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# "Vonnegut Speech" is not his

From: [campbell@ufomind.com](mailto:campbell@ufomind.com) (Glenn Campbell, Las Vegas)  
Date: Wed, 6 Aug 1997 09:45:13 -0800

[3 Messages]

[Via [kerry@hungerford.chch.cri.nz](mailto:kerry@hungerford.chch.cri.nz)]

"Vonnegut Speech" Circulates on Net

Dan Mitchell  
6:13pm 4.Aug.97.PDT

A copy of Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s recent MIT commencement address made heavy email rotation on Friday. The characteristically pithy, funny, thoughtful speech was passed from friend to friend stamped with such comments as "worth a read" and "check this out - it's great."

And it was great. Trouble is, it wasn't Vonnegut's. "Kurt Vonnegut Jr. had never given a commencement address at MIT," said Robert Sales, associate director of the school's news office.

It turns out the "speech" was actually a column penned by the Chicago Tribune's Mary Schmich. The column ran on 1 June - five days before UN Secretary General Kofi Annan delivered the actual commencement address at MIT. That speech "was a lot longer and maybe not as clever" as the purported Vonnegut address, Sales said.

Much of Schmich's column - which consists of advice for graduates - sounds like stuff Vonnegut might say: "Don't be reckless with other people's hearts. Don't put up with people who are reckless with yours.... Remember compliments you receive. Forget the insults. If you succeed in doing this, tell me how.... Keep your old love letters. Throw away your old bank statements.... Do one thing every day that scares you."

Nobody - least of all Schmich - can figure out why Vonnegut's name was slapped onto her column. "Some prankster apparently decided it would be funny. Why is it funny? If you can figure that out, you're a genius," she said Monday.

Perhaps the act itself wasn't funny, but some of the fallout has been. First of all, there's the fact that (ahem) Wired News ran part of the column as its Quote of the Day on Friday. Also, Schmich says she's gotten as much attention from the incident as just about anything she's written. "My email's just flooded with messages," she says. And

she says she's actually been accused of plagiarizing Vonnegut - and vice versa. On Friday, she managed to reach Vonnegut, who, Schmich says, said the whole thing is "spooky."

In her column on Monday, Schmich writes that she wrote the piece "one Friday afternoon while high on coffee and M&M's." And, she insisted, "it was not art."

In part, Schmich blames the "cyberswamp" of the Internet for all the trouble. "At newspapers, things like this have to go through a barrier before they go out to the world," she said. But on the Net "anybody can put anybody's name on anything."

Nonetheless, she added, "No one involved in this did anything bad, except the person who started it."

<http://www.wired.com/news/news/culture/story/5762.html>

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[VIA James Graham <jgraham@genetics.com>]

Date: Sunday, August 3, 1997  
Source: Mary Schmich.  
Section: METRO CHICAGO  
Parts: 1  
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VONNEGUT? SCHMICH? WHO CAN TELL IN CYBERSPACE?

I am Kurt Vonnegut.

Oh, Kurt Vonnegut may appear to be a brilliant, revered male novelist. I may appear to be a mediocre and virtually unknown female newspaper columnist. We may appear to have nothing in common but unruly hair.

But out in the lawless swamp of cyberspace, Mr. Vonnegut and I are one. Out there, where any snake can masquerade as king, both of us are the author of a graduation speech that began with the immortal words, "Wear sunscreen."

I was alerted to my bond with Mr. Vonnegut Friday morning by several callers and e-mail correspondents who reported that the sunscreen speech was rocketing through the cyberswamp, from L.A. to New York to Scotland, in a vast e-mail chain letter.

Friends had e-mailed it to friends, who e-mailed it to more friends, all of whom were told it was the commencement address given to the graduating class at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The speaker was allegedly Kurt Vonnegut.

Imagine Mr. Vonnegut's surprise. He was not, and never has been, MIT's commencement speaker.

Imagine my surprise. I recall composing that little speech one Friday afternoon while high on coffee and M&M's. It appeared in this space on June 1. It included such deep thoughts as "Sing," "Floss," and "Don't mess too much with your hair." It was not art.

But out in the cyberswamp, truth is whatever you say it is, and my simple thoughts on floss and sunscreen were being passed around as Kurt Vonnegut's eternal wisdom.

Poor man. He didn't deserve to have his reputation sullied in this way.

So I called a Los Angeles book reviewer, with whom I'd never spoken, hoping he could help me find Mr. Vonnegut.

"You mean that thing about sunscreen?" he said when I explained the situation. "I got that. It was brilliant. He didn't write that?"

He didn't know how to find Mr. Vonnegut. I tried MIT.

"You wrote that?" said Lisa Damtoft in the news office. She said MIT had received many calls and e-mails on this year's "sunscreen" commencement speech. But not everyone was sure: Who had been the speaker?

The speaker on June 6 was Kofi Annan, secretary general of the United

"Vonnegut Speech" is not his

Nations, who did not, as Mr. Vonnegut and I did in our speech, urge his graduates to "dance, even if you have nowhere to do it but your living room." He didn't mention sunscreen.

As I continued my quest for Mr. Vonnegut - his publisher had taken the afternoon off, his agent didn't answer - reports of his "sunscreen" speech kept pouring in.

A friend called from Michigan. He'd read my column several weeks ago. Friday morning he received it again - in an e-mail from his boss. This time it was not an ordinary column by an ordinary columnist. Now it was literature by Kurt Vonnegut.

Fortunately, not everyone who read the speech believed it was Mr. Vonnegut's.

"The voice wasn't quite his," sniffed one doubting contributor to a Vonnegut chat group on the Internet. "It was slightly off - a little too jokey, a little too cute . . . a little too 'Seinfeld.' "

Hoping to find the source of this prank, I traced one e-mail backward from its last recipient, Hank De Zutter, a professor at Malcolm X College in Chicago. He received it from a relative in New York, who received it from a film producer in New York, who received it from a TV producer in Denver, who received it from his sister, who received it. . . .

I realized the pursuit of culprit zero would be endless. I gave up.

I did, however, finally track down Mr. Vonnegut. He picked up his own phone. He'd heard about the sunscreen speech from his lawyer, from friends, from a women's magazine that wanted to reprint it until he denied he wrote it.

"It was very witty, but it wasn't my wittiness," he generously said.

Reams could be written on the lessons in this episode. Space confines me to two.

One: I should put Kurt Vonnegut's name on my column. It would be like sticking a Calvin Klein label on a pair of Kmart jeans.

Two: Cyberspace, in Mr. Vonnegut's word, is "spooky."

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[And here's a clip from the columnists' profiles from the Chicago Tribune]

MARY THERESA SCHMICH

(Embedded image moved to file: PIC17138.PCX)

Mary Theresa Schmich was born in Savannah, Ga., the oldest of eight children, and spent her childhood in Georgia. She attended high school in Phoenix then earned a B.A. at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif.

After working in college admissions for three years and spending a year and a half in France, she attended journalism school at Stanford. She has worked as a reporter at the Peninsula Times Tribune in Palo Alto, Calif., at the Orlando Sentinel and, since 1985, at the Chicago Tribune. She spent five years as a Tribune national correspondent based in Atlanta.

For three years starting in 1992, she wrote a column for the Tribune. She left for a year to attend Harvard on a Nieman fellowship for journalists, then returned to the column in July 1996.

She also writes the "Brenda Starr" comic strip and plays a decent barroom piano. She lives in Chicago.

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From Glenn Campbell:

I was a Vonnegut fan in my youth. The style of the address was consistent with his, but the recent date struck me as odd. He hasn't written anything this good in two decades.

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PO Box 30303, Las Vegas, NV 89173 Glenn Campbell, Webmaster & Moderator

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