

In Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, the holy Books of Bokonon speak of Foma, a San Lorenzan dialect word meaning "harmless untruths." The Books invite the faithful to "live by the Foma that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." It need hardly be an injunction — faced with an indifferent universe, we have each of us selected our sublime fibs. Right now, surrounded as we are by science, we chose to call our Foma "magic," a willingness to suspend rationality in return for a jolt of the inexplicable.

And who's to say that magic is a Foma? In Vonnegut's world nothing is sure, not even uncertainty. He winks at us with the sweet promise of the charlatan, inviting us to find the real magic behind the tricks. Take off the blinkers, he seems to say. Let the ineffable tap dance into your soul.

On a cold January day in New York City, Vonnegut (who also wrote, among other things, *Sirens Of Titans*; *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse Five*) talked about this, and more . . .

Vonnegut: Magic makes life more charming. For instance, astrology is nice because so many people feel like nothing now, including physicists. So many people are out of work or have no reason to respect themselves. People do not value each other very highly any more because there are very few ways we can use each other . . . there are fewer and fewer natural interdependencies. But everybody at a minimum has a birthday. So a perfectly colorless, friendless person can walk into a party. Some nice person welcomes this jerk to the party, but nobody can think of anything to say, or anything to think about him, until somebody says, "When is your birthday?" And

it turns out he's a Leo, and so suddenly he becomes all these marvelous things — he has a stone and a precious metal and a very respectable set of characteristics. So some people in the room are naturally his friends, and others naturally his enemies, and life becomes marvelous. This is what a folk society does for any member in it . . . it makes a person feel important and gives a person roles to play.

Do you have any stuff you keep around that does magic things for you?

There have been several artists in my family, so I have things they have made — pictures, ashtrays. My grandfather was a painter and my father was a painter, and they were both architects, too. They accumulated artifacts, and as is perfectly natural, I inherited these, and they do relate me to the past. But I don't do anything magic. Do you?

No, but I'm not ready to say some supernatural power doesn't exist. Are you interested in that?

No, I'm just interested in the social function of magic. I'm interested in telepathy because it seems an awful lot of our living is on a telepathic level. And I think we're talking in many different ways right now. More is going on between us than just words. You can't account for relationships on the basis of simply what has been said . . . it's an exchange of presence.

And I'm very sensitive to vibrations. There are some situations I walk into where I want out immediately. I walked into a room with the Jefferson Airplane — they asked to see me because they had a scheme where we were going to do something together — and the vibrations were just awful, I wanted out as fast as possible. They wrote me a

Carol Troy Interviews

KURT VONNEGUT

photos by Jill Krementz



letter later about it and were apologizing for the bad vibrations. Why? They may have had funny ideas about who I am on the basis of my books, and I turned out not to be that way at all. And I had on a business suit with black shoes and laces, and they didn't like that, I suspect . . . I don't know. Of course everybody felt rotten about it afterwards and had no easy explanation.

Do you think clothes set up vibrations with people? You don't describe them much in your books . . .

I describe uniforms . . . because they're interesting and they're frightening and they're on my mind. In my play, *Happy Birthday Wanda June*, we have one character who is a colonel in the SS, played by Louis Terenne. All through rehearsals he was rehearsing without costume, and then we had a dress rehearsal. It was terrifying . . . everybody was frightened and Louis turned into an utter shit. He wouldn't get off it, wouldn't quit being an SS colonel. We'd chat with Louis and say, "Hey, that's a swell uniform" — he'd had his hair cut short, too — and we'd try to make jokes with him and just get the most appalling small smiles out of him.

What do the kids wear in your classes at Harvard now?

Lots of kids pretend to be construction workers. What sticks in my mind now is one kid who wears coveralls with the most amazing number of zippers in the thing. But the Radcliffe girls all dress very straight. Of the three girls in my class of 15, one is from Indianapolis, one is from Texas, one is from Long Island. Boston and Cambridge worry them. They want to look right so they play it safe. There are lots of freaks in Cambridge, but not going to school usually, simply infesting Holyoke Center.

People dress to cheer each other up, which is nice. An older person really dressed up, as his generation dresses up, can look pretty damned nice. I was always cheered up when a friend of mine had a really sharp looking suit on and was prosperous. When I was in college everybody wore grey flannel, but somehow I was never able to find the right shade of grey. The clothes I've liked best lately, the ones I was most tempted by, were the mod clothes with the velvet collars, the Edwardian look with very narrow trousers, jodhpur boots and all that. I liked it. I think it's charming to be a dandy. But of course I have a Brooks Brothers suit . . . I really don't know what else to wear. I'm appreciative of how other people dress, but I haven't figured out a way for me to reciprocate. And I haven't seen anybody my age really do much with the clothing thing except Timothy Leary maybe, or Allan Ginsberg. And I would lose part of my social effectiveness if I were to begin to dress absurdly, to get away from what you call the rumpled tweed thing that's expected of me. People would be confused by it. Bell-bottoms, for instance, would upset a lot of people.



But nice manners and a rational approach to life and a Brooks Brothers suit won't help you at all . . . they're killers of communication.

So you don't think a little irrationality, a little willingness to believe, can get us together more?

Well, I think magic is socially useful, like astrology, to make people more important than they are. But there is no spell I could cast which would either jinx me or make me very lucky.

But I have gone to magic stores to buy a particular item, which is a bouquet that goes up one sleeve . . . you can feed it down through the arm of your suit . . . and any time you want to, you can produce a bouquet. You know I've said in lectures that the principal function of the artist is to cheer other people up . . . so I did this trick a NYU one time and a girl came forward and said that my books hadn't cheered her up at all. So I gave her the bouquet of flowers. It turns out that this happens almost every time and I lose a \$7 bouquet.

In London, about a year ago, I went into a magic store and said I want a bouquet I can produce from my cuff, because I was going to have to give a talk. And there were several other guys hanging around the magic store. The guy behind the counter looked very baffled, was sort of mumbling, and said he had heard about this trick but he'd never seen it, didn't think much of it. And the other guys in the store were mumbling about it too. So it looked like I wasn't going to get much satisfaction. And suddenly, every man in the store produced a bouquet!

Magicians are charming, good people. I don't think there's any viciousness in them at all, or any deception. They want you to get good at it too, to be encouraged that anybody, no matter how clumsy, can get good at these tricks. They want you to join their gang.

Actually, fiction uses a lot of the principles of

stage magic. It's where you mention something casual . . . it's just a perfectly innocent gesture, just dropping a piece of information which doesn't seem to be important . . . and then about three pages later this piece of information suddenly becomes terribly important. This is 'misdirection,' where the magician appears to be doing something when actually he's setting up two tricks away.

Do you believe in spooky magic?

No. I believe in all sorts of communication. I believe in fortune tellers, because I do believe the future is knowable. I don't think it's nearly the mystery we've pretended it to be. I don't know how they do it, but they simply can tell.

Have you been to a fortune teller and really believed in it?

Yes, to a certain extent. I have a fair idea of how it's going to go.

Palmistry isn't especially related to the lines on your hands. It's a way of touching people. And it's a socially charming thing for a stranger to take you by the hand. The palmist I went to on Cape Cod—I don't go to these people seriously . . . I'm just interested, willing to believe—the lady on Cape Cod took my hand between both of hers and closed her eyes, for a deeper reading, and did a sort of long-term forecast. She was doing it by touch. And she was right about a lot of things. She was a sort of low-grade clairvoyant. She could see people in my life.

And last night I was into the *I Ching*. There was somebody there who had the book and was able to give the readings, and that made life seem more important than it is. There's no way life could have been made to seem more important than it was last night by the *I Ching*—three pennies and a book.

So magic is distinctly useful. . . and as people come to feel less and less able to deal with the outer world rationally, they're perfectly rational to look for irrational ways to deal with it. ♣



Kurt Vonnegut choosing a shirt for his first day at Harvard