

Kurt is up in Heaven now

Kurt Vonnegut

The death of Kurt Vonnegut was a great blow to The Spokesman. In 2003, Kurt was invited to speak under the auspices of the Mark Twain House in Hartford, Connecticut ‘...at the age of eighty, and because of what I myself have written’. He sent us the text, which we published as a pamphlet (Spokesman Books £2). We thought it would be appropriate to reprint it here as a tribute to our friend.

Hello. Ahoy. I hope this isn't like the Academy Awards, where nobody was supposed to say what the great American patriot and moralist, Mark Twain, would have said at this crisis in our history, upon receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award, say.

Michael Moore in fact violated that standard of decorum at the Academy Awards. Shame on Michael Moore. He spoiled the party.

First things first: I want it clearly understood that this mustache I'm wearing is my father's mustache. I should have brought his photograph. My big brother Bernie, now dead, a physical chemist who discovered that silver iodide can sometimes make it snow or rain – he wore it, too.

Speaking of weather: Mark Twain said some readers complained that there wasn't enough weather in his stories. So he wrote some weather, which they could insert wherever they thought it would help some.

Mark Twain, and I forget what his real name was – Justin Kaplan, the great Twain scholar, is among us tonight. He will know what Mark Twain's name really was. So ask him.

In any case, the person who called himself Mark Twain was said to have shed a tear of gratitude and incredulousness when honored for his writing by Oxford University in England. And I should shed a tear, surely, having been asked at the age of eighty, and because of what I myself have written, to speak under the auspices of the sacred Mark Twain House here in Hartford.

What other American landmark is as sacred to me as the Mark Twain House? The Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln were country boys from Middle America, and both of them made the American people laugh at themselves and appreciate really important, really moral jokes.

Abraham Lincoln was 26 years older than Twain. Queen Victoria was only 16 years older than Twain, and so might have been his sister. Twain and Victoria died in the same decade. Victoria in 1901 and Twain in 1910.

And I do not kid myself. Aside from my mustache and my addiction to nicotine, I stand in relationship to Mark Twain as Antonio Salieri stood to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

I should tell you, too, that tonight I will occasionally mention somebody named 'Jim.' Jim is the most appealing and wise character in the greatest possible of all American novels. In company such as this, I do not need to say the name of that book. It's not 'Gone with the Wind.'

I note that construction has stopped here in Hartford of a Mark Twain Museum – behind the carriage house of the Mark Twain House at 351 Farmington Avenue.

Work persons have been sent home from that site because American 'Conservatives,' as they call themselves, on Wall Street and at the head of so many of our corporations, have stolen a major fraction of our private savings, have ruined investors and employees by means of fraud and outright piracy.

Shock and awe.

And now, having installed themselves as our Federal Government, or taken control of it from outside, they have squandered our public treasury and then some. They have created a public debt of such appalling magnitude that our descendants, for whom we had such high hopes, will come into this world as poor as churchmice.

And our nation and our states, cities and towns, and so many of our people are dead broke, or close to it on account of 9/11?

You know what I say about that? I say, 'horsefeathers.'

And if you think Baghdad is a mess tonight, wait until you see New York and Chicago and Denver and Los Angeles two or three years from now, not because of Arabs, whom TV is teaching our children to hate, but because of what home grown economic terrorists have done to them.

Shock and awe.

What are the Conservatives doing with all the money and power which used to belong to all of us? They are telling us to be absolutely terrified, and to run round in circles like chickens with their heads cut off. But they will save us. They are making us take off our shoes at airports. Can anybody here think of a more hilarious practical joke than that one?

Smile, America. You're on Candid Camera.

And they have turned loose a myriad of our high tech weapons, each one costing more than a hundred high schools, on a Third World country, in order to shock and awe human beings like us, like Jim, like Adam and Eve, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

In high school in Indianapolis I learned to call that part of the world 'The Cradle of Civilization.'

'Cradle?' Rock-a-bye baby.

And, oh yes, they're buying or building mansions in Palm Beach, Florida, and so on, in order to live like and near Rush Limbaugh. Some of them, I guess, are now driving Hummers instead of Beamers.

The other day I asked the former Yankees pitcher Jim Bouton what he thought

of our great victory over Iraq, and he said, ‘Mohammed Ali *versus* Mr. Rogers.’ I assume that all of you, like Jim Bouton, a very funny writer by the way, watch ‘Sesame Street.’

‘Mohammed Ali *versus* Mr Rogers.’

What are Conservatives? They are people who will move Heaven and Earth, if they have to, who will ruin a company or a country or a planet, to prove to us and themselves that they are superior to everybody else, except for pals. They take good care of their pals, keep them out of jail – and so on.

Conservatives are crazy as bedbugs. They are bullies. Shock and awe.

Class war? You bet.

They have proved their superiority to admirers of Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain and Jesus of Nazareth by, with an able assist from television, making inconsequential our protests against their war. On what grounds did we protest it? There are many I could name, but I need name only one, which is common sense.

I asked a Civil War historian one time what it was that poor whites in the Confederacy, who had never owned slaves, thought they had to fight so hard for. And he said it was so there could continue to be a great number of human beings who were mistreated legally and socially as their inferiors.

Even though they weren’t billionaires, they were still Conservatives.

Were these Johnny Rebs scientifically correct in believing themselves mentally superior to the slaves? I’ll have to say, ‘Not quite.’

Some people similar in appearance to the character Jim in ‘Huckleberry Finn,’ but surely not all of them, have since performed superbly in all arts and sciences, and in all professions.

Some Jims, moreover, have given a gift to the world which is now almost the only reason many foreigners still like us at least a little bit. That gift is a specific remedy for the world-wide epidemic of depression, which is jazz, and in particular the Blues.

Albert Murray, a person of colour who is a friend of mine, is a jazz historian. He told me that the suicide rate per capita of slave owners was higher than that of slaves. He said that was because the slaves could do what white people only later learned how to do, which was to shoo away Old Man Suicide by playing and singing the Blues.

If I may insert an autobiographical note at this point: When I was growing up in Indianapolis during the Great Depression, the sanest, wisest, calmest person in our house was our cook Ida Young.

If somebody says, ‘It ain’t the money,’ it’s the money.

If a Conservative says, ‘It ain’t racism,’ it’s racism.

If a Conservative says, ‘It ain’t xenophobia,’ it’s xenophobia.

Shock and awe.

Foreigners loves us for our jazz. And they don’t hate us for our purported liberty and justice for all. They hate us now for our arrogance. But they have hated us in the past because our corporations have long been the principal deliverers and imposers of new technologies and economic schemes which have wrecked the

self-respect, the cultures of men, women and children in so many other countries.

Be that as it may, construction of the Mark Twain Museum will sooner or later be resumed. And I, the son and grandson of Indiana architects, seize this opportunity to suggest two features which I hope will be included in the completed structure. One is words to be chiseled into the capstone over the main entrance.

I would also like there to be a statue somewhere on the property, possibly one as tall as a giant redwood, considering the importance of the subject. Such a statue, even if only six feet high, would make an unfulfilled dream of Mark Twain's come true at last, at last. He found it unbearable, or so he said, that nowhere on Earth was there a monument to the most important human being who ever lived, who was Adam. He thought that Elmira, New York, where he was living then, would be a good place to put one at public expense.

What did Adam look like? Well, on that score at least you are in luck tonight. It so happens that I hold a Master's Degree in Anthropology from the University of Chicago. And by the power thus vested in me, I tell you that the fossil record now makes it incontrovertible that all of us, like the character Jim in 'Huckleberry Finn,' come from Africa.

Twain himself confessed to a shortage of weather in what he wrote. Modern readers surely note another shortfall, something else which is singularly missing. I mean erotica in its narrowest sense. I mean sex.

The same charge, of course, can be leveled against the collected works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

The sexiest thing our hero ever wrote, I think, is 'Eve's Diary.' Talk about hardcore porn!

I would be delighted if one of you would contradict me.

Anyone? Justin Kaplan?

If we accept 'erotica' in its broader sense, as not just about sex between people, but about love affairs with anything, even ladies' shoes or crack cocaine or E-mail or coathangers, we can say Mark Twain wrote an erotic masterpiece which, in intensity of intercourse, makes 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' read like an op ed piece in the *New York Times*.

It is also the happiest book ever written.

I am speaking, of course, of 'Life on the Mississippi.'

The love object in that case of '*pyschopathia sexualis*', if you like, is a river.

Herman Melville, author of the second greatest possible American novel, was in love with the ocean.

I myself grew up in Indianapolis, the world's largest city not on a navigable waterway. I had only a race track and the Eli Lilly Company to fall in love with, and it shows. It shows.

On the subject of sexual perversions, I am dying to tell a joke which unfortunately involves the Irish. And the last thing I want to do, God knows, is to insult a person of Irish descent. I am nearly as indebted to the Irishpersons George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde and Jonathan Swift as I am to Mark Twain and Herman Melville.

And, oh yes, I know Swift's parents were English. But he was born in Dublin, and that is where he received his education, which was evidently a good one. And you know what the Englishman Samuel Johnson said about 'Gulliver's Travels?' He said, 'Once you thought of the little people, the rest was obvious.'

But OK, here goes: You know what the definition of an Irish homosexual is? That's a man who loves women more than whiskey. I will pause, in order to let that sink in.

'A man who loves women more than *whiskey*.'

A violation of the natural order.

OK? So now, on that model, and it's a tricky one, I offer a definition of a homosexual male novelist in Victorian times. That was a man who loved women more than boats.

Most of you here though, because you have chosen to be in this place tonight, male or female, rich or poor, in your American dreams have lived on the beach or bank of a perfectly tremendous idea, and I quote:

'Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.'

What a beckoning river or ocean that dream of equality has been for some!

The man who said that was shot to death in the back of his head by a young Conservative. John Wilkes Booth was only twenty-seven years old when he so exercised his rights under the Second Amendment to the Constitution. Twain was thirty.

Hello, Charlton Heston. You know what the Second Amendment actually says, if read in full? It says, 'Hey, Charlton Heston, please protect us. Join the National Guard.'

When our political ancestors said, eleven score and seven years ago now, that we were going to respect one another as equals, they were, except for Benjamin Franklin, who wanted to outlaw slavery, windbags. I am not telling you the news. We all know that.

But the Mark Twain House here in Hartford and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington celebrate two of our spiritual ancestors who wished with all their hearts and minds that the United States could really be a country of respected equals, or at least more of one.

Many of us, but obviously not all Americans, at this, the start of the Third Christian Millennium, wish that the whole Earth could be more of a home of respected equals. But our nation, and hence our whole planet, has been captured by Jingos and Yahoos and Know-nothings and bullying anti-equality Imperialists of a sort which so humiliated and sickened Twain and Lincoln in their day.

Should we give up? I hate to tell you, but our hero Mark Twain gave up on the whole human race in 1898. He was only sixty-three. He had twelve more years to live, and there hadn't even been a First World War yet. He wouldn't live long enough to hear about the First World War.

But, even so, he wrote 'The Mysterious Stranger.' In that tale, which would only be published posthumously, he suggests to his own grim satisfaction, and to

mine as well, that Satan rather than God may have created this World, and, and I quote, 'The damned human race.'

So we could be demons in Hell. That would certainly explain a lot.

Was Twain a prophet? Technically, I guess we would have to say so. He said that, given human nature, things can only get worse. And things have gotten worse. Bingo.

At the end of 'A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court,' with knights being cooked to death in their iron suits when they tried to scale a fence charged with high voltage Yankee electricity, Twain foresaw how technology was going to revolutionize for the worse the manly arts of warfare. Bingo.

I myself have written that our planet's immune system is trying to get rid of a disease called 'us.' That would explain AIDS and the new pneumonia and driving while drunk and so on. And war.

But hey, listen:

I got a letter from a sappy woman a while back. She knew I was sappy, too, a fan of Twain and Lincoln – and Thoreau and George Bernard Shaw. She was about to have a baby. It wasn't mine. She just wanted to know if it was bad to bring such a sweet, innocent creature into a world as nasty as this one is.

I replied that what made being alive almost worthwhile for me was the saints I met, and they were numerous, and could be anywhere. These were Americans who behaved helpfully, capably, compassionately, honorably and modestly, in what might indeed be Hell.

I told her not to get an abortion, because there would be plenty of saints for her child to meet.

It was with such saints in mind that I came up with my first idea, since discarded, for a greeting to be chiseled into the capstone over the entrance to the Mark Twain Museum. This was it:

WELCOME TO UNDAMNED MEMBERS
OF THE HUMAN RACE.

But here is what I now think would be more fun to put up there, and Mark Twain loved fun more than anything. I have tinkered again with something famous he said, which is: 'Be good and you will be lonesome.' That is from 'Following the Equator.' OK?

So envision what a majestic front entrance the Mark Twain Museum will have someday. And imagine that these words have been chiseled into the noble capstone and painted gold:

BE GOOD AND YOU WILL BE LONESOME
MOST PLACES,
BUT NOT HERE, NOT HERE.

Another possible definition of an American saint: A person who does his or her job competently, without wanting to humble anyone, without wanting to make anybody who is economically or politically or socially weak feel like something the cat drug in.

And so much for American domestic policy. Now about American foreign policy:

One of the most humiliated and heartbroken pieces Twain ever wrote was about the slaughter of one hundred Moro men, women and children by our soldiers during our liberation of the people of the Philippines after the Spanish American War. Our brave commander was Leonard Wood, who now has a fort named after him. Fort Leonard Wood.

What did Abraham Lincoln have to say about such American imperialist wars? Those are wars which, on one noble pretext or another, actually aim to increase the natural resources and pools of tame labor available to the richest Americans who have the best political connections.

And it is almost always a mistake to mention Abraham Lincoln in a speech about something or somebody else. I am about to quote him again. He always steals the show. I guess he's already stolen this one.

I owe my awareness of the quotation to Morley Safer of Sixty Minutes, whose wife Jane, an anthropologist like me, comes from Hartford. Small world.

Morley Safer used this quotation in a speech and knocked my block off. Now I will use it in a speech and knock your blocks off. I see no reason why any of you shouldn't subsequently use it in speeches, in order to knock other people's blocks off.

Lincoln was only a Congressman when he said in 1848 what I am about to echo. He was heartbroken and humiliated by our war on Mexico, which had never attacked us.

We were making California our own, and a lot of other people and properties, and doing it as though butchering Mexican soldiers who were only defending their homeland against invaders weren't murder.

What other stuff besides California? Well, Texas, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. Lots of ski resorts! I am not a racist, God knows, God knows, but one can't help wondering what a Mexican would want with a ski resort. A golf course, yes. But a ski resort?

The person Congressman Lincoln had in mind when he said what he said was James Polk, our President at the time. Abraham Lincoln said of Polk, his President, our armed forces' Commander and Chief:

'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 – that serpent's eye, that charms to destroy, he plunged into war.'

Holy smokes! I almost said, 'Holy shit!' And I thought I was a writer! Twain was only 13 when Lincoln so wrote.

I asked Morley Safer where in heck he found that quotation, that 'rainbow of military glory rising in showers of blood,' and he said it was in a collection of Lincoln's letters in a library.

It wasn't in Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, but it will be in the next edition. What makes me think so? It so happens that Justin Kaplan, whom I have identified in our midst as our greatest Twain scholar, is also editor of that useful volume, that ticket to immortality.

Do you know we actually captured Mexico City during the Mexican War? Why

isn't that a national holiday? And why isn't the face of James Polk up on Mount Rushmore, along with Ronald Reagan's?

What made Mexico so evil back in the 1840's, well before our Civil War, is that slavery was illegal there. Remember the Alamo?

If I am not the writer Lincoln and Twain were, I am at least a Humanist. I think that is what Mark Twain, if asked, would call himself nowadays. Nowadays it means persons like my parents and both sets of grandparents, who try to behave ethically without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. They serve as best they can the only abstraction of which they have any real familiarity, which is their community.

What about Jesus? I say what one of my great grandfathers wrote, as follows: 'If so much of what Jesus said is ethically brilliant, and especially the Beatitudes, and "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," what can it matter whether he was God or not?'

My great grandfather's name was Clemens Vonnegut. Small world, small world.

This piquant coincidence is not a fabrication. I give you my word of honor that it is true.

Clemens Vonnegut called himself a 'Freethinker,' an antique word for Humanist. He was a hardware merchant in Indianapolis.

So, just as there was once a man named Adam who in Africa had all humanity in his loins, so, a hundred and twenty years ago, say, there was one man who was both Clemens and Vonnegut. I would have liked being such a person a lot. I only wish I could have been such a person tonight.

I claim no blood relationship with Samuel Clemens of Hannibal, Missouri. 'Clemens,' as a first name, is, I believe, like the name 'Clementine,' derived from the adjective 'clement.' To be clement is to be lenient and compassionate, or, in the case of weather, perfectly heavenly.

So there's weather again.

I am honorary President of the American Humanist Association. I succeeded the late, great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov in that completely functionless capacity. He had earned a doctorate in biochemistry, by the way.

We held a memorial service for Dr. Asimov a few years 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. It rolled them in the aisles. It was several minutes before order could be restored.

Should I ever happen to die, God forbid, I hope some of you will say, 'Kurt is up in Heaven now.'

That is my favorite joke.

And I thank you for your attention.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kurt Vonnegut', with a small star-like symbol below it.