

Fates worse than DEATH

Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut sent us this article in 1982, as a contribution to the discussion surrounding the first European Conference for European Nuclear Disarmament in Brussels. The foreword, by Ken Coates, describes the background to that event. We reprint it 24 years after its first appearance, because, unfortunately, it still maintains all its relevance.

Foreword

A little over two years ago, the Russell Foundation launched an Appeal for European Nuclear Disarmament. We were scared. The arms race was running wild, and the big nuclear powers were threatening each other as if the next war were going to be fought with catapults. Thousands of people agreed with our Appeal, and signed it. Among them was Kurt Vonnegut Jnr, who knows about war at first hand because he was a prisoner of war in Dresden when allied bombers burnt that city, and almost everyone in it.

For two years now, we have been trying to organise a European Conference of all the disarmament movements. At last this is scheduled to meet in Brussels, on 2nd, 3rd and 4th July 1982. After that, we hope to move on to a second big conference in Berlin during 1983.

I think these meetings will succeed. They have to succeed, because the peace movements absolutely have to speak to one another, exchange ideas, learn to share each other's experiences, problems and successes.

But in one way, however many people come to Brussels, the END Convention is already a great success. And that is because of Kurt Vonnegut. I wrote to him to ask him for a message to the Convention. In fact, I wrote more than once, but in the end he replied. This is what he said:

2 June 1982

Dear Ken Coates,

I'm sorry to have been such a slovenly responder to your good letters. I can't come to Brussels in July, but the world seems to be one big city now. I ran into the Mayor of Nagasaki, whose mother was pregnant with him when the bomb was dropped, only this afternoon – two hundred yards from my doorstep. As it turns out, he is for peace. Surprise.

I, a druid, preached for peace at the Episcopal Cathedral here, St. John the Divine, two Sundays ago. I enclose a copy of what I

said, more or less. If anything in it is of any use to you, please help yourself. The copyright is owned by the Cathedral, which paid me zero. They wouldn't have the balls to sue, no matter what you did.

Cheers,



Kurt Vonnegut

The piece he sent is a gem. Opening that letter was nicer than being given a parcel of diamonds as big as marbles. In the middle of the Falkland war, with people dying and threatened with death, this is the finest message we could have had for the delegates to the Brussels meeting.

Ken Coates

* * *

Fates worse than Death

Kurt Vonnegut

Lecture at St. John the Divine, NYC 23 May 1982

Good morning,

This is a pretty small church, but I guess I have to start somewhere.

Actually, this is not my main line of work. Preaching in Cathedrals is just a hobby. I make up stories for a living. I get my ideas from dreams.

The wildest dream I have had so far is about *The New Yorker Magazine*. In this dream, the magazine has published a three-part essay by Jonathan Schell, which proves that life on Earth is about to end. I am supposed to go to the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, where all the people are waiting, and say something wonderful – right before a hydrogen bomb is dropped on the Empire State Building.

People as far away as Bridgeport will die instantly.

Here is how I interpret the dream: I consider myself an important writer, and I think *The New Yorker* should be ashamed that it has never published me.

* * *

I will speak today about the worst imaginable consequences of doing without hydrogen bombs. This should be a relief. I am sure you are sick and tired of hearing how all living things sizzle and pop inside a radioactive fireball. We have known that for more than a third of this century – ever since we dropped an atom bomb on the yellow people of Hiroshima. They certainly sizzled and popped.

After all is said and done, what was that sizzling and popping, despite the brilliant technology which caused it, but our old friend death? Let us not forget that Saint Joan of Arc was made to sizzle and pop in old times with nothing more than firewood. She wound up dead. The people of Hiroshima wound up dead. Dead is dead.

Scientists, for all their creativity, will never discover a method for making

people deader than dead. So if some of you are worried about being hydrogen-bombed, you are merely fearing death. There is nothing new in that. If there weren't any hydrogen bombs, death would still be after you. And what is death but an absence of life? That's all it is. That is all it ever can be.

Death is nothing. What is all this fuss about?

* * *

Let us 'up the ante', as gamblers say. Let us talk about fates worse than death. When the Reverend Jim Jones saw that his followers in Guyana were facing fates worse than death, he gave them Kool-Aid laced with cyanide. If our government sees that we are facing fates worse than death, it will shower our enemies with hydrogen bombs, and then we will be showered in turn. There will be plenty of Kool-Aid for everyone, in a manner of speaking, when the right time comes.

What will the right time look like?

I will not waste your time with trivial fates, which are only marginally worse than death. Suppose we were conquered by an enemy, for example, who didn't understand our wonderful economic system, and so Braniff Airlines and International Harvester and so on all went bust, and millions of Americans who wanted to work couldn't find any jobs anywhere. Or suppose we were conquered by an enemy who was too cheap to take good care of children and old people. Or suppose we were conquered by an enemy who wouldn't spend money on anything but weapons for World War Three. These are all tribulations we could live with, if we had to – although God forbid.

But suppose we foolishly got rid of our nuclear weapons, our Kool-Aid, and an enemy came over here and crucified us. Crucifixion was the most painful thing which the ancient Romans ever found to do to anyone. They knew as much about pain as we do about genocide. They sometimes crucified hundreds of people at one time. That is what they did to all the survivors of the army of Spartacus, which was composed mostly of escaped slaves. They crucified them all. There were several miles of crosses.

If we were up on crosses, with nails through our feet and hands, wouldn't we wish that we still had hydrogen bombs, so that life could be ended everywhere? Absolutely.

We know of one person who was crucified in olden times, who was supposedly as capable as we or the Russians are of ending life everywhere. But he chose to endure agony instead. All he said was, 'Forgive them, Father – they know not what they do.'

He let life go on, as awful as it was for him, because here we are, aren't we?

But he was a special case. It is unfair to use Jesus Christ as an exemplar of how much pain and humiliation we ordinary human beings should put up with before calling for the end of everything.

* * *

I don't believe that we are about to be crucified. No potential enemy we now face has anywhere near enough carpenters. Not even the Pentagon at budget time has

mentioned crucifixion. I am sorry to have to put that idea into their heads. I will have only myself to blame if, a year from now, the Joint Chiefs of Staff testify under oath that we are on the brink of being crucified.

But what if they said, instead, that we would be enslaved if we did not appropriate enough money for weaponry? That could be true. Despite our worldwide reputation for sloppy workmanship, wouldn't some enemy get a kick out of forcing us into involuntary servitude, buying and selling us like so many household appliances or farm machines or inflatable erotic toys?

And slavery would surely be a fate worse than death. We can agree on that, I'm sure. We should send a message to the Pentagon: 'If Americans are about to become enslaved, it is Kool-Aid Time.'

They will know what we mean.

* * *

Of course, at Kool-Aid time all higher forms of life on Earth, not just us and our enemies, will be killed. Even those beautiful and fearless and utterly stupid sea birds, the blue-footed boobies of the Galapagos Islands, will die, because we object to slavery.

I have seen those birds, by the way – up close. I could have unscrewed their heads, if I wanted to. I made a trip to the Galapagos Islands two months ago – in the company of, among other people, Paul Moore, the bishop of this very cathedral.

That is the sort of company I keep these days – everything from bishops to blue-footed boobies. I have never seen a human slave, though. But my four great-grandfathers saw slaves. When they came to this country in search of justice and opportunity, there were millions of Americans who were slaves.

* * *

The equation which links a strong defence posture to not being enslaved is laid down in that stirring fight song, much heard lately, 'Rule Britannia'. I will sing the equation:

'Rule, Britannia, Britannia rule the waves –'

That, of course, is a poetic demand for a navy second to none. The next line explains why it is essential to have a navy that good:

'Britons never, never, never shall be slaves.'

It may surprise some of you to learn what an old equation that is. The Scottish poet who wrote it, James Thomson, died in 1748 – one quarter of a century before there was such a country as the United States of America. Thomson promised Britons that they would never be slaves at a time when the enslavement of persons with inferior weaponry was a respectable industry. Plenty of people were going to be slaves, and it would serve them right, too – but Britons would not be among them.

So that isn't really a very nice song. It is about not being humiliated which is

all right. But it is also about humiliating others, which is not a moral thing to do. The humiliation of others should never be a national goal.

There is one poet who should have been ashamed of himself.

* * *

If the Soviet Union came over here and enslaved us, it wouldn't be the first time Americans were slaves. If we conquered the Russians and enslaved them, it wouldn't be the first time Russians were slaves.

And the last time Americans were slaves, and the last time Russians were slaves, they displayed astonishing spiritual strengths and resourcefulness. They were good at loving one another. They trusted God. They discovered in the simplest, most natural satisfactions, reasons to be glad to be alive. They were able to believe that better days were coming in the sweet by-and-by. And here is a fascinating statistic: they committed suicide less often than their masters did.

So Americans and Russians can both stand slavery, if they have to – and still want life to go on and on.

Could it be that slavery isn't a fate worse than death. After all, people are tough, you know? Maybe we shouldn't send that message to the Pentagon – about slavery and Kool-Aid time.

* * *

But suppose enemies came ashore in great numbers, because we lacked the means to stop them, and they pushed us out of our homes and off our ancestral lands, and into swamps and deserts. Suppose that they even tried to destroy our religion, telling us that our Great God Jehovah, or whatever we wanted to call Him, was as ridiculous as a piece of junk jewellery.

Again: this is a wringer millions of Americans have already been through – or are still going through. It is another catastrophe which Americans can endure, if they have to – and still, miraculously, maintain some measure of dignity, or self-respect.

As bad as life is for our Indians, they still like it better than death.

* * *

So I haven't had much luck, have I, in identifying fates worse than death. Crucifixion is the only clear winner so far, and we aren't about to be crucified. We aren't about to be enslaved, either – to be treated as white Americans used to treat black Americans. And no potential enemy that I have heard of wants to come over here to treat all of us the way we still treat American Indians.

What other fates worse than death could I name? Life without petroleum?

* * *

In melodramas of a century ago, a female's loss of virginity outside of holy wedlock was sometimes spoken as a fate worse than death. I hope that isn't what the Pentagon or the Kremlin has in mind – but you never know.

I would rather die for virginity than for petroleum, I think. It's more literary, somehow.

* * *

I may be blinding myself to the racist aspects of hydrogen bombs, whose only function is to end everything. Perhaps there are tribulations which white people should not be asked to tolerate. But the Russian slaves were white. The supposedly unenslavable Britons were enslaved by the Romans. Even proud Britons, if they were enslaved now, would have to say, 'Here we go again'. Armenians and Jews have certainly been treated hideously in modern as well as ancient times – and they have still wanted life to go on and on and on. About a third of our own white people were robbed and ruined and scorned after our Civil War. They still wanted life to go on and on and on.

* * *

Have there ever been large numbers of human beings of any sort who have not, despite everything, done everything they could to keep life going on and on and on?
Soldiers.

'Death before Dishonour' was the motto of several military formations during the Civil War – on both sides. It may be the motto of the Eighty-second Airborne Division right now. A motto like that made a certain amount of sense, I suppose, when military death was what happened to the soldier on the right or the left of you – or in front of you – or in back of you. But military death now can easily mean the death of everything, including, as I have already said, the blue-footed boobies of the Galapagos Islands.

The webbed feet of those birds really are the brightest blue, by the way. When two blue-footed boobies begin a courtship, they show each other what beautiful, bright blue feet they have.

* * *

If you go to the Galapagos Islands, and see all the strange creatures, you are bound to think what Charles Darwin thought when he went there: How much time Nature has in which to accomplish simply anything. If we desolate this planet, Nature can get life going again. All it takes is a few million years or so, the wink of an eye to Nature.

Only humankind is running out of time.

My guess is that we will not disarm, even though we should, and that we really will blow up everything by and by. History shows that human beings are vicious enough to commit every imaginable atrocity, including the construction of factories whose only purpose was to kill people and burn them up.

It may be that we were put here on Earth to blow the place to smithereens. We may be Nature's way of creating new galaxies. We may be programmed to improve and improve our weapons, and to believe that death is better than dishonour.

And then, one day, as disarmament rallies are being held all over the planet, ka-bloooey! A new Milky Way is born.

* * *

Perhaps we should be adoring instead of loathing our hydrogen bombs. They could be the eggs for new galaxies.

* * *

What can save us? Divine intervention, certainly – and this is the place to ask for it. We might pray to be rescued from our inventiveness, just as the dinosaurs may have prayed to be rescued from their size.

But the inventiveness which we so regret now may also be giving us, along with the rockets and warheads, the means to achieve what has hitherto been an impossibility, the unity of mankind. I am talking mainly about television sets.

Even in my own lifetime, it used to be necessary for a young soldier to get into fighting before he became disillusioned about war. His parents back home were equally ignorant, and believed him to be slaying monsters. But now, thanks to modern communications, the people of every industrialised nation are nauseated by war by the time they are ten years old. America's first generation of television viewers has gone to war and come home again – and we have never seen veterans like them before.

What makes the Vietnam veterans so somehow spooky? We could almost describe them as being 'unwholesomely mature'. They have never had illusions about war. They are the first soldiers in history who knew even in childhood, from having heard and seen so many pictures of actual and restaged battles, that war is meaningless butchery of ordinary people like themselves.

It used to be that veterans could shock their parents when they came home, as Ernest Hemingway did, by announcing that everything about war was repulsive and stupid and dehumanising. But the parents of our Vietnam veterans were disillusioned about war, too, many of them having seen it first hand, before their children ever went overseas. Thanks to modern communications, Americans of all ages were dead sick of war even before we went into Vietnam.

Thanks to modern communications, the poor, unlucky young people from the Soviet Union, now killing and dying in Afghanistan, were dead sick of war before they ever got there.

Thanks to modern communications, the same must be true of the poor, unlucky young people from Argentina and Great Britain, now killing and dying in the Falkland Islands. *The New York Post* calls them 'Argies' and 'Brits'. Thanks to modern communications, we know that they are a good deal more marvellous and complicated than that, and that what is happening to them down there, on the rim of the Antarctic, is a lot more horrible and shameful than a soccer match.

* * *

When I was a boy it was unusual for an American, or a person of any nationality, for that matter, to know much about foreigners. Those who did were specialists – diplomats, explorers, journalists, anthropologists. And they usually knew a lot

about just a few groups of foreigners, Eskimos, maybe, or Arabs, or what have you. To them, as to the schoolchildren of Indianapolis, large areas of the globe were *terra incognita*.

Now look what has happened. Thanks to modern communications, we have seen sights and heard sounds from virtually every square mile of the land mass on this planet. Millions of us have actually visited more exotic places than had many explorers during my childhood. Many of you have been to Timbuktu. Many of you have been to Katmandu. My dentist just got home from Fiji. He told me all about Fiji. If he had taken his fingers out of my mouth, I would have told him about the Galapagos Islands.

So we now know for certain that there are no potential human enemies anywhere who are anything but human beings almost exactly like ourselves. They need food. How amazing. They love their children. How amazing. They obey their leaders. How amazing. They think like their neighbours. How amazing.

Thanks to modern communications, we now have something we never had before: reason to mourn deeply the death or wounding of any human being on any side in any war.

* * *

It was because of rotten communications, of malicious, racist ignorance that we were able to celebrate the killing of almost all the inhabitants in Hiroshima, Japan, thirty-seven years ago. We thought they were vermin. They thought we were vermin. They would have clapped their little yellow hands with glee, and grinned with their crooked buck teeth, if they could have incinerated everybody in Kansas City, say.

Thanks to how much the people of the world now know about all the other people of the world, the fun of killing enemies has lost its zing. It has so lost its zing that no sane citizen of the Soviet Union, if we were to go to war with that society, would feel anything but horror if his country were to kill practically everybody in New York and Chicago and San Francisco. Killing enemies has so lost its zing that no sane citizen of the United States would feel anything but horror if our country were to kill practically everybody in Moscow and Leningrad and Kiev.

Or in Nagasaki, Japan, for that matter.

We have often heard it said that people would have to change, or we would go on having world wars. I bring you good news this morning: people have changed.

We aren't so ignorant and bloodthirsty any more.

* * *

I told you a crazy dream I had – about *The New Yorker Magazine* and this cathedral. I will tell you a sane dream now.

I dreamed last night of our descendants a thousand years from now, which is to say all of humanity. If you are at all into reproduction, as was the Emperor Charlemagne, you can pick up an awful lot of relatives in a thousand years. Every person in this cathedral who has a drop of white blood, is a descendant of Charlemagne.

A thousand years from now, if there are still human beings on Earth, every one

of those human beings will be descended from us – and from everyone who has chosen to reproduce.

In my dream, our descendants are numerous. Some of them are rich, some are poor, some are likeable, some are insufferable.

I ask them how humanity, against all odds, managed to keep going for another millennium. They tell me that they and their ancestors did it by preferring life over death for themselves and others at every opportunity, even at the expense of being dishonoured. They endured all sorts of insults and humiliations and disappointments without committing either suicide or murder. They are also the people who do the insulting and humiliating and disappointing.

I endear myself to them by suggesting a motto they might like to put on their belt buckles or tee-shirts or whatever. They aren't all hippies, by the way. They aren't all Americans, either. They aren't even all white people.

I give them a quotation from that great 19th century moralist and robber baron, Jim Fisk, who may have contributed money to this cathedral.

Jim Fisk uttered his famous words after a particularly disgraceful episode having to do with the Erie Railroad. Fisk himself had no choice but to find himself contemptible. He thought this over, and then he shrugged and said what we all must learn to say, if we want to go on living much longer:

‘Nothing is lost save honour.’

I thank you for your attention.