

Putting A Bitter Coating On A Sugar Pill

Why Kurt Vonnegut? Vonnegut has been an important author of the last half century or so. His humor and conversational writing style make him a very engaging storyteller, but it's his contrast and critique of society within the absurd characters and environments that he creates that make him special. For me personally it's his ability to create very flawed human characters, and to show the beauty, dignity, and worth of each. Rarely, if ever, are there bad people as characters, only good people in bad situations. Says Vonnegut:

I believe in original sin. I also believe in original virtue.

What do I hope to impart on my audience this morning? I hope to present some of Vonnegut's views on humanism, religion, and how the two are not opposing views. I hope to challenge you to accept foma, find your karass, and avoid granfallons. Also if possible, I hope to point out that Truth (with a capital-T) need not be fact to be accepted as truth.

First, I must tie up a few loose ends. First a disclaimer, to quote Vonnegut:

All persons, living and dead, are purely coincidental.

Second, I must return to the two earlier readings. Does anybody know who Eugene Debs was? He was a five time Socialist party candidate for President. The similarities

between the Debs quote and the Sermon on the Mount are quite apparent. Was Jesus too a Socialist? I'm definitely not here in any way to take a stand for political socialism, but one could make an argument for substitution of the word 'Humanist' for 'Socialist'. Says Vonnegut:

The example of Christianity is not encouraging, actually, since it was nothing but a poor people's religion, a servant's religion, a slave's religion, a woman's religion, a child's religion, and would have remained such if it hadn't stopped taking the Sermon on the Mount seriously and joined forces with the vain and rich and violent.

I don't think that I have to point out the hypocrisy of Christianity in this country embracing Capitalism so strongly, repudiating scientific Darwinism while embracing the economic and social aspects of Darwinism. Survival of the fittest indeed! What about, only as strong as the weakest link? But I'm not here to preach to the choir. I instead think it is important to understand that Humanism, is not a religion or philosophical thought outside of religion, but should be a very real aspect of religion. Because many of us accept Humanism, we too often feel that we must also reject religion. This should not be the case.

Now I must present the obligatory Kurt Vonnegut Bio. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was born on Armistice Day 1922. He studied Chemistry and Biology at Cornell, rather than fail out he enlisting in the Army during WWII (modern society's second suicide attempt). His mother committed suicide while he was in basic training. As an infantry scout, he was captured by the Germans at the Battle of the Bulge. As

a POW he was working in Dresden when Allied Forces firebombed the city killing approximately 135,000 civilians, a much deadlier attack than Hiroshima by well over 50,000. He spent two years after WWII at the University of Chicago as a graduate Anthropology student, before having his master's thesis rejected. He has worked in advertising, PR, teaching, newspapers, as a car salesman, and a volunteer fireman. He was first a short story writer before he became a novelist.

I must point out that I'm not sure that Vonnegut is a novelist. It was more something he was pushed into by necessity, when short stories lost their audience due to the advent of television. He just learned to write longer short stories, or to combine multiple short stories into one. He also is often categorized as Science Fiction. This is false as well, this just happens to be a junk category where many writers are catalogued when no other genre will hold them.

The short formula for a successful novel is exclamation point, question mark, period. Get the readers attention! Set up mysteries? Tie everything up. Kurt really has problems with the final rule, the period. But he really likes the exclamation point and the question mark. A Vonnegut book poses many questions and answers few of them, but that is what makes him engaging as a writer and storyteller. On a side note, he believes the semi-colon to be a transvestite hermaphrodite and sees no use for it.

He's been referred to as a black humorist, today's title 'putting a bitter coating on a sugar pill' is how his writing was once described by his editor. Says his lifelong friend and POW compatriot Bernard O'Hare:

In some reviews Kurt has been characterized as a black humorist. Those reviewers wouldn't know black humor from Good Friday. They don't know what they read is only his reaction to the sight of the world gone mad and rushing headlong toward Dresden to the hundredth power. And they miss his message, in which he pleads that world governments found their rule on something more akin to the Sermon on the Mount than the preaching's of those who lead the world to Armageddon. There is certainly nothing wrong with a man like that. And if such thinking constitutes black humor, it's too bad there is not an epidemic of it.

Says Kurt on humor:

The only way to get a belly laugh, I've found, is to undermine a surface joke with more unhappiness than most mortals can bear.

Having touched on the Sermon on the Mount, it's time to move on to Kurt's own spirituality and views on religion. He's a humanist (having served as the Honorary President of the American Humanist Association) and sometime Unitarian Universalist. A few quotes on this:

I am an atheist (or at best a Unitarian who winds up in churches quite a lot).

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. So that denomination claims me as one of its own.

You have called me a humanist, and I have looked into humanism some, and I have found that a humanist is a person who is tremendously interested in human beings. My dog is a humanist. His name is Sandy.

Unitarians don't believe in anything. I am a Unitarian.

Once after giving a speech at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, the Dean of the Chapel there wrote a letter to a mutual friend of Vonnegut's, asking:

I want to ask Vonnegut about his religious persuasion. What is redemptive about his writings? Must they be? Are they intended to be? He deliberately mentioned Jesus and invoked religious images. What gives?

Kurt responded by letter, in part:

I am a fourth-generation German-American religious skeptic ("Freethinker"). I believe that God has so far been unknowable and hence unobservable, hence the highest service one can perform is to his or her community, whose needs are quite evident. I believe that virtuous behavior is trivialized by carrot-and-stick schemes, such as promises of highly improbable rewards or punishments in an improbable afterlife.

We will return to this letter later.

Reading the internet in preparation for this homily, it became very clear to me that his opinions on religion have been largely misinterpreted. He has been held by many as a foe of religion. This could not be further from the truth! It has been said that there are no villains in his books, but the villains in his books are very real. History, culture, and society are these villains. Much the same as Vonnegut has vilified organized religion, not religious spirituality. More quotes:

I admire Christianity more than anything, Christianity as symbolized by gentle people sharing a common bowl.

*My great war buddy Bernard O'Hare, now dead, lost his faith as a Roman Catholic during World War Two. I didn't like that. I thought that was too much to lose. I knew Bernie had lost something important and honorable. I did not like that, did not like it because I loved **him** so much.*

Likewise, on the death of his first wife Jane:

*She was raised a Quaker, but stopped going to meetings of friends after her four happy years at Swarthmore. She became an Episcopalian after marrying Adam, who remained a Jew. She died believing in the Trinity and Heaven and Hell and all of the rest of it. I'm so glad. Why? Because I loved **her**.*

Vonnegut's problem with religion is based on how easily it has become entrenched with the enemies of people namely history, society, and culture. Relevant religion has often been the liberal tool of change in society, not part of the status quo. Christianity has been one of the most (if not the most) liberal of all the religions. From Moses of the Old Testament, to Jesus and the New Testament, to Martin Luther and the Protestant movement, right up to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement. And I should add that humanism was at the center of all of these events. There are very clear reasons why Christianity was easily adopted by Negro Slaves in this country, because religion has always been for the oppressed. They got the message, it was the slave owners that did not. When religion becomes the conservative thought in society, then in my opinion the religion begins to die.

In Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle*, there is a fictional religion on the island of San Lorenzo based on the writings of Bokkonon. The Book of Bokkonon begins:

*All of the true things am I about to tell you are
shameless lies.*

In the book there were a few religious terms related to the religion of Bokkononism. The first I'll mention is Foma. It's defined as:

Harmless untruths, intended to comfort simple souls.

An example: "Prosperity is just around the corner."

In other words, myth. To often we religious skeptics, we freethinkers get to caught up in reason and ignore the power of foma, or myth. We believe that this reason, this scientific truth can provide all of the answers we need. But reason and science don't address issues such as hope and idealism. Quoting the Book of Bokonon:

What can a thoughtful man hope for mankind on Earth, given the experience of the past million years? Nothing.

Or to quote Bono of U2:

Hope and history don't rhyme.

Face it, how much of life is based on blind faith? Or to word it differently, how much in life requires trust? Or luck? Foma are an important part of parenting. We don't always tell our kids the truth, we tell them that they are smart, talented, and good-looking. We encourage them with Foma. Religious and spiritual Foma can be just as useful tools in shaping our truths. Nietzsche said that only a person of deep faith could afford the luxury of religious skepticism. Quoting Vonnegut on Nietzsche:

Humanists find rapture enough in secular knowledge and hope. Most people can't.

What incredible foma it takes to place your faith in humanity!

Kurt Vonnegut on his short lived belief in science:

I thought scientists were going to find out exactly how everything worked, and then make it work better. I fully expected that by the time I was twenty-one. Some scientist would have taken a color photograph of God Almighty-and sold it to Popular Mechanics magazine. Scientific truth was going to make us so happy and comfortable. What actually happened when I was twenty-one was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima.

And we would be a lot safer if the Government would take its money out of science and put it into astrology and the reading of palms. I used to think Science would save us, and science certainly tried. But we can't stand any more tremendous explosions, either for or against democracy. Only in superstition is there hope. If you want to become a friend of civilization, then become an enemy of truth and a fanatic for harmless balderdash.

I beg you to believe in 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 , there might be hope for us.

Likewise, those on the side of religion get too caught up in their truth, i.e. the literality of the religion, that they miss the message, the foma, the myth within. They miss the humanism in the words. Continues Vonnegut:

A great swindle of our time is the assumption that science has made religion obsolete. All science has damaged is the story of Adam and Eve and the story of Jonah and the Whale.

Everything else holds up pretty well, particularly the lessons about fairness and gentleness.

The other two terms used by Bokonon are Karass and Granfalloon. A karass is defined as:

A group of people who work together to do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing, or with whom they are acting.

No examples of a karass can be given, if one was provided it would then become a granfalloon. Defined as:

A proud and meaningless association of people, a false karass.

Some examples of a granfalloon: Hoosiers, Sandlappers, Americans, Republicans, Democrats, Catholics, Baptists, Humanists, Unitarians, well you get the point. It's important to recognize these granfalloons for what they are, because believing them to be more, to be karasses, is extremely arrogant and dangerous. Hope, idealism, and tolerance can not destroy these walls after they have been built. While we may find these associations to be of use, we need to insure that they don't become definitive. Says Vonnegut of a UU congregation that invited him to speak:

I wasn't to consider myself a relative of any sort, and it was obvious that I could not tell that cold-roast professorial bunch anything that it hadn't accepted or dismissed collectively years and years ago.

We as a congregation should work to insure that we avoid the potential granfalloon in our midst. That we remember that tolerance is meaningless if we only talk about it, and that tolerance applies more to how we treat others than how we expect others to treat ourselves.

To close I will finish the letter that Vonnegut wrote to the Chaplain at Transylvania University who questioned what Vonnegut believed:

Jesus is particularly stimulating to me, since he noticed what I can't help noticing, that life is so hard most people are losers or feel like losers, so that a skill essential to most of us, if we are to retain some shred of dignity, is to show grace in defeat. That to me is the lesson he taught while up on the cross, whether he was God or not. And he was neither the first nor the last human being, if that is what he was, to teach that while in unbelievable agony.

*As for the preaching of formal Christianity, I am all for it. What I can't stand are sermons which say that to believe in the divinity of Jesus is a way to **win**.*