

HOBGOBLINS AND CONSISTENCIES

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
15 APRIL 2007

Readings:

By Ralph Waldo Emerson – from *Self-Reliance*

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,
Adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.
With consistency a great soul simply has nothing to do....

Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today – ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood’ – Is it so bad to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure wise spirit that ever took flesh.
To be great is to be misunderstood.

And these words from the late Kurt Vonnegut:

What should young people do with their lives today?

Many things, obviously.

But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.

Sermon:

Emerson was indeed not a man to be foolishly consistent. He only lasted about two years as a parish minister. He was destined to be a great thinker and writer, not a pastor. Yet in the years after he left the ministry, he frequently provided pulpit supply throughout New England's Unitarian churches. For the occasion, he would arrive on Sunday with an old sermon in his pocket. But when it came time to preach words that had written often years earlier, he would come to an idea or phrase and stop. He'd look up and say I don't believe that anymore, and then go on.

Thanks in large part to Emerson, that great American voice of the 19th century, Unitarians have long been freethinkers, willing to change our minds. Willing at times to appear foolish and inconsistent for the sake of integrity. Kurt Vonnegut, that great American voice of the 20th century, was in the lineage of such free-thinkers.

We Unitarian Universalists love to list the famous people of the past who shared our faith. Some say this is because we are small and insecure. I think it is because we are indeed relatively small in numbers and sometimes we feel alone and lonely. Listing our famous folk is a way to connect us to the depth of our heritage and to remember our voices are more influential than we sometimes think. We need to feel a part of a tribe, not isolated beings.

OK, so naming Kurt Vonnegut who died this past week as one of us is a bit of a stretch in some ways, not so much in others. Vonnegut's parents and grandparents subscribed to the brand of Unitarianism of the American West in the 19th century – a kind of freethinking, iconoclastic, often anti-institutionalist Unitarian.

Vonnegut certainly knew Unitarians. He gave the Ware Lecture at General Assembly in 1986. He once said of himself, “I am an atheist, or at best a Unitarian who winds up in church a lot.” Although he was a skeptic, he was also a deeply religious writer. His fictional characters are perpetually wrestling with the idea of God and how to make meaning of the chaos and violence of human life.

He was not one to get caught up in a foolish consistency. He revered science and reason, yet he made it very clear how devastating and unreliable they can be. He was highly individual and something of a loner, but he understood the value of community. He was a humanist and atheist but he continually wondered about the nature of God. In *Sirens of the Titans*, a

character creates the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. Vonnegut was like Jacob, wrestling with the angel by the river, seeking, demanding a blessing. An atheist who wound up in church a lot.

We have seven principles that guide our religious path, but sometimes I think all we need is two – the first and the seventh. First, the inherent worth and dignity of every person and seventh, the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Oh, there are marvelous things in-between; I especially love the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Yet distilled to their essence, I think all can eventually be subsumed by the first and seventh.

We are individuals, precious and whole and significant, sometimes great and misunderstood, and yet we are all profoundly connected to each other and all creation, small pieces of something much larger. If we can manage to stand in both of those truths simultaneously, then we are walking a true path. Another of those poignant paradoxes we are called to stand in.

But it's hard out there on the edge, difficult to stand in the swirling maelstrom of paradox. Too often we land, dangerously on one side or another of this grand paradox. On one side, you get a kind of hyper-individualism, and independence of which we can be inordinately proud. We become selfish and self-referential. Ironically, in this extreme we are actually more likely to be victims of a consumer mentality that robs us the capacity to be truly individual and original. We are duped and seduced into believing that we can only express our individuality by buying something that everyone else has.

Just a few years after Emerson wrote his seminal essay *Self-Reliance* he stopped using the term because people immediately took him to mean a kind of hyper-individualism and justified all manner of selfish and destructive actions by it.

Emerson admired the original thinker – someone who could stand within a culture and time and yet think beyond it. It was that sort of greatness that Emerson aspired to. I think of Mark Twain and Albert Einstein – both of whom were among Vonnegut's heroes, and both of whom he managed to resemble. Especially Twain - think bushy hair, big mustache. Vonnegut, too, is a great American original thinker.

Yet both Emerson and Vonnegut understood the value and importance of community, of tribe.

Although at its extreme, tribalism is just as dangerous as hyper-individualism. Tribe, however you name it, is used to justify all manner of violence and destruction. The most hideous modern example is the genocide in Rwanda, all the more horrifying because it was based on a nearly arbitrary and made-up tribal distinction. We all fall prey to this when we fail to independently, when we refuse to entertain another point of view.

Yet Identity with tribe also gives meaning. Vonnegut says, "It's obvious throughout the human experience that extended families and tribes are terribly important. We can do without an extended family as human beings about as easily as we can do without vitamins or essential minerals."

When asked what tribe he belonged to Vonnegut responded, "It's an ancestral tribe. These were immigrants from the north of Germany who came here about the time of the Civil War. Called themselves free thinkers. They were impressed, incidentally, by Darwin. They are called humanists now. People who aren't so sure the Bible is the word of God, who are denounced by some people as secular humanists. Well that's exactly what I am. The trouble with being a secular humanist is that we don't have a congregation. We don't meet, so it's a very flimsy tribe."

I find Vonnegut to be more of a religious humanist, not a bad way to describe many of us here. And our tribe isn't so flimsy, but it can be a little small and lonely, so we do things like count Kurt Vonnegut as our own. We also do things like gather every year for General Assembly, which I love to call the grand gathering of the tribe. Among the things we do there is listen to the Ware Lecture, an illustrious list of both Unitarian Universalists and our sympathizers among them Vonnegut, Martin Luther King, Mary Oliver, Norman Lear, Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, Malvina Reynolds, Saul Alinsky and Jane Addams of Hull House fame way back in 1931.

Vonnegut once mused about why he kept writing, kept speaking at places like the Ware lecture. Why bother, he wondered

and answered his own questions. "Many people need desperately to receive this message: I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people do not care about them. You are not alone."

We must be individuals who think for ourselves. Without the individual expression of our precious and unique selves, we are lost. Never in the history of the universe, have atoms and elements assembled in just this combination, the combination that created you. You are, we are, all simply amazing creations. Your rose can open and bloom courageously.

Yet we need each other – desperately. Without tribe and dependence and connection, we are lost.

So how do we balance the individual and the tribe, without falling into the dangers of either? I find a clue in Vonnegut's work. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, a character addresses new humans arriving on the planet:

Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies -- God damn it, you've got to be kind."

The hardness of individual integrity is softened by the kindness and compassion necessary to being in community, to sharing a planet.

I leave you with this final story from Vonnegut.

"I work at home, and if I wanted to, I could have a computer right by my bed, and I'd never have to leave it. But I use a typewriter, and afterwards I mark up the pages with a pencil. Then I call up this woman named Carol out in Woodstock and say, "Are you still doing typing?" Sure she is, and her husband is trying to track bluebirds out there and not having much luck, and so we chitchat back and forth, and I say, "OK, I'll send you the pages." Then I'm going down the steps, and my wife calls up, "Where are you going?" I say, "Well, I'm going to go buy an envelope." And she says, "You're not a poor man. Why don't you buy a thousand envelopes? They'll deliver them, and you can put them in a closet." And I say, "Hush."

So I go down the steps here, and I go out to this newsstand across the street where they sell magazines and lottery tickets and stationery. I have to get in line because there are people buying candy and all that sort of thing, and I talk to them. The woman behind the counter has a jewel between her eyes, and when it's my turn, I ask her if there have been any big winners lately. I get my envelope and seal it up and go to the postal convenience center down the block at the corner of 47th Street and 2nd Avenue, where I'm secretly in love with the woman behind the counter. I keep absolutely poker-faced; I never let her know how I feel about her. One time I had my pocket picked in there and got to meet a cop and tell him about it. Anyway, I address the envelope to Carol in Woodstock. I stamp the envelope and mail it in a mailbox in front of the post office, and I go home. And I've had a hell of a good time. And I tell you, we are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you any different."

That story is full of both the individual and community. And full of simple human kindness. Vonnegut is busy doing his own idiosyncratic thing, exhibiting his irascible self. Yet he is doing in the context of human contact and human kindness.

In our struggle to be individuals we sometimes think we must sacrifice kindness – if we are to distinguish ourselves, to escape the madding crowd, to rise above the unruly mob rushing like lemmings to the cliff's edge.

Yet in truth, without kindness we cannot be complete individuals. Without kindness we cannot create true community.

Without kindness we are lost. Cultivating an attitude of simple loving kindness as we walk our individual paths, as we gather to celebrate, we share each other's pain, is the way to stand in this paradox.

Kindness will heal us. Simple human kindness will save us yet. May it be so. Amen.