



“Practice any art ... to find out what’s inside you, to make your soul grow.”
— Kurt Vonnegut*

Dear Faithful Reader,

When I was a kid my father took a position directing the famed Bach Choir of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Every May the choir held a major festival; people came from all over the country to attend. For a week, my family made our annual pilgrimage from our New Jersey home to take a suite of rooms at the Hotel Bethlehem, where my mom would host a series of parties for the musicians — and I would be awestruck by the soloists.

These were A-list opera singers, huge, famous, the movie stars of the classical music world. I vividly remember them all — Maureen Forrester, the legendary Canadian contralto; Charlie Bressler, the tenor with a voice like honey, who recorded Handel’s *Chandos Anthems* with my father; Phyllis Bryn-Julson, the gorgeous young soprano (I had such a crush on her); Tom Paul, the phenomenal bass, one of the most affable people I’ve ever met and a close family friend over the years.

What I remember most is how ... *big* they were. Not physically big: *energetically* big. There was something in their eyes, in their laughter, even in the way they listened when you talked. Life spilled out of them like an overfull cup; they lit up every room they entered.

It’s a challenging thing, being an opera singer: there’s no closeup camera on you, no mic, no amp or pickup; just you and your voice, moving about on the stage, bringing a human drama to life. You and your voice have to fill the auditorium. And they did. Every one of these people was an epic personality — joyous, vibrant, a thrill to be around.

When you project a character, when you launch a story out into the world like that, day after day, year after year, it changes you. It informs you. It draws out of you experiences and emotions and layers and dimensions you didn’t even know were in there.

It *grows* you.

I think that’s what happens when you write.

Writing changes you. As you write, you fathom a whole constellation of human experience, and here’s a paradoxical thing: the more specific you get, the more

accurately you home in on particularities of character and circumstance, the more you tap into something universal. And like physical exercise developing muscle tissue, the act of holding and carrying a narrative builds you. You become a changed person. A bigger person.

In [my coaching program, Writing Mastery Mentorship](#), one of the first things I ask my clients is, *Why do you write? What are your objectives?*

Everyone has different goals. Some want to use their book as part of a speaking or consulting business; some want to become robustly-selling authors with a large and growing readership; some want to get their own life story down on record for their grandchildren. Some want to write a book purely for the sake of having *done* it.

These and a dozen other reasons are all equally valid — but I believe there’s more. Whatever specific purpose you may have for wanting to write, I believe there is one common reward at the heart of it: ***Who you become in the process.***

This has probably never been said better than by Kurt Vonnegut in the last year of his life, in a letter he wrote to a group of students in a high school English class*:

“Practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage, no matter how well or badly, not to get money and fame, but to experience *becoming*, to find out what’s inside you, *to make your soul grow.*”

And here’s something fascinating: a similar thing happens, or can happen, with relationships.

In *The Go-Giver Marriage*, there’s a question the elderly Jeremiah Janell puts to Tom early in the story: “What is the purpose of marriage?” It’s not until near the end of the book that Mr. Janell finally offers an answer:

“The purpose of marriage is to give yourself fully to another — and in the process become your best self.”

This is what happens when you write, or practice any art: you give yourself fully to the process of creating — and gain entry to the process of becoming.

Perhaps we could change just one word of that wonderful Vonnegut quote without violating its essential message:

“Practice any *devotion* ... to experience becoming, to find out what’s inside you, to make your soul grow.”

The Japanese perfected the art of elevating the mundane to the level of the sacred. Whether in serving tea, raking a garden, or gluing together fragments of broken pottery,

they dug deep enough to unearth the secret of deploying devotion to make one's soul grow.

I do this through scribbles on the page; I do it in bringing my wife tea every morning, making her laugh, or joining with her in unplanned moments of talking and listening. These are devotions that help me discover what's inside me. They grow my soul. That, behind all the other good reasons, is why I do them.

A question: To what are you devoted? What makes your soul grow? (Let me know, if so moved; I can't wait to read your answer!)

In that magnificent James L. Brooks film *As Good As It Gets*, the bigoted, misanthropic, thoroughly unlikable Melvin Udall (Jack Nicholson) makes this confession to Carol the waitress (Helen Hunt):

“You make me want to be a better man.”

And, incredibly, so he becomes.

The relationship. The love. The devotion. The art. It *stretches* you. It fills you with life.

It makes you a bigger person.

My July wish for you: that you spend time every day devoting yourself to something that makes your soul grow.

A handwritten signature in green ink, appearing to be 'Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.', written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

*** ABOUT THE WRITER**

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s life and work is marked throughout by three distinct features: Paradox, Trauma, and Transcendence; if his life were a Medieval morality play, these three would be its principal supporting cast.

Let's take Paradox first, shall we?

Look up “Kurt Vonnegut” on the internet, in book jackets, or on Amazon, and I guarantee whatever bio or description you read will contain the words “darkly humorous.” He was, in his writing and in person, both hilarious and deadly serious at the same time. He was a wildly successful novelist, often cited as one of the greatest literary minds of the twentieth century. Yet he wrestled constantly with the specter of failure, not only in the early years, before his breakout bestsellers propelled him to fame, but afterwards, too.

He was a life-long atheist — in fact, it was arguments over faith that led to divorce with his first wife (though the two remained friends for life). Yet he hugely admired the person of Jesus (he often praised the Sermon on the Mount, especially the Beatitudes) and described himself variously as a “Christ-worshipping agnostic” and “Christ-loving atheist.” (But not, he insisted, “a Christian,” citing his abhorrence of religion-inspired violence throughout history.)

According to all who met him he was one of the kindest, gentlest of souls — yet he could be cranky, cantankerous, and dismissive. As author Lev Grossman wrote in a 2007 obituary for *Time* magazine:

He could easily have become a crank, but he was too smart; he could have become a cynic, but there was something tender in his nature that he could never quite suppress; he could have become a bore, but even at his most despairing he had an endless willingness to entertain his readers: with drawings, jokes, sex, bizarre plot twists, science fiction, whatever it took.

Then, Trauma.

Like many of his generation, the writer grew up under the shadow of family adversity.

The youngest of three, Kurt, Jr., was born into a well-off Indiana clan of German immigrants who had carved out their fortunes in the New World, yet by the time he was in grade school that relative prosperity had been gutted by the Great Depression. His father, formerly a successful architect, became withdrawn, his mother depressed, bitter, and abusive, developing a hatred for her husband “as corrosive as hydrochloric acid.” It was not a happy home.

Cutting short a college career at Cornell, Vonnegut enlisted in the army in 1942, figuring that if he didn’t, he would be drafted anyway. In May 1944 he traveled back home to Indianapolis for a Mother’s Day visit, only to find that his mother had succumbed to suicide the night before by overdosing on sleeping pills.

[An aside: Why do we still say someone “committed” suicide? Does one “commit” terminal cancer? Or “commit” a fatal car crash? Let’s update our language to match our understanding.]

Returning to service, Kurt was shipped to Germany, where he was captured that December in the Battle of the Bulge and sent to Dresden as a prisoner of war. Less than two months later Dresden was hit by a massive Allied bombing assault so intense that it created an enormous firestorm, destroying the city and incinerating thousands of civilians — 130,000 of them, it was believed at the time, though later estimates put the number closer to 25,000.

To the 22-year-old Vonnegut, who survived by taking refuge in an underground meat locker and was immediately afterward put to work combing through the rubble for bodies (“a terribly elaborate Easter-egg hunt,” was his wry description), it was a

catastrophe that both scarred him for life and galvanized his morose, despairing, yet insistently humane view of life.

Which brings us to the Transcendence.

From the start, Vonnegut's writing seemed to be reaching for things that did not yet exist. He attended the University of Chicago post-war on the GI Bill but left without a degree, despite having completed his coursework, because he never wrote a dissertation: every topic he proposed was rejected by his professors as too outlandish. (Twenty-five years later that same institution gave him a Master's degree, accepting his novel *Cat's Cradle* in lieu of a thesis.) Early reviewers clearly did not know what to make of this strange, chain-smoking writer who conjured up the wildest blend of science fiction, satire, slapstick, and fatalistic tragedy all with a deadpan humor that would have made Groucho Marx seem tame.

In the mid-sixties, after five novels and innumerable short stories, Vonnegut had received such a string of mixed reviews and lackluster commercial returns that he contemplated throwing in the towel altogether. When his sister and her husband both died suddenly (the one from the cancer and the other, bizarrely, from a train accident two days later), Kurt and his wife Jane unhesitatingly took in their three young sons. Vonnegut now had a household of eight to support, and the writing thing was just not cutting it.

And then an offer came out of the blue: a teaching position at the Iowa Writers' Workshop — a gesture he later compared to the tossing of a life preserver to a drowning man.

The Iowa position led to a Guggenheim Fellowship, which took him to Germany, where he revisited the site of his greatest horror: Dresden. And out of Dresden, he penned what would become his breakout novel: *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Vonnegut's most famous work, this semi-autobiographical sci-fi-infused antiwar novel was an instantaneous hit, landing on the *New York Times* bestseller list and remaining there for sixteen weeks. This was 1969, the height of antiwar sentiment in America, and Vonnegut's wildly satirical, tragicomic, absurdist epic about Billy Pilgrim, the Vonnegut stand-in who "had become unstuck in time," spoke to a generation in a way that no writer before had done. Writing in *The New Republic*, an up-and-coming novelist named Michael Crichton (just then on the cusp of publishing *The Andromeda Strain*, his first novel under his own name) explained Vonnegut's success this way:

"He writes about the most excruciatingly painful things. His novels have attacked our deepest fears of automation and the bomb, our deepest political guilts, our fiercest hatreds and loves. No one else writes books on these subjects; they are inaccessible to normal novelists."

Slaughterhouse-Five cemented Vonnegut's career and established him as cultural icon. He soon became a frequent speaker at rallies, gave commencement addresses around the country, was handed lecturing positions at Harvard and the City College of New York, and bestowed honorary degrees by a handful of academic institutions.

Hollywood came calling, too; *Slaughterhouse-Five* was made into a successful George Roy Hill movie (which Vonnegut pronounced "flawless"). He was even conscripted to play himself, in a memorable cameo in Rodney Dangerfield's film *Back to School*.

The novelist wrote on for three decades more, continuing at times to baffle critics and suffer defeats along with the triumphs. In 1971 he struggled so hard with progress on his current novel that for a time he quit writing it altogether. (This was *Breakfast of Champions*, which went on to spend a total of 56 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and is now regarded as a masterpiece.) In 1984, overwhelmed with depression, he attempted suicide.

His last book, a bestselling collection of essays reflecting his lifelong disillusionment with the government, was aptly titled *A Man Without a Country*.

And yet he never abandoned his innate kindness and deep appreciation of the goodness in those he encountered. He may have lost faith in humanity, but never stop believing in the core decency of its people.

Which brings us to the Quote.

In 2006 a group of high school students at Xavier High School in New York City were given an assignment in "persuasive writing" by their English teacher, a Ms. Lockwood, who asked them to write to their favorite author and ask him or her to come visit their school. Five students chose Vonnegut (a testament to the reverence the novelist inspired; no other author was selected in multiples!), and while he was not able to make that visit before his death the following year, he did respond with this now-famous letter (reproduced in full in the fascinating book *More Letters of Note*, by Shaun Usher):

Dear Xavier High School, and Ms. Lockwood, and Messrs Perin, McFeely, Batten, Maurer and Congiusta:

I thank you for your friendly letters. You sure know how to cheer up a really old geezer (84) in his sunset years. I don't make public appearances any more because I now resemble nothing so much as an iguana.

What I had to say to you, moreover, would not take long, to wit: Practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage, no matter how well or badly, not to get money and fame, but to experience becoming, to find out what's inside you, to make your soul grow.

Seriously! I mean starting right now, do art and do it for the rest of your lives. Draw a funny or nice picture of Ms. Lockwood, and give it to her. Dance home after school,

and sing in the shower and on and on. Make a face in your mashed potatoes. Pretend you're Count Dracula.

Here's an assignment for tonight, and I hope Ms. Lockwood will flunk you if you don't do it: Write a six line poem, about anything, but rhymed. No fair tennis without a net. Make it as good as you possibly can. But don't tell anybody what you're doing. Don't show it or recite it to anybody, not even your girlfriend or parents or whatever, or Ms. Lockwood. OK?

Tear it up into teeny-weeny pieces, and discard them into widely separated trash receptacals [sic]. You will find that you have already been gloriously rewarded for your poem. You have experienced becoming, learned a lot more about what's inside you, and you have made your soul grow.

God bless you all!

Kurt Vonnegut

Missing past issues of *Mann's Search for Meaning*? You can find them all [RIGHT HERE](#).