

God Bless You Dr. Kevorkian

by
Kurt Vonnegut

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how twisted it is in society is definitely a theme.

God Bless You is just over 10 years old, being written in 1999.

Considering it was written pre-9/11, does it still relate today?

Absolutely, I feel like today's political climate is fueled heavily by religion, especially with this year's election. Pointing to religion as a way to validate their morals, and how you have to be a christian to be a good politician. I remember saying to my mother I wasn't proud to be an American for these reasons, and she almost slapped me! I'm ashamed of our country's history, and the lies that are told in the classroom. There was so much racism, and homophobia, and awful shit in my town that I was so vocally against, and even in middle school, I was freaked out by it. I remember after 9/11, all the racist things I heard against not just muslims, but almost anyone with dark skin. I was so disgusted by it. On the subject of euthanasia, it's only a conflict of religion, and that's the only reason it's not legal, which I personally believe it should be.

The most memorable moment from the book would be?

I think the interview of Hitler is the most shocking to me. The part of him apologizing and being the christian man that he is, I was like 'damn, that's good!' I think it was his definition of humanism that resonated with me the most: 'just be a good person,' I kept telling myself that. It's just what I should do, I thought about it a lot because it took the most thought to do.

It's refreshing that you're not into all of Vonnegut's work.

Yeah, with this particular book, he really talked to a subject that interested me, and he sort of danced around it in his other books.

When is a good time to read Kevorkian?

I think anyone who's having doubts about religion, or life, or just about being a good person. A devout whatever would dismiss it, but those with doubts would find something I think. It happens multiple times during someone's life, and it reminded me that religion is something people go to during a

time of fear and confusion. It made me feel less insane that I wasn't the only one thinking these thoughts.

How would you entice high school readers to read more substantive books?

'Edward Cullen as Dr. Kevorkian, in the major motion picture... God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian!' Hmm... 'Boyfriends everywhere are reading this book!' By the way, that boyfriend I was talking about earlier, we broke up because he was a conservative christian! How does that make sense? Maybe he didn't understand the sarcasm... It's for the youth that are looking for a brighter tomorrow, and they need to understand ideological views they have never even thought of. I don't know what to say to them to get their response really, 'Edward Cullen read this book: two thumbs way up!' Edward Cullen, the fictional vampire. It's a humorous book, a short read, it's sarcastic. It's pulpy and casual in a way, but touches on serious issues.

“If I could get the youth of the country to do one thing, it'd be to turn off their cell phones and go out, kill a chicken, and prepare it for dinner.”

What sort of images and colors do you see when you reminisce on Dr Kevorkian?

Definitely a hospital bed, like Lee Pace in *The Fall*. Also, in *Grease*, the beauty school drop-out dreamscape. I see a lot of white and sea-foam greens, but the green is also sort of sickening, and something jarring, like a red. Brancussi's drawings are very wiry, and kind of scratched into a surface, which might inform Vonnegut's drawings himself, and I associate with that. Vonnegut's drawings themselves were kind of bad and dumb, and it didn't seem to add much, but it's



Kurt Vonnegut has many published novels and short stories, but it wasn't until his 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* that he developed his iconic use of felt-tip illustrations incorporated into his writing.

also very 'fuck it,' which is what his work is about: 'The world is ending, everything sucks, why worry about drawing.'

Finally, what other books would you recommend to students?

I really like *Of Mice and Men* by Steinbeck, *Franny and Zooey*, Morgan definitely hit on that. One series I really enjoyed is the *Foxfire Series*, which is a series of books that describe in detail different skills of living in the most basic manner. There's stuff in there about building a cabin, about hunting, snakelore, and even how to make your own moonshine. Some of it's just interesting to read, but I strongly believe in the labor movement, and working with one's hands, and working with what you got. And if I could get the youth of the country to do one thing, it'd be to turn off their cell phones, go out and kill a chicken, and prepare it for dinner. I'm not kidding! I really believe there needs to be a return to working with the basics, and know what an honest days work is, and to know that the youth are capable of more than they think they are. It's fascinating!

The title of Vonnegut's series of short stories makes reference to Jack Kevorkian, a figure most known for his advocacy of assisted suicide. Kevorkian, a pathologist, was incarcerated in 1999 for his practice of assisted suicide for terminally ill patients, and passed away of natural causes in 2011.

Jr. Kevorkian has just unstrapped me from the gurney after yet another controlled near-death experience. I was lucky enough on this trip to interview none other than the late Adolf Hitler.

I was gratified to learn that he now feels remorse for any actions of his, however indirectly, which might have had anything to do with the violent deaths suffered by thirty-five million people during World War II. He and his mistress Eva Braun, of course, were among those casualties, along with four million other Germans, six million Jews, eighteen million citizens of the Soviet Union, and so on.

"I paid my dues along with everybody else," he said.

It is his hope that a modest monument, possibly a stone cross, since he was a Christian, will be erected somewhere in his memory, possibly on the grounds of the United Nations headquarters in New York. It should be incised, he said, with his name and dates 1889—1945. Underneath should be a two-word sentence in German: "Entschuldigen Sie."

Roughly translated into English, this comes out, "I Beg Your Pardon," or "Excuse Me."

During today's controlled near-death experience, I spoke to John Wesley Joyce, dead at sixty-five, former cop and minor league ball player, owner of the Lion's Head Bar in Greenwich Village from 1966 until it went bust in 1996. His was the country's most famous hangout for heavy-drinking, non-stop-talking writers in America. One wag described the clientele as "drinkers with writing problems."

The late Mr. Joyce said it was the writers who made it their club of their own accord, which hadn't pleased him all that

much. He said he installed a juke box in the hopes it would interfere with their talking. But they kept coming. "They just had to talk a lot louder," he said.

This is Kurt Vonnegut, WNYC's reporter on the Afterlife. During yesterday's controlled near-death experience, I had the pleasure of speaking with Frances Keane, a romance languages expert and writer of children's books, who died of cancer of the pancreas this past June 26 at the age of eighty-five. It seemed to me that her generally laudatory obit in the New York Times cut her off at the knees at the very end with this stark sentence: "Her three marriages ended in divorce." I asked her about this and she replied with shrugs and in three different romance languages.

"Asi es la vida," she said.

"C'e la vita," she said.

"C'estlavie," she said.

And then: "Go fly a kite!"

During my controlled near-death experiences, I've met Sir Isaac Newton, who died back in 1727, as often as I've met Saint Peter. They both hang out at the Heaven end of the blue tunnel of the Afterlife. Saint Peter is there because that's his job. Sir Isaac is there because of his insatiable curiosity about what the blue tunnel is, how the blue tunnel works.

It isn't enough for Newton that during his eighty-five years on Earth he invented calculus, codified and quantified the laws of gravity, motion, and optics, and designed the first reflecting telescope. He can't forgive himself for having left it to Darwin to come up with the theory of evolution, to Pasteur to come up with the germ theory, and to Albert Einstein to

come up with relativity.

“I must have been deaf, dumb, and blind not to have come up with those myself,” he said to me. “What could have been more obvious?”

My job is to interview dead people for WNYC, but the late Sir Isaac Newton interviewed me instead. He got to make only a single one-way trip down the tunnel. He wants to know what it seems to be made of, fabric or metal or wood or what. I tell him that it’s made of whatever dreams are made of, which leaves him monumentally unsatisfied.

Saint Peter quoted Shakespeare to him: There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

I have just interviewed Peter Pellegrino, who died last March 26, age eighty-two, in his home in Newtown, Pennsylvania. Mr. Pellegrino was a founder of the Balloon Federation of America, and the first American to cross the Alps in a hot air balloon, and a validator of ballooning records for the National Aeronautic Association, and a balloon pilot examiner for the F.A.A.

He asked if I’d been a balloonist, and I said no. This was outside the Pearly Gates. I’m not allowed inside anymore. If I go inside again, Saint Peter says I’ll be a keeper.

Saint Peter explained to Pellegrino that I wasn’t dead, that I was simply having a near-death experience, and would soon be back among the living.

When Pellegrino heard that, he said, “For God’s sake, man—get a tank of propane and a balloon while you’ve still got time, or you’ll never know what Heaven is!”

Saint Peter protested. "Mr. Pellegrino," he said, "this is Heaven!" "The only reason you can say that," said Pellegrino, "is because you've never crossed the Alps in a hot air balloon!"

Saint Peter said to me, "Not only do you still have time to go ballooning. You might also write a book with the title, 'Heaven and Its Discontents.'" He said to Pellegrino, ironically of course, "If you'd had crack cocaine on Earth, I suppose Heaven would also be a disappointment."

"Bingo!" said Pellegrino.

Even as a child, he said, he knew he belonged up in the sky, not on the ground, and I quote: "...just as a fish flopping on a riverbank knows it belongs in the water." As soon as he was old enough, he went up in the sky at the controls of all sorts of airplanes, from World War I Jennies to commercial transports.

"But I felt like an invader, an alien up there, tearing up the sky with my propellers, dirtying it up with my noise and exhaust," he went on. "I didn't go up in a balloon until I was thirty-five. That was a dream come true. That was Heaven, and I was still alive.

"I became the sky."

This is Kurt Vonnegut, signing off with Jack Kevorkian in Hunstville State Prison. Until the next time, ta ta.

When I went looking for James Earl Ray, confessed assassin of Martin Luther King, on today's controlled near-death experience, I didn't have to wander far and wide into Paradise. James Earl Ray died of liver failure on April 23 of 1998. According to Saint Peter, though, he has so far been unwilling to take a single step into the Life Everlasting awaiting him beyond the Pearly Gates.

He's no moron: he has an IQ of 108, well above average when measured against the intelligence of the general American population. He said to me that he wasn't going to set foot into eternity until a prison cell was built for him. He said the only way he could feel cozy forever was in a prison cell. In a cell, he said, he wouldn't give a darn how much time was passing by. Actually, he used the "s" word, wouldn't give a good "shit" how much time was passing by.

His conversation is still liberally spinkled with the "n" word for African-Americans, despite Saint Peter's pleas that he, for the love God, pipe the hell down. He said he never would have shot "the big n," meaning Dr. King, if he'd known the bullet would make what "the big n" said and fought for so effing famous all over the effing world. "Because of me," he said, "little white children are being taught that 'the big n' was some kind of American hero, like George effing Washington. Because of my little old bullet," he said, "the shit 'the big n' said has been carved into marble monuments and inlaid with effing gold, I hear."

This is Kurt Vonnegut in the effing state-of-the-art lethal injection facility in Huntsville, effing, Texas signing off.

During my most recent controlled near-death experience, I got to interview William Shakespeare. We did not hit it off. He said the dialect I spoke was the ugliest English he had ever heard, "fit to split the ears of groundlings." He asked if it had a name, and I said, "Indianapolis."

I congratulated him on all the Oscars the movie Shakespeare in Love had won, since it had his play Romeo and Juliet as its centerpiece.

He said of the Oscars, and of the movie itself, "A tale told by

an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” I asked him point-blank if he had written all the plays and poems for which he’d been given credit. “That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” he said. “Ask Saint Peter!” Which I would do.

I asked him if he had love affairs with men as well as women, knowing how eager my WNYC audience was to have this matter settled. His answer, however, celebrated affection between animals of any sort:

“We were as twinn’d lambs that did frisk in the sun, and bleat the one at the other: what we chang’d was innocence for innocence.” By changed he meant exchanged: “What we exchanged was innocence for innocence.” That has to be the softest core pornography I ever heard.

And he was through with me. In effect, he told your reporter to go screw himself. “Get thee to a nunnery!” he said, and off he went.

I felt like such a fool as I made my way back to the blue tunnel. An enchanting answer to any question I might have asked the greatest writer who ever lived could be found in Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations. The beaut about exchanging innocence for innocence was from The Winter’s Tale.

I at least remembered to ask Saint Peter if Shakespeare had written Shakespeare. He told me that nobody arriving in Heaven, and there was no Hell, had claimed authorship for any of it. Saint Peter added, “Nobody, that is, who was willing to submit to my lie- detector test.”

This is your tongue-tied, humiliated, self-loathing, semi-literate Hoosier hack Kurt Vonnegut, signing off with this question for today: “To be or not to be?”

Never before have I been a tease about a dead person I've interviewed, but now is the time. Let's see how smart you are about the history of big ideas.

For starters: This former Earthling, although not quite twenty, published an idea as persistent in the minds of thinking people today as Pasteur's germ theory, say, or Darwin's theory of evolution, or Malthus's dread of overpopulation.

Hint number two: Breeding will tell. This incredibly precocious writer's mother was a famous writer, too. Some of her books were illustrated by none other than William Blake! Imagine having one's book illustrated by William Blake! Her most passionate subject: the right of women to be treated as the equals of men. My mystery dead person's father was a writer, too, an anti-Calvinist preacher who wrote, most memorably, "God himself has no right to be a tyrant." Who were the friends of such distinguished parents? William Blake and Thomas Paine, and William Wordsworth to name a few.

Hint number three: This person was married to a celebrity, as famous for the romantic disorder of his life as for his poetry. He inspired the suicide of his first wife, for example. As Romantically as you please, he drowned when he was only thirty.

Give up? I spoke in Heaven today to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, author, again before she was twenty, of the most prescient and influential science fiction novel of all times: *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus*. That was in 1818, a full century before the end of the First World War—with its Frankensteinian inventions of poison gas, tanks and airplanes, flame throwers and land mines, and barbed-wire entanglements everywhere.

I hoped to get Mary Shelley's opinions of the atomic bombs we dropped on the unarmed men, women, and children of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and promise to try again. This time, though, she would only rhapsodize about her parents, who were, of course, William and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, and about her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and his friends and hers, John Keats and Lord Byron.

I said many ignorant people nowadays thought “Frankenstein” was the name of the monster, and not of the scientist who created him.

She said, “That’s not so ignorant after all. There are two monsters in my story, not one. And one of them, the scientist, is indeed named Frankenstein.”

This is Kurt Vonnegut in Huntsville, Texas, signing off.

I have returned from heaven, having interviewed the poet Dr. Philip Strax, S-T-R-A-X. He died at the age of ninety on the same day as the baseball player Joe Dimaggio, and was the author of this charming couplet:

TIS BETTER TO HAVE LOVE AND LUST
THAN LET OUR APPARATUS RUST.

Author of three volumes of poetry, Philip Strax was also a radiologist. He refined the use of x-rays, previously useful mainly for looking at bones, so they could detect malignancies in the soft tissue of breasts. The number of women's lives extended by early detection of cancers, thanks to mammograms, in baseball terms might be called thousands upon thousands of R.B.I., or runs batted in.

The turning point in his career as a physician, if not as a poet,

These written 'radio excerpts' actually began as a series of ninety-second radio interludes for WNYC, New York City's public radio station, and evolved into this collection of musings about who and what we live for.

was the death of his beloved wife Gertrude at the age of only thirty-nine. She was killed by breast cancer detected too late. Every moment of his professional life thereafter was devoted to fighting that disease: What a success!

I found him at the edge of a crowd of frenzied angels who wanted their feathers autographed by Dimaggio. I said that his glowing obituary in the New York Times indicated that he was extraordinarily fond of women, and they of him. He recited these unabashedly feminist lines of his own composition:

LET US REMIND OUR POOR MENJOLK IN DEED AND SONG:
THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF MEN IN THIS WOMANLY WORLD:
THOSE WHO KNOW THEY ARE WEAK,
THOSE WHO THINK THEY ARE STRONG.

This is Kurt Vonnegut, in the indispensable company of Jack Kevorkian, who has saved my life a hundred times now, signing off until the next time. Ta ta.

Assisted Suicide is the uncommon practice of trained medical professionals helping terminally ill patients who are requesting to end their lives. This form of euthanasia is an underlying theme of God Bless You. Because many religions forbid suicide of any kind, laws against the practice of assisted suicide have been put in place. Is it ethical to create such a law?

With great strides towards equal rights within these past 20 years, the recent resurgence in chauvinistic and religious conservative attitudes has greatly divided the United States. Many fear these tendencies are a glimpse of what's to come, but others suggest it's the last "big push" for these attitudes before equality takes a much fuller stance in the world. Are these strikes at equality something to fear?

