

Vonnegut, Five Years Gone.

Written by Alex Baer

Wednesday, 11 April 2012 17:26

Kurt Vonnegut left the planet five years ago today. If you noticed his absence then, surely you also know by how much the world has not been the same since. Some things, however, have not changed: Kurt found the world humorous, hapless, sadly lacking -- a pratfall away from cheating death or a breath from unimaginable brilliance. Or both, maybe simultaneously. He has said, "Human beings might as well look for diamond tiaras in the gutter as for rewards and punishments that were fair."

He was the author of 14 novels, 5 scripts, 5 short story collections, and 5 books of essays, and countless drawings, all filled with effervescent, irreverent, self-fluorescing Vonnegutian wit and crinkled-smile insights. "Cat's Cradle" was one such book, in which Kurt created a fanciful and poetic religion, Bokononism -- along with the end of the world, of course. The new religion gently explained the way of things, in rhyming "calypsos," using rare pairings of wry humor plied with the harsh truth:

"Tiger got to hunt, bird got to fly / Man got to sit and wonder, 'Why, why, why?'

"Tiger got to sleep, bird got to land / Man got to tell himself he understand."

Kurt had a wide-ranging imagination, inventing the planet Tralfamadore, a poisonously-interlocking form of ice, herds of handheld electronic bugaboos to bewilder and baffle his perplexed characters, along with a scientific theory of variable gravity -- playfully crediting that wonder with the effortless movement of mammoth stone blocks, easing completion of the pyramids in Egypt.

Kurt also invented a failed science fiction writer, Kilgore Trout, as a reappearing character, with Trout wielding wobbly stories illustrating various and necessary points on Kurt's agenda. Vonnegut himself, though, complained about being lumped into the sci-fi drawer of writers, explaining that "so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal."

He was part Mark Twain in his humanity, along with helpings of E.B. White, O. Henry, and some Will Rogers tossed in to the mix. He was a gentleman with a gentle sense of humor, called Laurel and Hardy saints for bringing the soothing and blessing balm of laughter to millions.

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You could do far worse than introduce yourself to his works. Some people break their accidental diet of Kurt's thoughts with "Breakfast of Champions," while other preferring rushing headlong into the time-blur of his best-known work, "Slaughterhouse Five." There's lots more to choose from, "Jailbird," "Timequake," "Slapstick," "Hocus Pocus," "Player Piano." To use one of Kurt's favorite phrases: *And so on.*

Kurt was from Indianapolis, said he and his people all sounded like bandsaws cutting galvanized tin. He spoke in public, now and again. He spoke on September 22, 2003, at the University of Wisconsin, and made a number of invigorating remarks, speaking about a book few were likely to have heard about: "... a medical text, 'The Mask of Sanity,' first published in 1941, and written by the late Dr. Hervey Cleckley, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the Medical College of Georgia."

Kurt continued, "Some people are born deaf, some are born blind or whatever, and this book is about congenitally defective human beings of a sort who are making this whole country and many other parts of the planet go completely haywire nowadays.

"These are people born without consciences. They know full well the pain their actions may cause others to feel but do not care. They cannot care. They came into this world with a screw loose, and now they're taking charge of everything.

"They appear to be great leaders because they are so decisive. Do this! Do that! What makes them so decisive is that they do not care and cannot care what happens next."

Kurt was timeless: he summarized history and replayed it for our lessons and amusement, sideways, with a laugh track, to keep the pain from being unbearable. He talked about almost everything at once sometimes -- a restless and eager mind ready to share more startling and laughable discoveries, more similarities in dissimilar things, displaying one definition of genius. He filled his writing with a light borne of living in and around much darkness.

Sometimes, he would joke about what he wanted on his tombstone. My favorite is the simple exclamation, "What in hell was that all about?!" He had seen plenty of death in WWII, which

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tempered his laughter about slaughter, placing this note on a character's tombstone: "We are healthy only to the extent our ideas are humane." On another, he placed, "Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt."

"Do you know what a Humanist is?" Kurt asked, in the same speech. "I am honorary president of the American Humanist Association, having succeeded the late, great, science fiction writer Isaac Asimov in that functionless capacity. We Humanists try to behave well without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. We serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is our community.

"We had a memorial service for Isaac a few years back, and at one point I said, 'Isaac is up in Heaven now.' It was the funniest thing I could have said to a group of Humanists. I rolled them in the aisles. It was several minutes before order could be restored. And if I should ever die, God forbid, I hope you will say, 'Kurt is up in Heaven now.' That's my favorite joke."

Kurt is up in Heaven now, five years to the day, sorely missed, in all this *pool-pah* we have now.

Continued godspeed, we will add, along with ongoing wishes of *bon voyage* -- and, if reincarnation turns out to have been the real thing, then, *many happy returns*, too!

<http://www.americanhumanist.org/hnn/archives/?id=293&article=2>

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