

20 February 2005

Dear Mr. Vonnegut,

First of all, I must say: loved your last book, Timequake (just in case you forgot what it was called, I guess). Taught me how to calm the heck down. It was the first book I'd ever read where I actually felt the guiding hand clasp my mine, dancing with me down a hilarious and nimble inventive and insightful path. It was so random and funny and easily profound and relaxed that I didn't even see the epiphany coming until I'd suddenly been brained with it, as surely as if it had been a mugger with a baseball bat hiding in a darkened alley. "Holy cow! Did you feel that? I didn't even see it coming!"

I was getting over a massively broken heart when I read it. I like to say I was "getting over" it because that sounds less worrisome, but really I was just standing, dumbfounded and trembling, in the middle of the smoking wreckage my life had somehow become. Everything I'd ever loved or trusted in was stripped away or demolished.

I was being reborn, although I did not know it at the time, and it was just as painful and scary as babies make it look the first time around, God bless 'em.

Reading your book helped me mend a broken heart and gave me the courage to go on living a life I knew would only be filled with more broken hearts. This I can do, because now I never forget to take a moment on the aforementioned sunny days and say, "If this isn't nice, what is?" This I can do, because now I feel the duty within myself to help others through this thing, whatever it is, and moreover because I found and learned to appreciate the others willing to help me through it, too. This I can do, because now I have learned to laugh at adversity and fear and pain, not out of foolish bravery, but because life is just that absurdly entertaining. Ting-a-ling!

* * *

You should know something: I am writing my honors project on you. You should know something else: it's been very, very difficult.

* * *

I chose you because you're my favorite author, but more than that, I chose you because of Timequake. It was the second book of yours I'd ever read, the first being Player Piano. The back cover's synopsis was only three sentences long, taken directly from the book: "At 2:27 PM on February 13th of the year 2001, the Universe suffered a crisis in self-confidence. Should it go on expanding forever? What was the point?"

I have read the vast majority of your works since then, but I can still look at those three sentences and remember that it was the last question, in particular, that made me buy the book: it resonated deep within me. Later, it was the last question, in particular, that made me decide to make your works the subject of my honors thesis. I made question the driving theme to the thesis. I did this because it is the driving theme to the vast majority of your works.

Here is the thing: I believe you have an answer, if not the answer, to the question driving all mankind, which is, "What is the point?" I intended to tease it out of your books, one piece at a time.

* * *

Here is another thing: you, as you probably know, have written a lot of books and short stories. At the beginning of this project, I was overwhelmed, not only by how much you had written, but by how many of your works are deeply embedded and intertwined with so many of your other works. All of it is connected, a wild, secret tapestry, a mystery puzzle with a thousand subtly-carved pieces that form a ragged circle rather than a neatly trimmed rectangle. So of course, the hardest part was the beginning – deciding which thread to start following, which piece of a thousand identical to it to place first. This is especially hard, because so many

"I believe you have an answer, if not the answer, to the question driving all mankind, which is, 'What is the point?'"

of your threads appear so many times, in so many different ways and circumstances. You repeat things a lot.

* * *

You repeat things a lot.

* * *

I needed one particularly heavy, strong thread that appeared enough times to be remarkable, fully-developed, and crucial, without needing the support of your entire body of work. Something that was extremely closely tied with who you were, what you believed, and how you saw the world. I thought, If only he had an alter-ego.

* * *

His name is Kilgore Trout. Probably, he's your most well-known reappearing literary device: your alter-ego, the miserably unsuccessful science fiction writer, whose best works only ever warranted publication in pornographic magazines as filler material between nude or nearly nude women.

Here's what I wrote about him in the introduction to my thesis:

"Trout's person, life and career mirrors, to a certain extent, Vonnegut's own, or perhaps, how he and his life appear to himself, at their worst. Forever old, unloved, unsuccessful, eccentric, full of bad habits and flaws, totally lacking in people skills, unlucky in relationships, a veteran of World War II, depressed, alone, and possibly insane, Trout seems to encompass all the things

"Trout seems to encompass all the things that Vonnegut regrets or fears is true about himself."

that Vonnegut regrets or fears is true about himself. Yet, Trout is not unlovable; indeed, he is Vonnegut's perennial tragic hero, a homeless vagrant wandering the pages of some of Vonnegut's arguably best works, looking for the meaning of his life, mirroring Vonnegut's own literary meanderings as he searches for the meaning of his own."

I wrote all that, but make no mistake: whatever Trout symbolizes, I could never think lowly of you at all. Whether you truly do of yourself is your own affair. This here is just business.

* * *

But with Trout's never-ending, possibly even unwitting search for meaning, a quest he makes in your stead, whether he wants to or not, I had it – the vehicle, the core that draws together all the repetitions, all the threads, binds them into one, makes them a tapestry with a strange and wistful beauty rather than a fistful of loose ends.

Atoms have nuclei. The writers of the New Testament had Jesus. Not to make any offensive parallels. I just mean that everything needs something solid, reliable and profound to act as its crux.

* * *

So I put my finger on the Kilgore Trout thread and I started following it. I looked at all of the books you put him in. I read them, I highlighted, I scratched my head. How had you put this together? How would I?

Many times, I wondered how the heck I'd gotten myself into this mess – how the heck I would get myself out. I wondered what the heck the point of doing an honors project was, anyway.

That was when I knew I was on the right track.

* * *

I realized something: these five books I was looking at, they didn't show a clear path to the answer to the big question. How could they? If they did, it would mean you didn't have to work for the answer, you already knew it and were just humoring the rest of us, and no one would ever believe it when you told us. You struggled for the answer. Like me, with this project, you didn't know where to begin. So you began in the most logical way possible: by exploring possible answers, and eliminating those that didn't work.

The Meaning of Life

••▶ (According to Kurt Vonnegut)

••▶ (As told through his alter-ego, Kilgore Trout)

••▶ (As interpreted by Sarah Wagenseller)

••▶ (As advised by Dr. George Diamond)

Money. Politics. Religion. Nationalism. War. Culture. Knowledge. The arts. Individualism. All of these and more were covered in those five books. All of those possible answers were disproved.

Another answer began to take shape, slowly building, become clearer and more well-defined. Trout got closer and closer.

So did I, so did I.

* * *

Now here I am, approaching the end of the project, and the end of my letter to you.

I can't say exactly what the answer is yet. I have a feeling, but I can't yet put it into words, because I can't yet be sure if I have the full answer. All I know is, it has something to do with extended families, with unconditional love, with humanity, with appreciation for the moment, with reasonless compassion and assistance for fellow beings.

Whatever it is, it is warm.

Until I know for certain, though, I move cautiously, cagey and apprehensive, and violently hopeful, always on the lookout for the final hidden epiphany lurking in the shadows, clutching a baseball bat, waiting for the exact — right —

— moment —

Yours truly,

Sarah B. Wagenseller

