

How To Get A Job Like Mine:
Kurt Vonnegut as Corpse Miner

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How To Get A Job Like Mine: Lessons Learned

Kurt Vonnegut had a relatively long and lucrative career as a public speaker. As could be expected from a writer as prolific and popular as Vonnegut, he was much in demand. Although time constraints forced him to reject numerous offers he still managed to make appearances at select colleges and universities throughout the country. He used the same title for all of his collegiate addresses: "How to Get a Job Like Mine." One may assume that most members of his audiences had had many years of experience with formal education and consequently were avid for lessons. They had reasonably high hopes of learning the most effective avenue to becoming world-class writers. In all probability they were expecting to be privy to the secrets of writing from the master himself. Although Vonnegut seldom disappointed his audiences, he almost never addressed the title of his speech. Not much was said about how to become a writer--at least not much in the tutorial vein.

In the majority of cases, his address was an entertaining Twain-like riff, frequently with visuals, on such subjects as history, politics, and economics. For the most part, his witticisms were roundly appreciated by his attentive audiences. However, there were times when Vonnegut, like Twain, was known to tweak his audience with an unexpected jab intended to jar their delicate sensibilities. For example in October of 1988, Vonnegut, speaking at a plush boutique liberal arts college in an up-scale suburb in central Florida, referred to the soon to be elected President, George H. Bush as "that scumbag from Yale." Polite laughter and assorted murmurs filled the lecture hall. Vonnegut ever quick on his feet then countered with his oft repeated recitation of Eugene Deb's credo: "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."

Although some members of his audiences may have left the hall with mixed emotions, most were almost always pleasantly entertained. Regardless of their mental

disposition, they could be forgiven for not securing the secret code for becoming a writer. However as an afterthought they might have conjectured as to how Vonnegut got a job like Vonnegut.

If we examine Vonnegut's career path closely we find that becoming a writer like Vonnegut does not necessarily come from mere tutelage in the presence of a great writer. A brief peek into Vonnegut's personal history illustrates that his career path was anything but linear.

In all likelihood the bulk of Vonnegut's audience were not aware that he had held many jobs in his life other than the one that had established his reputation as a novelist. A biographical sampling reveals that he was an infantryman in the U.S. Army, a police reporter for a Chicago daily, a short-lived journalist for *Sports Illustrated*, an owner and operator of a Saab dealership, a manager of a diaper cleaning service, a public relations writer for G.E., and of course a well known author. Consequently it would seem logical to examine a "lesson" or two that Vonnegut learned on his road to becoming a writer.

For Vonnegut, some of the most critical life lessons he was to learn from any single job were learned from his experiences while a prisoner of war in Dresden. His story is well known to his readers. Vonnegut, who was captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge, was being held in captivity in Dresden where, on the night of February 13th 1945, the allies firebombed the city. He, along with other prisoners of war, was housed in the basement of a slaughterhouse and consequently was spared the fate that awaited Dresden's mostly civilian residents. Vonnegut [1966]1983:vi-vii) remembers:

We didn't get to see the fire storm.
We were in a cool meat-locker under a slaughterhouse with our six guards and ranks and ranks of dressed cadavers of cattle, pigs, horses, and sheep. We heard bombs walking around up there. Now and then there would be a gentle shower of calcimine.

After thirty-six hours of anxious waiting while the bombs "walked" overhead, this was the scene that greeted Vonnegut ([1969]1984:178) as his guards ushered him out of the shelter: ". . . (T)he sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead."

Consequently, with most everyone dead and resembling "pieces of charred firewood two or three feet long—ridiculously small human beings, or jumbo fried grasshoppers," the days and weeks that followed found Vonnegut and his fellow prisoners hard at work removing bodies from the rubble and disposing of them in massive quantities. Consequently Vonnegut ([1966]1983:v) became a self-described "corpse miner," digging out "Hansels and Gretels (who) had been baked like gingerbread men."

So what did the craft of corpse mining teach Vonnegut? Alongside the most obvious lesson that "when you're dead, you're dead," Vonnegut suggests that he learned of the "show business" side of governments at war. In other words, bombings become dramatic fireworks shows intended to create wonder and prideful amusement among the victorious citizenry. Additionally, there was also a pedagogical aspect to the fireworks--it was intended to teach the enemy a valuable lesson. In terms of the latter, Vonnegut suggests that the supporters of the allied fire bombing of Dresden have frequently drawn on this pedagogical, albeit metaphorical, weapon in an effort to justify the deaths of thousands of innocents. In essence, they argue that the allies were out to teach their enemies a lesson. Something on the order of "You mess with us and we'll get you back ten times over," or some such school yard banter. Vonnegut, having spent weeks digging decaying, badly burned, bodies from the rubble that had been Dresden, scoffs at the notion. Instead, he argues that it would have been humanly impossible to gloat over the "victory" much less utter the following taunt: "I hope you've learned your lesson, you dirty rats. It serves you right." (Vonnegut 1997B:4)

Additionally, his job as a corpse miner taught Vonnegut not to trust his government—a government that he had been taught to revere and respect in his civics class at Shortridge High School back home in Indianapolis. Drawing on a conversation with his closest war buddy and fellow prisoner of war, Bernard V. O'Hare, Vonnegut ([1974] 1976:263-64) reflects that being corpse miners led the both of them to the conclusion that they could no longer believe their government's pronouncements.

When we went into the war, we felt our Government was a respecter of life, careful about not injuring civilians and that sort of thing. Well, Dresden had no tactical value; it was a city of civilians. Yet the Allies bombed it until it burned and melted. And they lied about it. All that was startling to us. But it doesn't startle anybody now.

Several years later Vonnegut (1997B:5) addressing an audience at Florida State University recalls:

But by the end of the war, as those of us who were in Dresden saw first hand, obliterating whole cities, with no particular targets in mind, had for our side, for the good guys, become a perfectly ordinary, logical thing to do. When I was home on furlough, but still in the Army, our side, the good guys obliterated Hiroshima and then Nagasaki in Japan with one atomic bomb for each.

With the fire bombing of Dresden and the official silence that followed on the part of government authorities, Vonnegut learned not to trust his government. With the bombing of civilian populations in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Vonnegut learned not to trust science and technology as well as his government. Within a span of a few months, Vonnegut's belief system had taken two seismic blows.

So what's the moral of this story? For one, to be a good writer it helps to have had a variety of jobs, a variety of work experiences, so to speak. Most importantly, regardless of the type of employment in which one engages, it is wise to remember Vonnegut's (1991:118) sagely warning that "(I)t can make quite a difference, not just to you

but to humanity, the sort of boss you choose, whose dreams you help come true." In the foregoing illustration Vonnegut's boss was the U.S. Government, or more specifically the U.S. Army, and although he had been subcontracted to the Nazis to serve briefly as a corpse miner, he would later question the dreams of his primary boss, his government.

With the benefit of hindsight and the anguished reflection that followed his military service, Vonnegut expressed some serious reservations concerning the mental health of too many contemporary "bosses." Borrowing from Cleckley's *The Mask of Sanity* (1941), Vonnegut argued that all too often, today's leaders suffer from a "pathological personality" disorder. Accordingly, this disorder afflicts many who are in powerful institutional positions such as CEOs of global corporations and those who hold high political office. Pathological personalities are aware that their policy decisions may harm others but, without any moral compass other than their own self-interest, they don't care. Committing the country to endless wars is an illustration of their decisiveness as well as a consequence of their policies. Vonnegut (2005:101) describes these smitten bosses in graphic if less than scholarly detail:

What has allowed so many PPs to rise so high in corporations, and now in government, is that they are so decisive. Unlike normal people, they are never filled with doubts, for the simple reason that they cannot care what happens next. Simply can't. Do this! Do that! Mobilize the reserves! Privatize the public schools! Attack Iraq! Cut health care! Tap everybody's telephone! Cut taxes on the rich! Build a trillion-dollar missile shield! Fuck *habeas corpus* and the Sierra Club and *In These Times*, and kiss my ass!

Being a corpse miner sent Vonnegut down a long road of social and political awareness, a journey that would contain many lessons but none more important than the ultimate price of war. Speaking through the character, Howard Campbell Jr. in *Mother Night*, Vonnegut ([1961] 1983:117) observes that the condition of a man's soul at war (and one might add, the soul of a culture at war) is

reminiscent of "the stink, diseased twilight, humid resonance, and vile privacy of a stall in a public lavatory." Dresden taught Vonnegut that. Nagasaki taught him that.

Vonnegut did not suggest that for those folks eager to get a job like his, that they should become corpse miners to learn important life lessons. However he did suggest that if human societies are to endure and evolve, they must stop celebrating war--something that our present culture seems more than a little reluctant to do. Vonnegut bemoans the disappearance of Armistice Day from our national calendar. From his perspective Armistice Day celebrated peace; it celebrated the end of the mindless butchering that was WWI. It was a solemn occasion when "children used to be told how horrible war was, how shameful and heartbreaking" (Vonnegut 1991:150). Now we celebrate "Veteran's Day" usually to the tune of marching bands and air shows designed to flex our imperial muscle. Vonnegut suggests a more appropriate public acknowledgement of the death and destruction caused by wars. He proposes through the voice of Horlick Minton, one of his characters in *Cat's Cradle*, that we honor the sacrifices of the hundreds and thousands of military and civilian personnel in a more solemn manner.

(W)e might best spend the day despising what killed them; which is to say, the stupidity and viciousness of all mankind. Perhaps, when we remember wars, we should take off our clothes and paint ourselves blue and go on all fours all day long and grunt like pigs. That would surely be more appropriate than noble oratory and shows of flags and well-oiled guns. (Vonnegut [1963]1984:170)

Rather than the celebratory parades and displays of military hardware whose costs overwhelm the national budget and needlessly drive up the deficit, Vonnegut suggests that it is imperative that we master the fundamental lesson of the futility of war--of the futility of not caring for others or the planet. Vonnegut knew that neither humanity nor the planet could tolerate any more experimental learning. He knew all too well that humanity could no longer abide lessons that are tied to violent explosions

and ignoble experiments. He knew it was too costly.
School's Out!

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