



## Kurt is up in heaven now

*Kurt Vonnegut*

*Kurt Vonnegut's first near-death experience was an accident, during a hospital operation that went wrong. He 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'. He followed this with a series of 90-second broadcasts for New York City's public radio station, WNYC, as the station's 'reporter on the afterlife' who interviewed more than 20 people at the end of the 'blue tunnel to the Pearly Gates'. We reproduce three of these, with John Brown, Clarence Darrow, and Eugene Victor Debs.*

... 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 AHA 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 ...

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Today's controlled near-death experience was a real honey! I interviewed John Brown – whose body lies a-moulderin' in the grave, but whose truth goes marchin' on. One hundred forty years ago, come October 2, he was hanged for treason against the United States of America. At the head of a force of only eighteen other anti-slavery fanatics, he captured the virtually unguarded Federal Armory at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. His plan? To pass out weapons to slaves, so they could overthrow their masters. Suicide.

Law-abiding citizens opened fire from all sides, killing eight of his men, two of them his sons. He himself was taken prisoner by a force of United States Marines, sworn to uphold the Constitution.

Their commander was Colonel Robert E. Lee.

John Brown wears a hangman's noose for a necktie up in Heaven. I asked him about it, and he said, 'Where's yours? Where's yours?'

His eyes were like glowing coins. 'Without shedding of blood,' he said, 'there is no remission of sin.' It turns out that's in the New Testament, Hebrews 9:22.

I congratulated him on what he'd said on his way to be hanged before a gleeful, jeering throng of white folks. I quote: 'This is a beautiful country.' In only five words, he had somehow encapsulated the full horror of the most hideous legal atrocities committed by a civilized nation until the Holocaust.

'Slavery was legal under American law,' he said.

'The Holocaust was legal under German law,' he said.

John Brown is a Connecticut Yankee, born in Torrington. He said there was a Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, who had actually encapsulated God in only six words: 'All men are created equal.'

Brown was twenty when Jefferson died. 'This perfect gentleman, sophisticated, scientific, wise,' John Brown went on, 'was able to write those incomparable sacred words while owning slaves. Tell me: Am I really the only person to realize that he, by his example, made our beautiful country an evil society from the very first, where subservience of persons of color to white people was deemed in perfect harmony with natural law?'

'I want to get this straight,' I said. 'Are you saying that Thomas Jefferson, possibly our country's most beloved founding father, after George Washington, was an evil man?'

'Let that, while my body lies a-molderin' in the grave,' said John Brown, 'be my truth which goes marchin' on.'

*(Choral rendition of one stanza of 'Battle Hymn of the Republic.')*

This is Kurt Vonnegut, signing off in the lethal injections facility at Huntsville, Texas. Until next time, ta ta.

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Dr. Jack Kevorkian has again unstrapped me from what has become my personal gurney, here, in the lethal injection facility at Huntsville, Texas. Jack has now supervised fifteen controlled near-death experiences for me. Hey, Jack, way to go! On this morning's trip down the blue tunnel to the pearly gates, Clarence Darrow, the great American defense attorney, dead for sixty years now, came looking for me. He wanted WNYC's listeners to hear his opinions of television cameras in courtrooms. 'I welcome them,' he said, if you can believe it. This man with the reputation of a giant,

comes from a rinky dink little farm town in Ohio.

‘The presence of those cameras finally acknowledges,’ he said to me, ‘that justice systems anywhere, anytime, have never cared whether justice was achieved or not. Like Roman games, justice systems are ways for unjust governments – and there is no other sort of government – to be enormously entertaining with real lives at stake.’

I thanked Mr. Darrow for having made American history much more humane than it would have been otherwise, with his eloquent defenses in court of early organizers of labor unions, of teachers of unpopular scientific truths, and for his vociferous contempt for racism, and for his loathing of the death penalty. And the late, great lawyer Clarence Darrow said only this to me: ‘I did my best to entertain.’

Signing off now. Hey, Jack, waddaya say we go downtown for some of that good old Tex-Mex cuisine?

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During what has been almost a year of interviewing completely dead people, while only half dead myself, I asked Saint Peter again and again if I could meet a particular hero of mine. He is my fellow Hoosier, the late Eugene Victor Debs of Terre Haute, Indiana. He was five times the Socialist Party’s candidate for president back when this country still had a strong Socialist Party.

And then, guess what, yesterday afternoon none other than Eugene Victor Debs, organizer and leader of the first successful strike against a major American industry, the railroads, was waiting for me at the far end of the blue tunnel. We hadn’t met before. This great American died in 1926 at the age of seventy-one when I was only four years old.

I thanked him for words of his, which I quote again and again in lectures: ‘As long as there is a lower class, I am in it. As long as there is a criminal element, I am of it. As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free.’

He asked me how those words were received here on Earth in America nowadays. I said they were ridiculed. ‘People snicker and snort,’ I said. He asked what our fastest growing industry was. ‘The building of prisons,’ I said.

‘What a shame,’ he said. And then he asked me how the Sermon on the Mount was going over these days. And then he spread his wings and flew away.

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