

Creative Writing

Kurt Vonnegut

Thank you.

I am happy to be here in Spokane again. I made a fool of myself onstage at Gonzago many years ago now. I was so innocent back then that I still considered it possible that we could become the humane and reasonable America so many members of my generation used to dream of. We dreamed of such an America during the Great Depression, when there were no jobs. And then we fought and often died for that dream during the Second World War, when there was no peace.

But I know now that there is not a chance in hell of America's becoming humane and reasonable. That is because power corrupts us, and absolute power corrupts us absolutely. Human beings are chimpanzees who get crazy drunk on power. I myself have experienced that intoxication. I was once a Corporal.

By saying our leaders are power-drunk chimpanzees, am I in danger of wrecking the morale of our men and women fighting and dying in the Middle East? Their morale, like so many of their bodies, is already shot to pieces. They are being treated, as I never was, like toys a rich kid got for Christmas.

But I will say this:

No matter how corrupt and greedy our government and our corporations and our media and Wall Street and our religious and charitable organizations may become, the music will still be perfectly wonderful.

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

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

And I have arranged for a Strauss waltz to be played as you depart, so you can waltz the heck out of here when it's time to go. For those of you who don't know how to waltz, nothing could be easier and more human. You go step,

*Kurt Vonnegut instructed
students at Eastern
Washington University,
Spokane on 17 April 2004.*

slide, rest, step, slide, rest, step, slide, rest. Oom, pah, pah, oom, pah, pah.

Bill Gates doesn't seem to realize that we are dancing animals.

During our catastrophically idiotic war in Vietnam, the music just kept getting better and better. We lost that war, by the way. Order couldn't be restored in Indo-China until the locals finally kicked us the hell out of there.

And how come the people in countries we invade can't fight like ladies and gentlemen, in uniforms, and with tanks and helicopter gunships?

About music: I like Strauss and Mozart and all that, but I would be remiss not to mention the absolutely priceless gift which African-Americans gave to the whole wide world when they were still in slavery...I mean 'the blues'. All pop music today, jazz, swing, be-bop, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the Stones, rock-and-roll, hip-hop and on and on is derived from the blues.

A gift to the world? One of the best rhythm-and-blues combos I ever heard was three guys and a girl from Finland, playing in a club in Krakow, Poland.

The wonderful writer Albert Murray, who is a jazz historian among other things, told me that, during the era of slavery in this country, an atrocity from which we can never fully recover, the suicide rate per capita among slave owners was much higher than the suicide rate among slaves. Al Murray says he thinks this was because slaves had a way of dealing with depression, which their white owners did not. They could play the blues. He says something else which also sounds right to me. He says the blues can't drive depression clear out of a house, but they can drive it into corners of any room where they are being played.

I am, incidentally, Honorary President of the American Humanist Association, having succeeded the late, great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov in that utterly functionless capacity. We humanists behave as honourably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishment 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 Asimov a while back, and at one point I said, 'Isaac is up in Heaven now'. That was the funniest thing I could have said to an audience of Humanists. I rolled them in the aisles. It was several minutes before order could be restored.

If I should ever die, again God forbid, I hope some of you will say, 'Kurt's up in Heaven now.' That's my favorite joke.

How do Humanists feel about Jesus? If what he said was superb, how can it matter whether he was God or not?

When you get to my age, if you get to my age, which is eighty-one, and if you have reproduced, you will find yourself asking your own children, who are themselves middle-aged, what life is all about. I have seven kids, four of them adopted. Most of you here are the same age as my grandchildren. They, like you, are being royally shafted and lied to by our Baby Boomer corporations and government.

I put my big question about life to my biological son Mark. Mark is a pediatrician, and author of a memoir entitled 'The Eden Express'. It is about his

crack-up, straitjacket and padded cell stuff, from which he recovered sufficiently to graduate from Harvard Medical School.

Dr. Vonnegut said this to his doddering old dad: 'Father, we are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is.' So I pass that on to you. Write it down, and put it on your computer, so you can forget it.

I have to say that's a pretty good sound bite, almost as good as, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto to you.' A lot of people think Jesus said that, because it is so much the sort of thing Jesus liked to say. But it was actually said by Confucius, a Chinese, five hundred years before there was that greatest and most humane of human beings, named Jesus Christ.

The Chinese also gave us, via Marco Polo, pasta and the formula for gunpowder. The Chinese were so dumb they only used gunpowder for fireworks.

And everybody was so dumb back then that nobody in either hemisphere even knew that there was another one.

We've sure come along way since then, only seven hundred years ago. Sometimes I wish we hadn't. I hate H-bombs and the Jerry Springer Show.

And while I have your attention, listen. Don't you think it's time we used DNA technology to find out who the freeloader is in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, so we can kick him out?

I love science. All humanists do. I'm particularly fond of the Big Bang Theory. It goes like this: There was once nothing, and it was so much nothing that there wasn't even such a thing as nothing. And then all of a sudden there was this great big BANG, and that's where all this crap came from. Forget the Bible.

Any questions?

You know what they should put over the entrance to the Physics Department? Just that one word:

BANG!

You know what else I think? I think life is no way to treat an animal, and not just people, but pigs and chickens, too. Life just hurts too much.

But to get back on to the subject of people like Confucius and Jesus and my son the doctor Mark, who've said how we could behave more humanely, and maybe make the world a less painful place. One of my favorites is Eugene Debs, from Terre Haute in my native state of Indiana. Please get a load of this:

Eugene Debs, who died back in 1926, when I was only four, ran several times as a Socialist candidate for President, if you can imagine such a ballot, had this to say while campaigning:

'As long as there is a lower class, I am in it. As long as there is a criminal element, I'm of it. As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free.'

Doesn't anything Socialistic make you want to throw up? Like great public schools or health insurance for all?

How about Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes?

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God, and so on.

Not exactly planks in a Republican platform. Not exactly Donald Rumsfeld or Dick Cheney stuff.

For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that The Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere.

'Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon? Give me a break!

Who am I for in this next presidential election? I will vote for anybody, as long as he is a Nordic, heterosexual multi-millionaire, and went to Yale University, and was a member there of the secret society known as 'Skull and Bones'.

Only kidding, but seriously: there is a tragic flaw in our precious Constitution, and I don't know what can be done to fix it. This is it: Only nut cases want to be President.

This was true even in my high school. Only seriously disturbed people ran for Class President. We might have psychiatrists examine all candidates. But who but a nut case would want to be a psychiatrist?

But, when you stop to think about it, only a nut case would want to be a human being, if he or she had a choice. Such treacherous, untrustworthy, lying and greedy animals we are!

I wouldn't trust any one of you, no matter how friendly and innocent you may appear, any farther that I could throw you. Because you're human.

And for the love of God, as the Christians say, please don't trust me. I couldn't stand it.

My favourite song? It's 'How Could You Believe Me When I Said I Loved You, When You Know I've Been a Liar All My Life?'

You want to know what I pray every night?

I go down on my old knees, next to my cot in the coal bin, and I pray with all my heart, 'To whom it may concern. Couldn't you please put my soul inside a sea otter or barn owl instead?' I would rather be a sea otter than a human being, even if there has been another oil spill.

You want to know what the British mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell called this planet? He said it was 'the Lunatic Asylum of the Universe.' And he said the inmates had taken over, and we were tormenting each other and trashing the joint. And he wasn't talking about the germs or the elephants. He meant we the people.

Lord Russell lived to be almost a hundred. His dates are 1872 to 1970 AD. What does 'AD' signify? That commemorates an asylum inmate who was nailed to a wooden cross by a bunch of other inmates. With him still conscious, they, no

kidding, hammered spikes through his wrists and insteps, and into the wood. Then they set the cross upright, so he had to dangle up there where even the shortest person in the crowd could see him writhing this way and that.

Can you imagine people doing such a thing to a person?

No problem. That's entertainment. Ask the devout Roman Catholic Mel Gibson, who as an act of piety, has just made a fortune with a movie about how Jesus was tortured. Never mind what Jesus said.

During the reign of King Henry the Eighth, founder of the Church of England, he had a counterfeiter boiled alive in public. Show biz again. Mel Gibson's next movie should be 'The Counterfeiter'. Box office records will again be broken.

One of the few good things about modern times is, if you die horribly on television, you will not have died in vain. You will have entertained us.

And what did the great British Historian Edward Gibbon have to say about the human record so far? He said, 'History is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind.'

The same can be said about this morning's issue of the *New York Times*.

Edward Gibbon's dates? 1737 to 1794 AD.

The French Algerian writer Albert Camus, who won a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, wrote that, 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.'

So there's another barrel of laughs from literature.

Camus himself died in an automobile accident.

His dates? 1913 to 1960 AD.

Listen, all great literature is about what a bummer it is to be a human being: *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Bible* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

But I have to say this in defence of humankind: No matter in what era in history, including the Garden of Eden, everybody just got there. And, except for the Garden of Eden, there were already all these crazy games going on, which could make you act crazy, even if you weren't crazy to begin with. Some of the games which were already going on when you got here were love and hate, Liberalism and Conservatism, automobiles and credit cards and girls' basketball.

On the subject of crazy games already going on before any of us ever got here:

If you keep up with current events in the supermarket tabloids, you know that a team of Martian anthropologists have been studying our culture for the past ten years, since our culture is the only one worth a nickel on the whole damn planet. You can forget Brazil and Argentina.

Anyway: They went back home last week, because they knew how terrible global warming was about to be. Their space vehicle wasn't a flying saucer. It was more like a flying soup tureen. And they're little all right, only six inches high. But they aren't green. They're mauve.

And their little mauve leader, by way of farewell, said in that teeny-weeny, tanny-wanny, toney-woney little voice of hers that there were two things about

American culture no Martian would ever understand.

‘What is it,’ she squeaked, ‘what can it possibly be about blowjobs and golf?’

Even crazier than golf, though, is modern American politics where, thanks to TV, and for the convenience of TV, you can be only one of two kinds of human beings, either a Liberal or a Conservative.

Actually, this same sort of thing happened to the people of England ten generations ago, and Sir William Gilbert, of the radical team of Gilbert and Sullivan, wrote these words for a song about it back then:

I often think it's comical
 How nature always does contrive
 That every boy and every gal,
 That's born into the world alive,
 Is either a little Liberal,
 Or a little Conservative.

Which one are you in this country, and it's practically a law of life that you have to be one or the other? If you aren't one or the other, you might as well be a doughnut.

If some of you still haven't decided, I'll make it easy for you.

If you want to take my guns away from me, and you're all for murdering fetuses, and love it when homosexuals marry each other, and want to give them kitchen showers, and you're for the poor, you're a Liberal.

If you are against those perversions and for the rich, you're a Conservative.
 What could be simpler?

A show of hands, please: How many of you are Liberals?

On the subject of homosexuality: If you really want to hurt your parents, and you don't have the nerve to be gay, the least you can do is go into the arts. And in a few minutes I'll give a lesson in Creative Writing. That's what the blackboard is for.

In the meanwhile, though, I want to talk to you about our government's war on drugs. It's certainly a lot better than no drugs at all. It was illegal mescaline, which put my son Mark in the loony bin for a little while.

But get this: The two most widely abused and addictive and destructive of all substances are both perfectly legal. One, of course, is ethyl alcohol. And President George W. Bush, no less, and by his own admission, was smashed or tiddley-poo or four sheets to the wind a good deal of the time from when he was sixteen until he was forty-one. When he was forty-one, he says, Jesus appeared to him, and made him knock off the sauce, stop gargling nose paint.

Other drunks have seen pink elephants.

And what the heck, he doesn't make any of the big decisions, and couldn't, and wouldn't want to in any case.

All he has to do is say he will not cut and run, no matter what happens in Iraq or Afghanistan. Where in the heck can you cut and run to from Crawford, Texas? Dubuque, Iowa? Spokane?

And you know why I think he is so pissed off at Arabs? They invented algebra.

Arabs also invented the numbers we use, including a symbol for nothing, which nobody else had ever had before.

You think Arabs are dumb? Try doing long division with Roman numerals.

We're spreading democracy, are we? Same way European explorers brought Christianity to the Indians, what we now call 'Native Americans'. There's this story about Spaniards who were about to burn a Native American alive because he had been uppity in some way. And he was lashed to the stake, about to entertain, and a Spaniard tied a cross to the end of a long stick, and he held it up so the Native American could kiss it.

And the Native American asked why he should kiss it, and the Spaniard said if he kissed it he would go to Heaven. And the Native American asked if there were Spaniards in Heaven. He was told there were, and the Native American said he certainly didn't want to go there.

How ungrateful he was! How ungrateful are the people of Baghdad today.

So lets give another big tax cut to the super-rich. That'll teach Bin Laden a lesson he won't soon forget. Hail to the Chief.

That chief and his cohorts have as little to do with the Democracy as those Spaniards had to do with Jesus. We the people have absolutely no say in whatever they choose to do next. In case you haven't noticed, they've already cleaned out the treasury, passing it out to pals in the war and national security rackets, leaving your generation and the next one with a perfectly enormous debt, which you'll be asked to repay.

Nobody let out a peep when they did that to you, because big money and TV have disconnected every burglar alarm in the Constitution: The House, the Senate, the Supreme Court and the FBI, and We the People.

About my own history of foreign substance abuse. By the God or whatever, I am not an alcoholic, largely a matter of genes. I take a couple of drinks now and then, and will do it again tonight. But two is my limit. No problem.

I am of course notoriously hooked on cigarettes. I keep hoping the things will kill me. A fire at one end and a fool at the other.

And I have been a coward about heroin and cocaine and LSD and so on, afraid they might put me over the edge, and, unlike my son Mark, I might never come back again. I did smoke a joint of marijuana one time with Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, just to be sociable. It didn't seem to do anything to me one way or the other, so I never did it again.

But I'll tell you one thing: I had a high that not even crack cocaine could match. That was when I got my first driver's license! Look out world, here comes Kurt Vonnegut. I'm what a car is now. I'm a hundred horsepower now, which is eleven hundred manpower, so don't mess with me. Hya, Babe, you want a lift somewhere?

And my car back then, a Studebaker, as I recall, was powered, as are almost all means of transportation and other machinery today, and electric power plants and furnaces, by the most addictive and destructive drugs of all, which are fossil

fuels, so easy to set afire.

When you got here, even when I got here, the industrialized world was already hopelessly hooked on fossil fuels, and very soon now there won't be any more of those. Cold turkey.

You've heard of 'crack babies'? Those are babies who come into the world already hooked on crack because their mothers were hooked on crack. Well, we are the fossil fuel babies.

As I speak, we are burning the last whiffs and drops and chunks of fossil fuels in a binge of thermodynamic whoopee. And while we do that, our waste products continue to make the air unbreathable and the water undrinkable, and more and more life forms are dying because of us.

This is a university, isn't it? Isn't it OK to tell young people the truth here? I mean this isn't like TV news, is it?

And here's what I think the truth is; we are all addicts of those fossil fuels in a state of denial, about to face cold turkey.

And like so many addicts about to face cold turkey, our leaders are now committing violent crimes to get what little is left of what we're hooked on.

But relax. I've got a joke that will dispel the gloom. It's another Martian joke. This is it, and no matter what, we've still got music and our sense of humor.

There's bad news and good news tonight, my friends. The bad news is the Martians have landed in New York City and are staying at the Waldorf Astoria.

The good news is they only eat homeless people and pee gasoline.

Put some of that pee in a Ferrari, and you can go a hundred miles an hour. If you're a guy, you can have babes like you can't believe. Put some in a plane and you can go as fast as a bullet, and drop all kinds of crap on the Arabs below. Put some in a school bus and you can get the kids to and from school. Put some in a fire engine, and it will get firemen to a fire, so they can put the fire out. Put some in a Honda, and it'll get you to work, and then back home again.

And wait till you hear what the Martians poop. It's Uranium. Just one of them can light and heat every home and school and church and business in Tacoma.

What's it like to be my age? I can't parallel park worth a damn anymore, so please don't watch me while I try to do it. And gravity has become a lot less friendly and manageable than it used to be.

I have also become a flaming neuter. I'm as celibate as fifty per cent of the heterosexual Roman Catholic clergy. And celibacy is no root canal. It's so cheap and convenient. You don't have to do or say anything afterwards, because there is no afterwards.

And when my tantrum, which is what I call my TV set, flashes boobs and smiles in my face, and says everyone but me is going to get laid tonight, and this is a national emergency, so I've got to rush out and buy a car or pills, or a folding gymnasium I can hide under my bed, I laugh like a hyena. I know and you know that millions and millions of good Americans, present company not excepted, are not going to get laid tonight.

And we flaming neuters vote! So I am looking forward to the day when the

President of the United States, no less, who probably isn't going to get laid that night, declares a National Neuter Pride Day. And out of our closets we'll come by the millions. Shoulders squared, chins held high, we'll go marching up Main Streets all over this boob-crazed democracy of ours, and laughing like hyenas.

But hey, listen; I got a letter from a sappy woman a while back. She knew I was sappy too, a Franklin Roosevelt Democrat, a friend of the working stiffs. She was about to have a baby, not mine. She wanted to know if it was a mistake to bring an innocent little baby into a world as awful as this one is. I told her that what made life almost worth living for me was the saints I met. These were people who behaved compassionately and capably, no matter what, and they could be anywhere.

So maybe some of you tonight are or may become saints for her child to meet. Most of us are loaded with Original Sin. But a surprising number of us, not me, God knows, are loaded with Original Virtue. Ain't that sweet.

So now it's time for me to teach creative writing.


First rule: Don't use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites, representing nothing. All they do is show you've been to college.

And I realize that some of you may have trouble deciding whether I'm kidding or not. So from now on I will thumb my nose at you like when I'm kidding.

For instance? Join the National Guard or the Marines and teach Democracy. (*Nose*)

If I give you the finger, (*Finger*) it means Spokane is about to be attacked by Al Qaeda. In that case wave flags, if you have them. That always seems to scare them away. Please don't get the two signals mixed up, or you might accidentally start World War Three.

*Creative writing lesson on blackboard
followed by 'Blue Danube' on the P.A.*

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Apr 22-04
I AM FREE
I AM HAPPY
Peace
Thank you.
Harjechi Vannuyc

Written in the garden of St. George's Cathedral, Jerusalem, on the afternoon of Thursday 22 April 2004.