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Commentary: A life touched by the late Kurt Vonnegut

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By Robin A. Rothman
Times Herald-Record

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What a crappy day. It's not the icy snow remnants on my car this morning, the overcast skies, the unrelenting rain. Even if Mother Nature had given us gorgeous weather, the world would feel dark. The world should be dark. The world IS dark. Reading of Kurt Vonnegut's death at 1 a.m. Thursday, I was devastated. I cried. I cursed a god I don't even believe in.

I didn't know Kurt Vonnegut; he didn't know me. I'm one of so many fans who'll say "This man and his works have had a profound effect on who I am." His biting social commentary, imaginative science fiction, inspirational humanism and courageous self-awareness spoke to me in a way no other author ever has, or probably will.

I'm one of even fewer fans who feel a core connection, having understood too well the Hoosierisms he sprinkled throughout his books. Vonnegut grew up in Indianapolis, Ind. From where I spent my formative years, his childhood home sits a mere 45 minutes north on a straight, flat, four-lane highway (three lefts and a right notwithstanding) through corn fields and little else. This sense of association is a straight-up "granfalloon," I know. A "false karass."

Vonnegut's 1963 book "Cat's Cradle" marked the origin of his pseudo-religious concoction Bokonism and first introduced us to the terms "karass" and "granfalloon."

As Vonnegut wrote: "We Bokononists believe that humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing. Such a team is called a karass by Bokonon, and the instrument, the kan-kan, that bought me into my own particular karass was the book I never finished, the book to be called The Day the World Ended."

Vonnegut himself was an atheist, a humanist. In fact, he was the honorary president of the American Humanist Association from 1992 until, well, yesterday. But regardless of its religious basis, his karass concept was more than fiction.

On Feb. 19, 1998, in my second year of grad. school at NYU, I received a letter from a friend I'd known as an undergrad at Ball State University in Muncie, IN (Yes, David Letterman is another member of the Hoosier granfalloon). She'd been cleaning her apartment and she stumbled across a photocopy of a letter she knew I'd want to have -- a letter from Kurt Vonnegut dated Oct. 2, 1992. He had been scheduled to speak at our school, but he cancelled due to a heart attack. My friend's class sent a get-well card and the letter she sent me was Vonnegut's response to that card.

It was kind, self-deprecating, informative and entertaining. It made great cultural references and it offered solid faux advice. It began "Dear friends, colleagues, surely members of my karass --" and it was signed complete with his signature self-portrait. Granfalloon? Phooey! "Members of my karass...." I latched onto that line and I never let it go. Students of Ball State University, know that your feelings of solidarity with Kurt Vonnegut are validated. Little comfort that that is.

Indianapolis declared 2007 the Year of Vonnegut. Little did they know. The city is now in perfect position to mourn the man they'd intended to simply celebrate and, on April 27, hear speak at Clowes Hall. I'm jealous of people living in Indiana right now.

And it's not as if, as his age increased, I didn't see this day coming. It's not as if I haven't had a plan.

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Vonnegut announced in 1997 that "Timequake" would be his last book (so he wrote in the prologue). When in 2000 he released "Bagombo Snuff Box," a collection of his early writing, I bought it. It's been sitting unread on a shelf ever since. My plan: leave one thing unread. It's been tempting, I tell ya. I've read each of his books repeatedly... except that one. And now the time has come. Soon I will read the last "new" Vonnegut I'll ever get. He's gone. I wish I could honor him with a concise "So it goes," but this simple, characteristic line suddenly seems trite, and decidedly untrue.

And you?

How do you feel about Kurt Vonnegut's passing?



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