

Cold turkey

By Kurt Vonnegut
In These Times

Monday 10 May 2004

Many years ago, I was so innocent I still considered it possible that we could become the humane and reasonable America so many members of my generation used to dream of. We dreamed of such an America during the Great Depression, when there were no jobs. And then we fought and often died for that dream during the Second World War, when there was no peace.

But I know now that there is not a chance in hell of America's becoming humane and reasonable. Because power corrupts us, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Human beings are chimpanzees who get crazy drunk on power. By saying that our leaders are power-drunk chimpanzees, am I in danger of wrecking the morale of our soldiers fighting and dying in the Middle East? Their morale, like so many bodies, is already shot to pieces. They are being treated, as I never was, like toys a rich kid got for Christmas.

When you get to my age, if you get to my age, which is 81, and if you have reproduced, you will find yourself asking your own children, who are themselves middle-aged, what life is all about. I have seven kids, four of them adopted.

Many of you reading this are probably the same age as my grandchildren. They, like you, are being royally shafted and lied to by our Baby Boomer corporations and government.

I put my big question about life to my biological son Mark. Mark is a pediatrician, and author of a memoir, *The Eden Express*. It is about his crackup, straightjacket and padded cell stuff, from which he recovered sufficiently to graduate from Harvard Medical School.

Dr. Vonnegut said this to his doddering old dad: "Father, we are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is." So I pass that on to you. Write it down, and put it in your computer, so you can forget it.

I have to say that's a pretty good sound bite, almost as good as, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." A lot of people think Jesus said that, because it is so much the sort of thing Jesus liked to say. But it was actually said by Confucius, a Chinese philosopher, 500 years before there was that greatest and most humane of human beings, named Jesus Christ.

The Chinese also gave us, via Marco Polo, pasta and the formula for gunpowder. The Chinese were so dumb they only used gunpowder for fireworks. And everybody was so dumb back then that nobody in either hemisphere even knew that there was another one.

But back to people, like Confucius and Jesus and my son the doctor, Mark, who've said how we could behave more humanely, and maybe make the world a less painful place. One of my favorites is Eugene Debs, from Terre Haute in my native state of Indiana. Get a load of this:

Eugene Debs, who died back in 1926, when I was only 4, ran 5 times as the Socialist Party candidate for president, winning 900,000 votes, 6 percent of the popular vote, in 1912, if you can imagine such a ballot. He had this to say while campaigning:

*As long as there is a lower class, I am in it.
As long as there is a criminal element, I'm of it.
As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free.*

Doesn't anything socialistic make you want to throw up? Like great public schools or health insurance for all?

How about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes?

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. ...

And so on.

Not exactly planks in a Republican platform. Not exactly Donald Rumsfeld or Dick Cheney stuff.

For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere.

"Blessed are the merciful" in a courtroom? "Blessed are the peacemakers" in the Pentagon? Give me a break!

There is a tragic flaw in our precious Constitution, and I don't know what can be done to fix it. This is it: Only nut cases want to be president.

But, when you stop to think about it, only a nut case would want to be a human being, if he or she had a choice. Such treacherous, untrustworthy, lying and greedy animals we are!

I was born a human being in 1922 A.D. What does "A.D." signify? That commemorates an inmate of this lunatic asylum we call Earth who was nailed to a wooden cross by a bunch of other inmates. With him still conscious, they hammered spikes through his wrists and insteps, and into the wood. Then they set the cross upright, so he dangled up there where even the shortest person in the crowd could see him writhing this way and that.

Can you imagine people doing such a thing to a person?

No problem. That's entertainment. Ask the devout Roman Catholic Mel Gibson, who, as an act of piety, has just made a fortune with a movie about how Jesus was tortured. Never mind what Jesus said.

During the reign of King Henry the Eighth, founder of the Church of England, he had a counterfeiter boiled alive in public. Show biz again.

Mel Gibson's next movie should be *The Counterfeiter*. Box office records will again be broken.

One of the few good things about modern times: If you die horribly on television, you will not have died in vain. You will have entertained us.

And what did the great British historian Edward Gibbon, 1737-1794 A.D., have to say about the human record so far? He said, "History is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind."

The same can be said about this morning's edition of the New York Times.

The French-Algerian writer Albert Camus, who won a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, wrote, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide."

So there's another barrel of laughs from literature. Camus died in an automobile accident. His dates? 1913-1960 A.D.

Listen. All great literature is about what a bummer it is to be a human being: Moby Dick, Huckleberry Finn, The Red Badge of Courage, the Iliad and the Odyssey, Crime and Punishment, the Bible and The Charge of the Light Brigade.

But I have to say this in defense of humankind: No matter in what era in history, including the Garden of Eden, everybody just got there. And, except for the Garden of Eden, there were already all these crazy games going on, which could make you act crazy, even if you weren't crazy to begin with. Some of the games that were already going on when you got here were love and hate, liberalism and conservatism, automobiles and credit cards, golf and girls' basketball.

Even crazier than golf, though, is modern American politics, where, thanks to TV and for the convenience of TV, you can only be one of two kinds of human beings, either a liberal or a conservative.

Actually, this same sort of thing happened to the people of England generations ago, and Sir William Gilbert, of the radical team of Gilbert and Sullivan, wrote these words for a song about it back then:

*I often think it's comical
How nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal
That's born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal
Or else a little Conservative.*

Which one are you in this country? It's practically a law of life that you have to be one or the other? If you aren't one or the other, you might as well be a doughnut.

If some of you still haven't decided, I'll make it easy for you.

If you want to take my guns away from me, and you're all for murdering fetuses, and love it when homosexuals marry each other, and want to give them kitchen appliances at their showers, and you're for the poor, you're a liberal.

If you are against those perversions and for the rich, you're a conservative.

What could be simpler?

My government's got a war on drugs. But get this: The two most widely abused and addictive and destructive of all substances are both perfectly legal.

One, of course, is ethyl alcohol. And President George W. Bush, no less, and by his own admission, was smashed or tiddley-poo or four sheets to the wind a good deal of the time from when he was 16 until he was 41. When he was 41, he says, Jesus appeared to him and made him knock off the sauce, stop gargling nose paint.

Other drunks have seen pink elephants.

And do you know why I think he is so pissed off at Arabs? They invented algebra. Arabs also invented the numbers we use, including a symbol for nothing, which nobody else had ever had before. You think Arabs are dumb? Try doing long division with Roman numerals.

We're spreading democracy, are we? Same way European explorers brought Christianity to the Indians, what we now call "Native Americans."

How ungrateful they were! How ungrateful are the people of Baghdad today.

So let's give another big tax cut to the super-rich. That'll teach bin Laden a lesson he won't soon forget. Hail to the Chief.

That chief and his cohorts have as little to do with Democracy as the Europeans had to do with Christianity. We the people have absolutely no say in whatever they choose to do next. In case you haven't noticed, they've already cleaned out the treasury, passing it out to pals in the war and national security rackets, leaving your generation and the next one with a perfectly enormous debt that you'll be asked to repay.

Nobody let out a peep when they did that to you, because they have disconnected every burglar alarm in the Constitution: The House, the Senate, the Supreme Court, the FBI, the free press (which, having been embedded, has forsaken the First Amendment) and We the People.

About my own history of foreign substance abuse. I've been a coward about heroin and cocaine and LSD and so on, afraid they might put me over the edge. I did smoke a joint of marijuana one time with Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead, just to be sociable. It didn't seem to do anything to me, one way or the other, so I never did it again. And by the grace of God, or whatever, I am not an alcoholic, largely a matter of genes. I take a couple of drinks now and then, and will do it again tonight. But two is my limit. No problem.

I am of course notoriously hooked on cigarettes. I keep hoping the things will kill me. A fire at one end and a fool at the other.

But I'll tell you one thing: I once had a high that not even crack cocaine could match. That was when I got my first driver's license! Look out, world, here comes Kurt Vonnegut.

And my car back then, a Studebaker, as I recall, was powered, as are almost all means of transportation and other machinery today, and electric power plants and furnaces, by the most abused and addictive and destructive drugs of all: fossil fuels.

When you got here, even when I got here, the industrialized world was already hopelessly hooked on fossil fuels, and very soon now there won't be any more of those. Cold turkey.

Can I tell you the truth? I mean this isn't like TV news, is it?

Here's what I think the truth is: We are all addicts of fossil fuels in a state of denial, about to face cold turkey.

And like so many addicts about to face cold turkey, our leaders are now committing violent crimes to get what little is left of what we're hooked on.