

Kurt Vonnegut

DEBS SPEECH

Kurt Vonnegut
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I studied public speaking at Shortridge High School in Indianapolis. That was a long time ago. It was ~~well~~^{well} before the founding of the John Birch Society in Indianapolis. It was about the time of William Dudley Pelley and his Silver Shirts.

A lot of people don't take my home town as seriously as they should. But then I tell them that it is the world's largest city not on a navigable waterway, and the first place in America where a white man was hanged for the murder of an Indian. It is probably also the last place where a white man was hanged for the murder of an Indian. Indianapolis is more than just a speedway with the Eli Lilly Company in the infield. It takes one heck of a lot more than a speedway and the Eli Lilly Company to produce a James Whitcomb Riley ~~or~~^{or} the Reverend Jim Jones.

At Shortridge I learned the first two rules for public speakers. Jim Jones probably knew them, too. First rule: "Never read a speech." Second rule: "Never apologize."

Ever since then, I have read all my speeches and I have apologized as much as possible. I realized that no other trained public speakers would be doing these things, and that audiences would find them refreshing novelties. In America, if you want to become famous, you must do something which everybody else has been told not to do.

In fact, we are in the home now of a man who was told along with everybody else, "Whatever you do, don't gum up the railroads. They are the lifelines of our mighty nation." So he became famous

by gumming up the lifelines of our mighty nation.

After that, he tried to gum up the First World War. If he were alive today, he would probably try to gum up the Third World War. Anything for fame.

Now it is time for an apology -- two apologies, actually.

My first apology is for accepting an award named after a labor hero. I am no labor hero. The Eugene V. Debs Award should always go to a working stiff, but it's too late now. One thing I can give you my word of honor about anyway: I have never crossed a picket line and I will never cross a picket line. I would rather be dead.

Am I from a liberal family? Not strikingly so. As I reported in the introduction to my great novel Jailbird, my father, an Indianapolis architect, was startled to learn in 1945 that there had been some doubt about the guilt of Sacco and Vanzetti.

My first ancestor in this country, my great-great-grandfather Jacob Schramm, who cleared a farm in Sugar Creek Township, Hancock County, wrote to a friend in Bavaria in 1842: "It appears that human weakness makes it impossible to sustain a republic on this earth for any length of time, and the majority of people need, necessarily, a driving leader without whom they will inevitably wind up in chaos. Nevertheless, the Americans are still very proud of their freedom, even though they are the worst of slaves, and there is sure to be a bloody revolution before a monarchic government can gain a foothold here."

What radicalized me? What made me think that the Bill of Rights was more than a scrap of paper? A splendid education in the Indianapolis public schools, plus the Great Depression, plus three years as a private in the infantry.

What radicalizes Americans? America.

Apology number two: I am sorry for the damage which story-tellers have done to the minds of the young. This is not my surrender to the Moral Majority, which burns my books. I will continue in my writings to hint where babies really come from, and that God shouldn't be put in charge of everything until we get to know Him a little better, and that our exalted leaders are just like a lot of nitwits I went to high school with, and that American soldiers have been known to curse when wounded, and so on. I don't apologize for any of that.

I apologize for all the stories and plays which have taught young people that there are stars and bit-part players, and that the stars are all that matter. Look! There is the Emperor Napoleon crossing a battlefield after a victory -- astride his dapple gray. What are all those heaps of rags on the ground? Those are bit-part players, dying or dead. And who is this being borne toward the Emperor in a sedan chair, covering her ears so that she can't hear the groans of the bit-part players? It is the Empress Josephine! What lips! What eyes!

While I am at it, let me apologize for chess sets, too, with all those pawns so obviously born to be sacrificed. It is nothing to lose a pawn. It can even be fun -- in a gambit. But losing a king: that's something else again.

But writers can't be held responsible for the seeming moral lessons inherent in chess sets. So I withdraw my apology for chess.

I confess, however, to having written plenty of stories in which some characters are made to seem a lot more vital to civilization than others -- stories with kings and pawns, so to speak. Almost all writers tell stories like that. But ~~we~~^{we} don't tell such stories

because we think life is like that or should be like that. We do it in order to hold the attention of our audience. It is a purely technical matter. An audience cannot care equally about dozens of characters all at once. It gets confused and then bored, having lost track of who is who. So we give all the important actions and speeches to just a few ~~characters,~~
 We create stars. We say in effect to audiences, "Just keep your eyes on the stars, and get to know a little something about them, and you won't miss anything."

One of the few writers who has gotten away from this pernicious scheme just a little bit is that great socialist, George Bernard Shaw. Another is that great humanitarian, the physician Anton Chekhov. But neither one of them got all that far away from it.

And I call it a pernicious scheme because it is shockingly clear to me now that people have so mingled stories and real life in their minds that they imagine that in real life there are stars on the one hand, and, on the other hand, people who do not matter. This will not do anywhere on Earth, but it particularly will not do in America, which is struggling toward democracy. How tragic it is in our would-be democracy for it to be widely believed that most of us ~~can be as casually~~ can be as casually sacrificed as pawns.

Send the pawns to fight in Vietnam. Send them here, send them there -- send them anywhere. Or forget they exist. That's O.K., too.

We are not supporting characters in the cast of Hamlet, ready for any sort of humiliation or death, if only the Prince of Denmark can learn a thing or two.

first

I thought of making this apology ten years ago, at the time of the riots and then the massacre of convicts and hostages alike at Attica Prison in upstate New York. What happened at Attica was at least a statistical curiosity. It was the largest massacre of Americans by Americans since the Civil War. Forty-three Americans were killed by Americans.

What caught my eye, though, was the behavior of Nelson Rockefeller, then Governor of New York. The situation was this: He was in Albany, while at Attica convicts had taken over much of the prison, including one of four courtyards. They had also captured fifty prison employees, which they were holding as hostages. This was an extremely dangerous situation. Dangerous to whom? To the convicts and their hostages. The convicts and their hostages and their terrified families and friends all begged Rockefeller to come to Attica -- to exert the magic and grace inherent in his office as governor, so as to make it possible, somehow, for no one to die. He was asked to risk his dignity, and perhaps even his body, in order that some lives be saved. This is a familiar enough sort of summons to other sorts of public servants -- to policemen and firemen and soldiers.

But Nelson Rockefeller proudly declined to come. Instead, he sent State Troopers in with their weapons blazing, firing at anything that looked like a human being. Ten of the forty-five killed were hostages. Some rescue!

Ten years ago.

Why didn't Nelson Rockefeller come to Attica? Because he believed himself to be a leading character in a story, I think -- the only leading character in this case. Nobody else famous was involved.

Nobody else had a name ^{which} ~~_____~~ was ~~_____~~ ^{familiar from coast to coast.}

Nelson Rockefeller honestly believed that if anything demeaning happened to him, the star of the Attica story, the story would become confusing and boring to the audience. It would stop being a wonderful story. So he refused to come to Attica, and he ordered the state troopers to open fire indiscriminantly on all the bit-part players instead.

Did it bother him much that so many of the nobodies who were killed and wounded were virtuous hostages rather than wicked convicts? There is little evidence to that effect. A dead bit-part player is a dead bit-part player, no matter what side he may have been on. Ask the Emperor Napoleon after a great victory. Ask the Empress Josephine.

Ten years ago.

Have we learned anything since then? Well, I am telling you here in Terre Haute, which means "high ground", what we should have learned, and what we had better teach our children: the star system in real life is making us as sick as dogs in spirit, and it will kill us all, if we don't watch out.

Consider the attitudes of the virtuous United States of America and the wicked Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as they deploy their rockets and warheads for World War Three. The angels on our side and the devils on theirs are saying to each other, as though they were discussing ^{some} ~~_____~~ cheap and earthy resource like bauxite or coal or iron: "If we get made ^{enough} or scared enough, we will blow all your bit-part players away."

And what is it we are hearing more and more about this seemingly

inevitable and perhaps even desirable Third World War? "Don't worry. Some stars will survive. All we need is a few stars for the story to go on and on and on."

Speaking for our side, I want to say that, at a minimum, in my opinion, Bob Hope will survive. Palm Springs will survive.

So why wouldn't I apologize for literature's having been taken so seriously? I won't even get into the damage we writers have done with the endings of our tales. Events in life don't end. Only stories end. But now we story-tellers have people expecting not only that events will end ever so neatly, but that we will understand all sorts of things we couldn't understand before -- at the end. So by all means, let us hasten to the end.

Bon voyage!

But let's forget endings tonight -- for want of time. Let's stick to the star syndrome, which I consider the moral herpes of our era.

My Lord -- we now have this young monster named David Stockman, who has been so impressed by fiction as to believe that bit-part players in real life needn't even have food or shelter or clothing -- outside of prison or the armed forces, of course. He can't see that they even deserve work or hope.

And what can be the meaning of the lunatic displays of de luxe clothes and food and crockery in Washington, D.C., these days, but that our officials imagine themselves to be leading characters in our story? They are reassuring us that America is O.K., no matter how gruesome life becomes in High Ground, Indiana, since our stars are becoming happier all the time.

No end of good news from Washington, D.C.

Let Terre Haute send these ringing words to the District of Columbia: "We are not fans!"

How deeply infected are we all by what I have called the moral herpes of our era? Consider how inappropriate to this era, how exotic, how almost incomprehensible these words are, the most famous words ever spoken by Eugene V. Debs:

(Has any speaker in this house ever failed to quote them?)

"While there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

How many of us can echo those words and mean them? If this were a decent nation, we would all find those sentiments as natural and easy to say as, "Good morning. It looks like another nice day."

But the star system has made us

~~_____~~
~~_____~~
~~_____~~ all ravenous for the slightest proofs that we matter to the American story, somehow, at least a little bit more than someone else.

I will now parody the words of Eugene V. Debs, not to make fun of them but to bring them most sickeningly up to date:

"While there is a lower class, I can scorn it; while there is a criminal element, I can make war on it; while there is a soul in prison, I can imagine that I am free."

What should we do about this? We should teach our young that life is nothing like a movie or a play or a book or a television show -- or a picture in a frame. Children at an early age have no trouble telling salt from pepper or apples from oranges. Let

us teach them to make equally quick and sharp distinctions between life and art.

Let us tell them why some characters are more important than others in art, and that this has nothing to do with life itself. Life has no unimportant characters.

Let our children be quick to spot persons who imagine that they are characters in a story, and to understand that such person are not only a little batty, but that they have often appeared in history as very bad news.

Hitler.

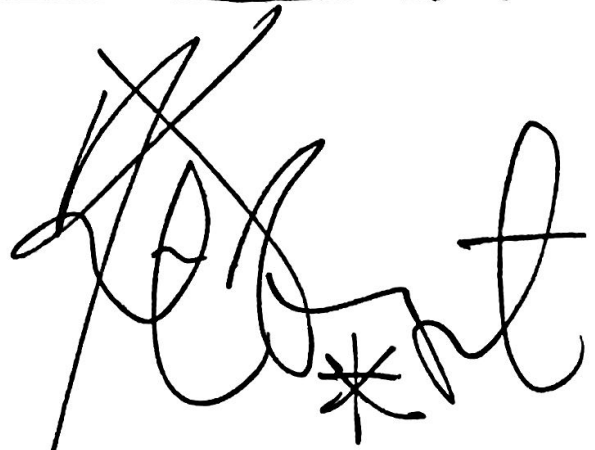
Caligula.

Is nobody ever to be sacrificed, pawn-like, for somebody else? Of course sacrifices will continue to be made. I only want Americans to decide for themselves to what extent, if any, they were born to be sacrificed. Many Americans, facing real dangers, will surely find themselves saying what Nelson Rockefeller should have said when he was asked by nobodies to come to Attica: "Very well -- the time has come to put ~~my life on the line.~~ my life on the line. *It is my duty.*"

I thank you for the Eugene V. Debs Award.

Tonight you have made me ~~_____~~ a star.

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