

The man without a country

James Alexander Thom

When Kurt Vonnegut died in April, he left an almost palpable ‘wisdom vacuum’ here in America, so much so that I found it hard to breathe.

There hadn’t been much wisdom in evidence since the turn of the century anyway. We’d hear all about ‘data’ and ‘intelligence’, but ‘wisdom’ had become an archaic word. (As we soon learned, the data and intelligence weren’t all that great, either.) But when the United States suffered a stupidity epidemic and let George W. Bush start an unprovoked war, old Kurt Vonnegut brought his pen out of retirement and pitted it against Bush’s sword.

His final book, *A Man Without a Country*, became a bestseller and heartened us with its sad, funny, kindly wisdom. It is a part of America’s awakening from war fever. Vonnegut, who had been through war, is a world authority on peace, and a beloved national wise man. He dwarfs Bush, who has never had a shred of combat experience or wisdom, and apparently thinks peace is just too boring.

One of the wisest things Kurt Vonnegut did over the years was to keep reminding us of what earlier wise men said. You could tell whom he admired by the opportunities he took to quote them. Jesus, Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain and Eugene Debs, to put them in chronological order. He quoted their wisdom in favour of human kindness and justice and against war-making.

Three of the best evenings I ever had in public involved Mr Vonnegut, who was, like me, Indiana-born. In the early 1990s we dined together at a big table during a literary festival in Indianapolis, as guest novelists. He was warm, droll and charming as usual, but tended to steer the conversation towards suicide (which he’d once failed to accomplish).

It seems he was having sympathetic angst for his friend and peer, William Styron, who had been struggling with suicidal depression. I had the pleasure of watching and hearing my

*A ‘phone and pen pal’ of
Kurt Vonnegut’s, James
Alexander Thom sent us this
tribute.*

Shawnee Indian wife scold the great man for even considering such a thing. She had never met Kurt before that evening, but had perceived that he was too valuable an American treasure to deliberately deprive us of his own life. By the time dinner was over, he was off that dismal subject and twinkling with good humour. Either she had convinced him, or made him afraid to be scolded about it again by an outspoken Shawnee woman. Whatever it was, he soldiered on for another fifteen years or so. I like to believe she made a bit of a difference.

The second great evening was also in Indianapolis, about ten years later, when he was scheduled to speak to the Indiana Civil Liberties Union, but wasn't well enough to come out from New York. I was asked to substitute for him.

I had no idea what he'd planned to say, but that was in the days when John Ashcroft was making a pious, unconstitutional ass of himself as George Bush's first Attorney General, so I had plenty to say. (Bush sure can pick those A.G.s!) When Kurt read my speech later, he phoned to tell me it was better than what he could have done – which was very kind, but surely not true.

The wonderful thing about that evening for me was the feeling in the auditorium that, even though I wasn't the man they'd signed up to hear, we all felt that we were sharing in the defence of American Constitutional law against a gang of delusionary rogues who had seized the White House by *coup d'état*, and we were declaring ourselves defenders of the Constitution.

And, as Kurt would have done, I had used humour as our defensive weapon. We were comrades-in-arms with mirth on our faces.

My last good Vonnegut evening was here in Bloomington, Indiana, in 2006, where I was invited to recite some of his anti-war words as one of the readers in Anthony Arnone's 'Voices of a People's History' stage production, based on Howard Zinn's classic history book. The selection began with a question I had asked myself, and Kurt had written, a question about wisdom: 'Where are Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain now when we need them?' I couldn't have imagined a happier combination: Twain, my favourite dead American author. Vonnegut, my favourite (then) living one. Lincoln, the greatest writer who was ever President of the United States, or maybe any country. Zinn, my favourite historian.

I had just finished writing a novel, 'Saint Patrick's Battalion', about the US-Mexico War of 1846-48, which was started by President James Polk almost the same way Bush started the Iraq War. Kurt had encouraged me to write the novel because it was so timely. And I had dedicated the book to him.

In the Vonnegut script selected for me to read that night was a quotation from Abraham Lincoln, who as a young Congressman had objected to that invasion. Here was Lincoln's stunningly written indictment of Polk (which now fits Bush exactly):

'Trusting to escape scrutiny, by fixing the public gaze upon the exceeding brightness of military glory – that attractive rainbow that rises in showers of blood ... he plunged into war.'

The last reader that evening dramatized the words of famous anti-war mother Cindy Sheehan in a hair-raising delivery, and if Bush the warmonger had

wandered into that auditorium that evening, his Secret Service bodyguards would have had all they could do to shield him from the contempt of that crowd of peacemongers.

Kurt Vonnegut used his own words to prove the pen is mightier than the sword, but also he enthusiastically relayed the anti-war writings of others. When I wrote how an old ex-Marine feels about the massacre of Iraqi civilians by young Marines in the town of Haditha, Kurt urged me to send the piece to this publication (*The Spokesman no.92*), where it appeared last year.

I thanked him for helping me spread my anti-war words, and for letting me spread his.

‘I’m a man of peace’, that old WWII rifleman and secular humanist said to me on the phone. ‘God bless you.’

Those were the last words I ever heard from him in his own voice, and if they weren’t nice, I don’t know what is.