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TW Interview by Martha Nichols

A Conversation About Memoirs, a Famous Father, and Mental Illness

Ever since Mark Vonnegut's second memoir came out, I've wanted to interview him, and not just because his deceased father is Kurt Vonnegut.



The Eden Express, Mark Vonnegut's first book, was published with much fanfare in the mid-1970s. It's a vivid account of enduring and recovering from psychotic episodes on a hippie commune in British Columbia.

His long-awaited sequel, *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So* (Delacorte, 2010), is a very different kind of memoir. Here, Vonnegut fills in the before and after of *The Eden Express*, including his unlikely arrival at Harvard Medical School and another "crack up" in 1985. In a 2010 talk at the Harvard Book Store, he said:

I wrote the book because I was increasingly annoyed with the younger self who wrapped up mental illness and everything else in a bow that fit less and less comfortably.

Given my own mother's life-long mood swings, his understated way of continuing the story has stuck with me. Vonnegut offers no healing balm or easy fixes. He ends his second book with "I love finding out what happens next."

I originally reviewed both memoirs in the February 2011 issue of *Talking Writing*. This spring, TW also led me to his office at MV Pediatrics in Quincy, Massachusetts. In early April 2014, our lively, hour-long conversation covered everything from Vonnegut's job as a pediatrician to his father's approach to family stories.

Mark Vonnegut seems like the perfect doctor for kids, not physically threatening but attentive, sensitive to shifts in mood. Our interview tumbled forward at a rapid clip, both of us leaping over each other's words, completing sentences, laughing. He often dropped his voice to punctuate a joke, squeezing the words out for comic effect.



The spacious reception area of MV Pediatrics contained the standard bead mazes, picture books, and little red chairs. The bright walls and watercolors—many painted by Dr. Vonnegut himself—were tastefully exuberant, too. “Why do you start your own practice?” he joked with me at one point. “So I could hang my paintings on the wall.”

He's also writing fiction these days, he said. The novel he's begun is based on a childhood friend he's renamed "Huck"— "to let readers know I'm hunting serious-sized bears."

This TW interview has been condensed and edited.

Don't miss [“Why Going Crazy Isn't Just a Good Story.”](#) [5] the updated TW essay by Martha Nichols about Vonnegut's memoirs.

[“The Random Facts of Life.”](#) [6] her Spring 2014 Editor's Note, also quotes from this interview with Mark Vonnegut.

TW: I found your second memoir refreshingly un-memoir-like.

MV: Good, because I have started to hate the whole term “memoir”—just because it's become a category. My father would say, “I like what I write, but people call it science fiction. It's like putting it into a urinal so they can pee on it.”

TW: I know. I always thought it was weird that his work was called science fiction.

MV: It's all writing. If it's done well, whether you call it memoir or fiction or whatever, it's either good writing or it's not good writing. It either resonates or it doesn't. But I always felt that “memoir” was a way of saying “this is different than fiction, they didn't really have to *work* at it the same way.” And writing is hard! I didn't just sit there and remember stuff.

TW: Toward the end of *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So*, you say, “My father gave me the gift of being able to pay attention to my inner narration no matter how tedious the damn thing could be.” That's a great term, because certainly all writers have an inner narration—everybody does.

MV: I think a lot of people are just confused—they see their inner narration as being identical to reality. If you end up in a psychiatric hospital, you realize that your inner narration and reality are not the same. Otherwise, these other people would not be treating you the way they are.

TW: Full disclosure: my mom was bipolar and had many different episodes when I was a child. She was also a visual artist, but when she was having an episode, none of it made sense—she couldn’t do any art.

MV: Right. And that’s the other thing that made me want to write the second book. I saw all the great art that had been made by people with psychiatric illness in reaction to and against the disease, not going along with it. And that was mind opening. People think that somehow psychosis gave Van Gogh his painting, and it’s just exactly the opposite.

TW: You’ve had no other psychotic episodes since 1985?

MV: No. Things can and still do get scary, but I see them coming a long way off, and I no longer have the idea that some day I might be without medication. It’s not going to be next week or the week after. [lowers his voice, suddenly serious]

TW: Is that something you learned to do, being able to see the signs?

MV: Oh, yeah. An eighteen-year-old has an enormous enthusiasm and is easily seduced by the illness. An older person says, “I don’t think so. You’re blowing smoke; this is a bunch of crap.” Even as an eighteen-year-old, when I started having little blips into mania, I said, “This is kind of tinny and unreal.” There is a tinniness to mania, which I think even the young recognize.

TW: It may have to do with the way you process information. My mother was a visual thinker, not a verbal person. I don’t think she ever saw signs coming.

MV: Yeah, but I do, and one of the things about this job and taking care of other people’s problems is I get immediate feedback about how I’m doing or not doing.

TW: In another interview, you said you wrote the memoirs because, ultimately, you want people to loosen up and tell their own stories—to not always be posturing and saying, “I’m fine! Everything’s fine.” I’m wondering how you see that as a pediatrician. You must hear stories all the time, from parents and kids, where they start by saying, “I think I’m fine, but this weird thing happened....”

MV: Right, right. Exactly!

TW: How do you get them to the loosening-up part—really talking about what’s going on with them?

MV: You can’t do it directly. If I’m worried about somebody and I set them up for a psychiatric evaluation at Children’s Hospital or whatever, on any given day, if they show up there, they might present just fine—and I know they’re not fine. But they don’t want to go to a hospital, they don’t want medication, they don’t want this, they don’t want that....

TW: What about parents? Do parents tell the story differently than kids?

MV: Of course they do. The difference between being disabled by neurosis and being a parent is very, very subtle. If you ask the kid, “Well, what’s 2 and 2?,” the mother will be.... [acts out the mother mouthing “four”] You know, they’re not separate.

A lot of times, what I have to do is to reassure the parent they’ve done whatever they can, and their job is to back off. Sometimes, you see a parent who thinks their kid is completely normal and that their inner narrative represents the truth about their child’s life—and they’re not even close.

The parenting process is you cut the cord. You cut the cord. Then you cut the cord. Then you cut the cord, so—

TW: You keep cutting the cord.

MV: So you keep cutting the cord.

TW: What you’re talking about is the way the stories that people tell themselves can overlap, with no boundaries, in a family.

MV: Right. If people are very critical of the childhood they came from and they’re going to do it exactly the opposite, what they don’t realize is that 180 degrees from crazy is crazy! [laughter] It’s freeing to see that the things I knew for certain when I was manic are not true. But an awful lot of the things we all think are true are not true. They’re just plain wrong.

TW: What do you think of most recovery memoirs? Do you have any favorites?

MV: [long pause] *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Sherman Alexie—but is that memoir? I think it is. Most of the stuff I really like is clearly fiction, which is clearly a memoir. Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Those, to me, are memoirs. The things that are marketed as memoirs, I usually don’t finish them. I start in there, and I feel like somebody has allowed themselves to be pushed, one way or another, into in a solution that I can’t buy.

TW: When you wrote *The Eden Express*, though, did you have anybody pushing in that direction, or did you write it basically that way?

MV: I wrote it that way—and I wanted it to be true. That it was done. I mean, who doesn’t? Who doesn’t want to go through hell, then get admitted to Harvard Medical School, get married, and have everything be perfect? Sign me up!

You are supposed to come to a point where the bow tying is the rational explanation for what this person’s been through—this person is now perfectly all right, and you don’t have to worry anymore. Especially with mental illness, people want to read something and say, “That person is mentally ill, and I am *not*.” [laughter]

TW: Going back to inner narration and your dad, who I don’t actually want to focus on a lot, because everyone focuses on him. I mean, he’s a wonderful writer, I love his work—

MV: But he’s a narcissist! [laughter]

TW: In his case, you have somebody who was famous and mostly writing fiction.

MV: Except when he wasn’t, and he got his version of his parents enshrined. His brother and most of the family does not believe that his mother in fact killed herself. They think she was having a bad day and took “a little too much.”

But there is a huge amount of autobiographical material in his introductions, his short fiction, and stuff like that, and so it is highly annoying to the other people in the family that you can jump up and down, you can say whatever you want, but his version is the one that gets told.

TW: If you think about trying to get people to loosen up so they tell their stories, was your father posturing or really using fiction as a way of exorcising demons?

MV: I think he stumbled on telling the truth to save his own life—and it worked. I’ve read all his college stuff, his high school stuff, and there I see a spoiled brat with mild amounts of talent who didn’t start writing until after he went through the bombing of Dresden and was forced to clean out the bomb shelters full of dead and rotting people. He was not a writer, but I think there was something about that horror....

It amazed me, going back to Indianapolis [where Kurt Vonnegut grew up] and seeing the clubs he and his family were part of. I said, “These aren’t working-class people. This isn’t what I was told.” My father was a popular guy!

TW: I wonder what Kurt Vonnegut’s inner narration must have been like. Was he always observing—was that what writing became for him when he was locked up behind a door, typing away?

MV: He told himself a lot of lies. He said he was doing it because he needed to make money. He needed to make money, but he was also living off a small inheritance until a certain point. I do think he noticed that when he stumbled

on telling the truth, whether in a short story or a novel, he felt relief. He felt like part of the human race and like he wasn't crippled and he knew whether to turn left when he came to an intersection. I think he had classic PTSD, but I don't think *he* would say that.

TW: So, you've done two memoirs, and he floats in and out of them. Do you feel like your version of the story is more true than what floats out of the autobiographical bits he scattered throughout his work?

MV: I think most children are more on to their parents than the parents themselves are. I have a very small idea of what my 37-year-old thinks of me, but I have had to be very self-conscious—again, it hasn't been out of virtue. It's allowed me to survive.

TW: Really good writers have to be attuned in that way as well.

MV: Yeah. They really do.

TW: What do you think are the challenges of writing about mental illness? In writing about my mother's illness, I can't get into her head—all I can write about is how it affected me, and that's a challenge.

MV: You know, it's hard. *The Eden Express* has been optioned, and people have been unable to come up with a screenplay. I think it's because they keep trying to get into my head. I want an utterly flat telling of me walking out of a supermarket with my arms full of tobacco, and the supermarket manager looking at me, and my friend saying, “Did you pay for those?” And I look at him and I say [speaks in a robotic voice], “If I was supposed to pay for these, Peter, he would have said something.”

That tells the whole thing rather than “oh, then I thought it was the end of the world.” It tells the work my friend had to do to get me to the ferry, to get me to the hospital.

TW: It's hard, because the romance of it is what's going on in the crazy person's head. The rest is just the heavy lifting. But of course that's what the story is. To some extent, it's just about describing behavior.

MV: Yeah, yeah. Right, right. And *not* drawing conclusions: “And then my dopamine receptors were overflowing.” [laughter] You know, “my emotional capabilities.” If you get drawn into a model of mental illness, whether it's the dopamine hypothesis or something went wrong in parenting, then you're not telling the truth anymore.

TW: But that means most of the human race is not really telling the truth.

[laughter; MV gives a thumbs up]

TW: I don't disagree with you. But along those lines, one of the things that rings true to me in your memoirs is that everything has meaning for the mentally ill. This dot connects to this dot connects to this, and it doesn't matter how *wild* it is. Given that this is crazy thinking, do you believe life is random—ultimately?

MV: What does that mean? I've come to believe that if you turn things upside down, if you realize that we had two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents—if you go back and say, “Well, how does that get to Adam and Eve?”—it can't. So, let's turn it upside down, and say we all came from *countless*.... Is life random? The details are random.

The question of whether life is random is the same as is God's eye really on the sparrows—and if so, why are there so damn many sparrows? Why isn't He using his attention in a more formidable...in a more *efficient* way? It sure looks like God is counting on there being a helluva lot of sparrows so He doesn't have to worry about each one.

TW: But if most people are spending their time telling themselves stories, saying “it's fine, I'm in control, God is watching the sparrows,” how do you get writing that is truthful? And I don't mean autobiographical—I mean truthful writing. How do you get there?

MV: You watch the details.

TW: You watch the details.

MV: You watch the details.

TW: Yeah. And let them add up?

MV: [softly] Yeah.

TW: Your father was the one who talked about your grandmother killing herself. Did he ever tell you family stories, and did they have the ring of truth?

MV: Some of them did. In one, I think he was holding forth as a teenager about how men were better cooks than women, and his mother poured a pitcher of water over his head. I say that a mother who pours a pitcher of water over her son's head when he's saying such things does *not* kill herself. She was certainly depressed, she was certainly an addict, but connecting that dot, to me, is trying to tell the truth and being pulled into an easy story: *Mother kills herself, and that's why I'm a black humorist*.

I mean [makes cracking sound with his mouth], too easy, Dad. Keep going, don't let the damn magnet pull you into the easy story.

TW: What's it been like for you, having to play the point person in maintaining his legacy? You're interpreting your father's life, he's already gone....

MV: You know, I'm grateful there's enough substance to his work that I don't have to blow smoke trying to get people to read it. Let the whirling dervishes whirl. I am not going to change the reality of who my father was or who he wasn't.

TW: There's a public story out there—I think that's a complicating thing. The stories you tell, especially in *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So*, really are personal stories. To me, it feels like, "oh, yeah, this is a real person." That's why it seems like less of a constructed memoir.

MV: The thing is, it would be easy to write a book about my father that would get me on Oprah. That would be easy.

Publishing Information

- ["Mark Vonnegut: Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness."](#) [7] recorded at Harvard Book Store, October 13, 2010 (WGBH Forum Network).
- ["Interview: Mark Vonnegut, M.D., Author of Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So"](#) [8] by Kathy Ritchie, *Smith Magazine*, October 19, 2010.

Art Information

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Straight-out without a lot of qualifiers, I should admit that I'm not a careful person. The fact that I have managed to achieve certain things doesn't matter. That I am aware of my uncarefulness isn't as helpful as you

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might think. My parents were told by the principal of West Barnstable Elementary School and my teacher that I was a bright boy whose spelling was in the retarded range and whose handwriting was the worst they'd ever seen....

Somewhere in high school I came across Mark Twain's statement that it shouldn't be held against someone if they know more than one way to spell a word. Years later, at a conference on ADHD, a colleague said that Huck Finn had ADHD and would be treated today and have a better life. I said that the best that treatment could achieve would be to make him into a second-rate Becky Thatcher, and we should worry, at least a little, about that.

—from “Mushrooms,” the last chapter of *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So* by Mark Vonnegut

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