

Kurt Vonnegut

FOREWORD BY
Neil Gaiman



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foreword

I have spoken to Kurt Vonnegut twice now. The first time he was alive. The second time, more recently, he was dead.

We met at the end of the blue tunnel that links this world with Heaven.

Dr. Jack Kevorkian is no longer permitted to counsel people on ways to end their lives, not even for temporary visits to the outskirts of Heaven, so I went and I came back in my own way. You'll forgive me if I omit the details.

The first time I spoke to Kurt Vonnegut it was a quarter of a century ago. He was in London, and I was a young journalist working in London. I had called him in his hotel, as suggested by his publicist, and had asked him if he would be willing for me to interview him.

He told me that he was tired, and he would prefer not to be interviewed. Anything he had to say, he said, was in his book. He was pleasant. He sounded tired.

I wanted to tell him how much his books had meant to me; that *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* were books I had read and loved as a child, and more than that, books I had learned from.

I did not tell him this while he was alive.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was mowing the perfectly kept lawns outside the golden arches of heaven.

I said, "I'm here to interview you about your book of posthumous encounters."

"The WNYC pieces?" He nodded. "I remember those."

"I'm writing the introduction and wanted to ask you some questions."

"Honestly, I'd prefer not to," he said. Then he saw the expression on my face. "Look. You can say what you like. I'm dead. I won't mind."

"Don't tell me," I said. "Anything you have to say is in the book."

He looked at me, then. "Have we had this conversation before?" he asked.

"Kind of."

"Why don't you quote something from one of the books then?" he said. He smiled. "Listen, I'd love to stop and talk, but this grass won't mow itself."

"Um. What about '*A purpose of human life, no*'

*matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around
to be loved'?"*

“Sure,” he said. “Tell them I said that.”

—Neil Gaiman
September 2010

introduction

A WORD FROM WNYC'S REPORTER ON THE AFTERLIFE

My first near-death experience was an accident, a botched anesthesia during a triple bypass. I had listened to several people on TV talk shows who had gone down the blue tunnel to the Pearly Gates, and even beyond the Pearly Gates, or so they said, and then come back to life again. But I certainly wouldn't have set out on such a risky expedition on purpose, without first having survived one, and then planned another in cooperation with Dr. Jack Kevorkian and the staff at the state-of-the-art

lethal injection execution facility at Huntsville, Texas.

The following reports were recorded for later broadcast by radio station WNYC. I hope they convey a sense of immediacy. They were taped in the tiled Huntsville death chamber only five minutes or so after I was unstrapped from the gurney. The tape recorder, incidentally, like the gurney, was the property of the good people of Texas, and was ordinarily used to immortalize the last words of persons about to make a one-way, all-expenses-paid trip to Paradise.

There will be no more round trips for me, barring another accident. For the sake of my family, I am trying to reinstate my health and life insurance policies, if possible. But other journalists, and perhaps even tourists, will surely follow the safe two-way path to Eternity I pioneered. I beg them to be content, as I learned to be, with interviews they are

able to conduct on the hundred yards or so of vacant lot between the far end of the blue tunnel and the Pearly Gates.

To go through the Pearly Gates, no matter how tempting the interviewee on the other side, as I myself discovered the hard way, is to run the risk that crotchety Saint Peter, depending on his mood, may never let you out again. Think of how heartbroken your friends and relatives would be if, by going through the Pearly Gates to talk to Napoleon, say, you in effect committed suicide.



About belief or lack of belief in an afterlife: Some of you may know that I am neither Christian nor Jewish nor Buddhist, nor a conventionally religious person of any sort.

I am a humanist, which means, in part, that I have tried to behave decently without any expectation of rewards or punishments after I'm dead. My German-American ancestors, the earliest of whom settled in our Middle West about the time of our Civil War, called themselves "Freethinkers," which is the same sort of thing. My great grandfather Clemens Vonnegut wrote, for example, "If what Jesus said was good, what can it matter whether he was God or not?"

I myself have written, "If it weren't for the message of mercy and pity in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I wouldn't want to be a human being. I would just as soon be a rattlesnake."

I am honorary president of the American Humanist Association, having succeeded the late, great, spectacularly prolific writer and scientist, Dr. Isaac Asimov in that essentially functionless

capacity. At an A.H.A. memorial service for my predecessor I said, “Isaac is up in Heaven now.” That was the funniest thing I could have said to an audience of humanists. It rolled them in the aisles. Mirth! Several minutes had to pass before something resembling solemnity could be restored.

I made that joke, of course, before my first near-death experience—the accidental one.

So when my own time comes to join the choir invisible or whatever, God forbid, I hope someone will say, “He’s up in Heaven now.” Who really knows? I could have dreamed all this.

My epitaph in any case? “Everything was beautiful. Nothing hurt.” I will have gotten off so light, whatever the heck it is that was going on.



Humanists, having received no credible information about any sort of God, are content to serve as well as they can, the only abstraction with which they have some familiarity: their communities. They don't have to join the A.H.A. to be one.

Yes, and this booklet of my conversations with the dead-and-buried was created in the hope that it would earn a little bit of money—not for me, but for the National Public Radio station WNYC in downtown Manhattan. WNYC enhances the informed wit and wisdom of its community and mine. It does what no commercial radio or TV station can afford to do any more. WNYC satisfies the people's right to know—as contrasted with, as abject slaves of high-roller publicists and advertisers, keeping the public vacantly diverted and entertained.

Whereas formal religions surely comfort many

members of the WNYC staff, that staff's collective effect on its community is humanism—an ideal so Earthbound and unmajestic that I never capitalize it. As I have used it here, “humanist” is nothing more supernatural than a handy synonym for “good citizenship and common decency.”



I wish one and all long and happy lives, no matter what may become of them afterwards. Use sunscreen! Don't smoke cigarettes.

Cigars, however, are good for you. There is even a magazine celebrating their enjoyment, with male role models, athletes, actors, rich guys with trophy wives, on its covers. Why not the surgeon general? Cigars, of course, are made of trail mix, of crushed cashews and granola and raisins, soaked in maple

syrup and dried in the sun. Why not eat one tonight at bedtime?

Firearms are also good for you. Ask Charlton Heston, who once played Moses. Gunpowder has zero fat and zero cholesterol. That goes for dum-dums, too. Ask your senator or senatrix or congressperson if guns, like cigars, aren't good for you.



My late Uncle Alex Vonnegut, my father's kid brother, a Harvard-educated life insurance agent in Indianapolis who was well read and wise, was a humanist like all the rest of the family. What Uncle Alex found particularly objectionable about human beings in general was that they so seldom noticed it when they were happy.

He himself did his best to acknowledge it when

times were sweet. We could be drinking lemonade in the shade of an apple tree in the summertime, and Uncle Alex would interrupt the conversation to say, “If this isn’t nice, what is?”

I myself say that out loud at times of easy, natural bliss: “If this isn’t nice, what is?” Perhaps others can also make use of that heirloom from Uncle Alex. I find it really cheers me up to keep score out loud that way.



OK, now let’s have some fun. Let’s talk about sex. Let’s talk about women. Freud said he didn’t know what women wanted. I know what women want. They want a whole lot of people to talk to. What do they want to talk about? They want to talk about everything.

What do men want? They want a lot of pals, and they wish people wouldn't get so mad at them.

Why are so many people getting divorced today? It's because most of us don't have extended families anymore. It used to be that when a man and a woman got married, the bride got a lot more people to talk to about everything. The groom got a lot more pals to tell dumb jokes to.

A few Americans, but very few, still have extended families. The Navahos. The Kennedys.

But most of us, if we get married nowadays, are just one more person for the other person. The groom gets one more pal, but it's a woman. The woman gets one more person to talk to about everything, but it's a man.

When a couple has an argument, they may

think it's about money or power or sex, or how to raise the kids, or whatever. What they're really saying to each other, though, without realizing it, is this:

“You are not enough people!”

I met a man in Nigeria one time, an Ibo who had six hundred relatives he knew quite well. His wife had just had a baby, the best possible news in any extended family.

They were going to take it to meet all its relatives, Ibos of all ages and sizes and shapes. It would even meet other babies, cousins not much older than it was. Everybody who was big enough and steady enough was going to get to hold it, cuddle it, gurgle to it, and say how pretty it was, or handsome.

Wouldn't you have loved to be that baby?



This rambling introduction is four times as long as the most efficient, effective piece of writing in the history of the English-speaking world, which was Abraham Lincoln's address on the battlefield at Gettysburg.

Lincoln was shot by a two-bit actor who was exercising his right to bear arms. Like Isaac Asimov and Uncle Alex, Lincoln is up in Heaven now.



So this is Kurt Vonnegut, WNYC's now emeritus reporter on the afterlife, signing off on paper this time.

Ta ta and adios. Or, as Saint Peter said to me,

with a sly wink, when I told him I was on my last round trip to Paradise: “See you later, alligator.”

K. V.

November 8, 1998, and May 15, 1999