German descent, and originally called the Deutsch House. But when Germans became the object of contempt because of World War I, the German House took on its current Greek name. Another of their buildings was All Souls Unitarian Church, at Fourteenth and Alabama Streets, constructed in 1910, where the Vonneguts became active members, and where Kurt Vonnegut attended Sunday school.

Kurt's mother came from one of the wealthiest families in Indianapolis, also of German descent, named Lieber, who owned a brewery. But when the Depression came, the well-to-do Vonnegut family came upon hard times; since there was little demand for architects, the family status, financially as well as socially, suffered. Before those hard times, the kids all attended elite private schools. Kurt went to the Orchard School, his brother Bernard to the elite Park School for Boys and his sister Alice to the elite Tudor School for girls. With the Depression, they were transferred to public schools, and their parents, especially their mother Edith, were devastated. Kurt, on the other hand, loved the public schools much more than the private ones. Throughout his life he held contempt for social privilege, and was more comfortable among the rank and file of life. He liked his friends better at public schools and would later report that "everything I believe I was taught in junior Civics class during the great depression at school 43 in Indianapolis." He claims his Indianapolis public school education was far superior to any of the five or six colleges he would later attend.

He eventually graduated from Shortridge High School, where he worked on *The Daily Echo*, which was the first daily high school newspaper in the country.

After high school Kurt attended Cornell University for a couple of years, majoring in biochemistry. He wanted to be an architect, like his father and grandfather, but his father was so discouraged by the financial ruin of the Depression years, he insisted that Kurt find a more secure career. His work at Cornell, Vonnegut reports, was quite mediocre, but it also was interrupted by World War II. He enlisted in the army in 1942, and was sent first to the Carnegie Institute of Technology and then to the University of Tennessee, for training in mechanical engineering, before being sent to Europe in the war. While he was in the army, his mother, Edith Lieber Vonnegut, depressed over the family losses from the Depression, committed suicide on Mothers Day, 1944.

At the Battle of the Bulge, his unit scouted for the army behind enemy lines, and they were captured by the Germans. He was held prisoner in the city of Dresden and during the day he was forced to work in a vitamin factory and at night he was locked in a basement meat locker of a slaughterhouse. That underground prison saved his life when allied forces carpet-bombed the city, killing over one hundred thousand civilians. One of the few American POW survivors, Vonnegut was ordered by the Germans to help gather dead bodies for mass burials and burnings. The impact of that experience remained with him for the rest of his life, and became the storyline of his most successful novel of all, *Slaughterhouse Five*.

Returning to Indianapolis from the war, he married Jane Marie Cox, whom he had known since kindergarten. He then enrolled at the University of Chicago to work on a master's degree in anthropology. When his thesis was rejected unanimously by the faculty, he left school and moved to Schenectady, New York, where he worked in the public relations department of General Electric Company, where his brother Bernard was a research scientist. While at G.E. he tried his hand at publishing short stories in popular magazines, and met with some success. After just a few years at G.E., he moved his family to Cape Cod where he would devote himself full-time to writing.

His marriage to Jane Marie lasted almost 25 years until they separated in 1970. When they divorced nine years later, he married photographer Jill Krementz, and lived thereafter in New York City.

Kurt Vonnegut was parent to seven children in all. Three were born to his first wife Jane Marie. When his sister Alice died from cancer (1958), two days after her husband died in a train accident, Kurt adopted three of their young children. With his second wife, Jill, they adopted another child, Kurt's seventh, named Lilly. His oldest son Mark, who will be here next week representing his father in the festivities, was named for Mark Twain. Mark Vonnegut also published a popular book in 1975 called *Eden Express*, an autobiographical account of Mark's life as a hippie battling schizophrenia. Mark later overcame his mental illness and graduated from Harvard Medical School. He is now a pediatrician in the Boston suburbs.

Over the years, Kurt Vonnegut would teach writing at University of Iowa, Harvard, New York University, and Smith College. He received numerous awards, including an honorary doctorate from Indiana University in 1973. He was among the most popular commencement speakers at Universities, and would receive at least a dozen such requests each year. In 1971, 25 years after the University of Chicago rejected his thesis for a Master's in anthropology, the school accepted his book *Cat's Cradle* as a finished M.A. thesis paper, and granted him a Master's Degree for it. The faculty felt the book showed an excellent grasp of anthropological study.

This life story and his views of religion are woven together, and expressed often in his writings. His Unitarian roots show. As an adult, he was not an active Unitarian, but he certainly was a practicing one.

Though he never regularly attended any church, he would attend Unitarian and Universalist Churches occasionally and often mentioned Unitarian ties respectfully in his books. In the book of essays *Palm Sunday*, for example, he wrote this little anecdote:

“I went to a Unitarian church for a while, and it might show. The minister said one Easter Sunday that, if we listened closely to the bell on his church, we would hear that it was singing, over and over again, ‘No hell, no hell, no hell.’ No matter what we did in life, he said, we wouldn’t burn throughout eternity in hell. We wouldn’t even fry for ten or fifteen minutes. He was just guessing, of course.

In 1986, he delivered the Ware Lecture at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, something I spoke of some weeks ago. When he published it in his collection of essays called *Fates Worse Than Death*, he introduced the lecture saying:

“In order not to seem a spiritual quadriplegic to strangers trying to get a fix on me, I sometimes say I am a Unitarian Universalist.”

In 1980, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the birth of William Ellery Channing, the founder of American Unitarianism, Vonnegut delivered the address at the Unitarian Church of Cambridge (First Parish) at Harvard, using Channing’s favorite topic, human dignity.”

Kurt Vonnegut shared with Mark Twain not only a style of writing – simultaneously humorous and satirical – but they shared a humanistic worldview that was generally unfavorable to traditional religion. In a word: “iconoclastic.” He was clearly proud of his family’s legacy as free-thinkers, and frequently adopted the label “humanist.” He served for many years as the “Honorary” president of the American Humanist Association, succeeding author Isaac Asimov. Here is one example of what he said about “Humanism”:

“Do you know what a humanist is? My parents and grandparents were humanists, what used to be called ‘Free Thinkers.’ So as a humanist I am honoring my ancestors, which the Bible says is a good thing to do. We humanists try to behave as decently, as fairly, and as honorably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. My brother and sister didn’t think there was one, my parents and grandparents didn’t think there was one. It was enough that they were alive. We humanists serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is community.

This quote touches on a couple of important values that were critical to Vonnegut’s iconoclastic religion. First, he sees it as highly ethical – in his words to “behave as decently, as fairly, and as honorably as we can.” Second, his description culminates in affirming the value of

community. The sense of community, of recognizing that we're all in this together, that our struggles are mutual efforts, is a common theme in his writing and an important aspect of his religious views.

He has obvious disdain for those who are bound by allegiance to creed. He objected strongly to any religion that was used for show. Like his mentor Mark Twain, he wrote biting critiques of religious hypocrisy. Here, for example, is what he had to say in one commencement speech:

“Now is as good a time as any to mention White House prayer breakfasts, I guess. I think we all know now that religion of that sort is about as nourishing to the human spirit as potassium cyanide. We have been experimenting with it. Every guinea pig died. We are up to our necks in dead guinea pigs.

“The lethal ingredient in those breakfasts wasn't prayer. And it wasn't the eggs or the orange juice or the hominy grits. It was a virulent new strain of hypocrisy which did everyone in. Talk about typhoid Mary!”

In his writings, Kurt Vonnegut often and casually refers to himself as an atheist. In a sermon I gave here a few months ago, I quoted the physicist Freeman Dyson as saying there are, in fact, two kinds of atheists: “ordinary atheists who do not believe in God and passionate atheists who consider God to be their personal enemy.” Vonnegut was clearly in the first category. He had no ax to grind with God.

In his most recent book, for example, he says this:

“If I should ever die, God forbid, let this be my epitaph:

THE ONLY PROOF HE NEEDED
FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD
WAS MUSIC

In other places he invokes the concept of God casually – in a useful literary style, though certainly not theologically useful. One example would be the speech I quoted in the reading when he ended with the comment, “You have just heard an atheist thank God not once, but twice.” It seems, almost, that he had deep respect for God, he just didn't happen to believe in Him. He had deep respect for God, but he was suspicious of those who took God too seriously.

He showed a similar respect, I think, for Jesus. Here is one comment:

“How do humanists feel about Jesus? I say of Jesus, as all humanists do, ‘If what he said is good, and so much of it is absolutely beautiful, what does it matter if he was God or not?’ But if Christ hadn't delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I wouldn't want to be human. I'd just as soon be a rattlesnake.”

There is no question that of his seventeen novels and collections of short stories, it is *Cat's Cradle* that deals most directly with religion. The story involves an isolated Caribbean island that practices an invented religion called Bokononism, and the founder, named Bokonon, is a key character. Bokonon says honestly that all religions, including his own, are based on shameless lies. But they are lies that help people cope, that make them more comfortable. Religion is about people's struggle to make sense out of a world that seems to offer little sense. In that case, lies can be allies.

Here is the creation story found in the holy Book of Bokonon:

“And God said, ‘Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done.’ And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close as mud as man sat up, looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. ‘What is the purpose of all this?’ he asked politely.

“God asked, ‘Everything must have a purpose?’

“‘Certainly,’ said man.

“‘Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this,’ said God.

“And He went away.

So this is the origin of religion, perhaps. It doesn’t come from God but it comes, rather, because God didn’t have a purpose in mind when the world was created. But we are left with the task of discovering it ourselves.

Vonnegut’s writings about religion are not particularly consistent, though as a novelist, a humorist, and a social commentator, consistency was not his job. Here is my concise summary of the religious legacy of this tremendous iconoclast.

It seems to me that Kurt Vonnegut was an atheist who was respectful of the idea of God, but not serious about it. He was a non-Christian who admired Jesus, but not those who worshipped him. He was a humanist who respected religion, but held disdain for those who take religion too seriously. For him, it was all about ethics: if you treat one another with respect, if you show kindness toward those who need it, if you have compassion for the fate of the world and humankind, then it doesn’t matter what you believe about God or Jesus or the afterlife. You can believe the moon is made of green cheese, and as long as that belief isn’t a danger to living a life of compassion, then go right on and believe it.

Like the invented religion of Bokonon, he seemed at times to say it’s O.K. to believe the comforting lies of religion, as long as you know that they are lies and superstitions. To believe them is one thing, but to believe them as being true is unacceptable. Here is one serious example. In a commencement speech to the graduates of Bennington College, he mentioned that it was their professors’ job to remove superstitions from their thinking. That is what education does – destroy superstition. But, he added, they should not give up on all superstition. He begged them

“to believe the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty. If you can believe that, and make others believe it, then there might be hope for us. Human beings might stop treating each other like garbage, might begin to treasure and protect each other instead.”

There is much to admire in his writing. I still have strong reservations for the word “icon,” unless it be admitted that he is an “icon of iconoclasm,” the patron saint of smashing icons.

His books and essays will remain for eternity, no longer stuck in the elusive concept of time. And the unique wit and wisdom of Kurt Vonnegut will be missed. God Bless You, Mr. Vonnegut.

And so it goes.



READING
from *Palm Sunday*, by Kurt Vonnegut

From a Commencement speech delivered to the 1974 graduating class of Hobart and William Smith Colleges. [For the purposes of this reading, please note that the year 1974 was about the time the environmental movement was born as a popular movement, and about the time Earth Day was first celebrated].

For two thirds of my life, I have been a pessimist. I am astonished to find myself an optimist now. I feel now that I have been underestimating the intelligence and resourcefulness of man. I honestly thought that we were so stupid that we would continue to tear the planet to pieces, to sell it to each other, to burn it up. I've never expected thermonuclear war. What seemed certain to me was that we would simply gobble up the planet out of boredom and greed, not in centuries, but in ten or twenty years. . . .

Our grandchildren will surely think of us as the Planet Gobblers. Poorer nations than America think of America as a Planet Gobbler right now. But that is going to change. There is welling up within us a willingness to say, "No, thank you" to our factories. We were once maniacs for possessions, imagining that they would somehow moderate or somehow compensate us for our loneliness.

The experiment has been tried in this most affluent nation in all of human history. Possessions help a little, but not as much as advertisers said they were supposed to, and we are now aware of how permanently the manufacture of some of those products hurts the planet.

So there is a willingness to do without them.

There is a willingness to do whatever we need to do in order to have life on the planet go on for a long, long time. I didn't used to think that. And that willingness has to be a religious enthusiasm, since it celebrates life, since it calls for meaningful sacrifices.

This is bad news for business, as we know it. It should be thrilling news for persons who love to teach and lead. And thank God we have solid information in the place of superstition! Thank God we are beginning to dream of human communities which are designed to harmonize with what human beings really need and are.

And now you have just heard an atheist thank God not once, but twice. And listen to this: God bless the class of 1974.

