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How to “Make Your Soul Grow”

In 2006, an English teacher at Xavier High School assigned her students a project to write a letter to their favorite author. The goal was to ask the author to come to speak at their school, as a way to practice their persuasive writing skills. Five of those students chose to write to Kurt Vonnegut, the famed satirist and author of classics such as Slaughter-House Five and Cat’s Cradle. Out of all the letters, Vonnegut was the only author to send a response. Unfortunately, he was unable to visit the school given his old age. Still, he felt inclined to respond to their kind letters and hoped to give the students some advice. This kind-hearted behavior wasn’t unfamiliar to Vonnegut, over the years he gave many commencement speeches that shared his wisdom with younger generations. In this case, he couldn’t give his speech in person, but he still chose to write an insightful letter encouraging students to practice art. Creating something, he argued, is a way to "make your soul grow" (Klein). As a fellow student, I found this letter to be incredibly powerful rhetoric, insisting that people need to practice art in order to become themselves. In just a short letter, Kurt Vonnegut successfully responds to the rhetorical situation presented because he understands his exigence, audience, and constraints. He uses a humorous tone that resonates with young people and specific calls to action that engage the readers and encourage them to practice art in a time when creativity isn’t always highly valued.

One of the main reasons this letter successfully communicates its message is that it appropriately responds to the rhetorical situation at hand. In Lloyd F. Bitzer’s The Rhetorical Situation, Bitzer establishes the three key principles involved in a rhetorical situation. The first is exigence, the situation that necessitates the existence of the rhetoric (Bitzer 6). The main exigence for Vonnegut’s response was the original letters written by the students, which asked
for a response. There’s another exigence, however, that defines what Vonnegut decided to share with the students, the lack of art engagement in schools. Several studies produced in recent years, particularly one by *Frontiers In Psychology*, have shown that engaging in art improves physical and emotional wellbeing (Mastandrea et al.). Despite this research, arts education has continuously fallen”, according to a study by the National Endowment for the Arts, the amount of 18 year olds who received arts education in childhood has fallen from 64.6% in 1982 to 49.5% in 2008 (Rabkin and Hedberg). As science and math take priority over arts and humanities in education because many believe they produce better jobs, art in schools continues to decrease. Data has backed it up, but as an artist, Vonnegut understands how important art is on a personal level. The overall attack on art and his personal connection to it are why he chose to use his letter to encourage these students to practice art in any way they could.

Bitzer also explains audience, the people who are influenced by the rhetoric and can take action as a result (Bitzer 7). In this case, the intended audience is the students who wrote to him and their teacher. Since it’s a letter, he specifically addresses the audience at the beginning, "Dear Xavier High School, and Ms. Lockwood, and Messrs Perin, McFeely, Batten, Maurer, and Congiusta" (Klein). The message of the letter was directly meant for these students, which is why the assignments relate specifically to their class, “ I hope Ms. Lockwood will flunk you if you don't do it” (Klein). When it was later published publicly, an unintended audience was created of students who read the letter and felt inspired to practice art as well. Although the message wasn’t written for this unintended audience, it is still a broad idea that can be applied to anyone. The importance of art is timeless, and Vonnegut’s words still resonate with other students more than fifteen years later.
Finally, Bitzer details the importance of constraints, which are anything that has the power to limit the influence of the rhetoric (Bitzer 8). Vonnegut faces a couple of constraints in this letter, particularly the challenge of getting across such a big idea in a one-page letter and his humorous tone which may cause some to not take him seriously. Although he’s used to speaking in person Vonnegut shares that his advice is simple, “What I had to say to you, moreover, would not take long” (Klein). By keeping it short and concise, he’s not able to go into much detail about why art is key to personal wellbeing but instead focuses on what he would like the students to do. His sense of humor may also make it difficult for those unfamiliar with his writing to understand his point. It seems silly when he compares himself to an iguana and asks students to “pretend you’re Count Dracula”, even though the topic he’s discussing is serious. However, since this letter is addressing students who love his writing, they’re familiar with Vonnegut’s comedic style, so it is more effective for them.

Despite being a barrier for those unfamiliar with Vonnegut’s particular brand of comedy, his humorous tone is actually a major appeal for the audience of the letter. The demographic he’s trying to engage are teenagers, so the choice to make his advice comical actually benefits the message. Students are used to being lectured, but Vonnegut’s humorous style stands out and helps the students understand the joy that practicing art can bring. He gives them silly assignments, “Draw a funny or nice picture of Ms. Lockwood, and give it to her. Dance home after school, and sing in the shower and on and on. Make a face in your mashed potatoes” (Klein). Obviously, students don’t like receiving homework, but when that homework is to dance and play with their food they might begin to understand what Vonnegut means by growing your soul. The tone appeals to pathos, the tool of persuasion that utilizes emotion. The light jokes appeal to the audience's sense of fun and joy, which makes sense since Vonnegut is trying to
share the joy that practicing art creates. He wants the students to “experience becoming”, which can seem vague, but when he puts it in terms of silly actions it seems more grounded to the readers.

Vonnegut also successfully engages his youthful audience by assigning specific calls to action. From the beginning, he’s asking students to take action, “Practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage” (Klein). This creates a sense of interaction with the audience which improves their engagement with the idea. Simply telling the kids that art can improve their well-being so they should do it is much less effective than giving specific instructions on how to involve art in their lives. The ending provides an even more distinct assignment when Vonnegut instructs, “Here's an assignment for tonight, and I hope Ms. Lockwood will flunk you if you don't do it: Write a six line poem, about anything, but rhymed” (Klein). He even involves the teacher, Ms. Lockwood, making it a school assignment to create art. The part that makes the assignment stand out from much of the other homework teenagers are assigned, is that he tells them why they should do it. He not only asks that they don’t turn it in but to, “Tear it up into teeny-weeny pieces, and discard them into widely separated trash receptacles” (Klein). The point is not to get a grade for the poem, but that by creating something meaningful they will have, “experienced becoming, learned a lot more about what's inside you, and you have made your soul grow” (Klein). This particular action gives the students a way to relate his point to their real life. By actually practicing art in the way he asks, they learn the lesson through practice. This real-world practice resonates much more deeply than just being lectured about an idea.

Although this letter was written 15 years ago, the message has only become more relevant. Many people, especially in the school system, don't value creativity as an important
skill. As arts programs receive less and less funding, many students are discouraged from putting
time and energy into a pursuit that they're told won't make them money in the long run. As
someone who didn't write a best-selling book until age 47, Vonnegut knew this argument well.
Still, he encouraged pursuing creativity. In his last book, A Man Without a Country, written
around the same time as this letter, he wrote, "Go into the arts. I'm not kidding. The arts are not a
way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable" (Vonnegut 28).
Vonnegut understood that art is a key part of living a happy life, so he chose to share that
understanding with the impressionable young students that looked up to him. It’s clear that the
message resonated not only with the students at Xavier High School, but also with generations to
come. In 2014, seven years after Vonnegut’s death, students at Hove Park School in the United
Kingdom created a video honoring the letter. The video celebrates the importance of practicing
art and the impact Kurt Vonnegut’s message has had on students across generations and
continents (Newton). Despite the persistent debate that art is a frivolous pursuit, artists and
young people continue to rally around the message that engaging with art will “make your soul
grow”.

Dear Xavier High School, and Ms. Lockwood, and Messrs Perlin, McFeely, Batten, Maurer and Congiueta:

I thank you for your friendly letters. You sure know how to cheer up a really old geezer (84) in his sunset years. I don't make public appearances any more because I now resemble nothing so much as an iguana.

What I had to say to you, moreover, would not take long, to wit: Practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage, no matter how well or badly, not to get money and fame, but to experience becoming, to find out what's inside you, to make your soul grow.

Seriously! I mean starting right now, do art and do it for the rest of your lives. Draw a funny or nice picture of Ms. Lockwood, and give it to her. Dance home after school, and sing in the shower and on and on. Make a face in your mashed potatoes. Pretend you're Count Dracula.

Here's an assignment for tonight, and I hope Ms. Lockwood will flunk you if you don't do it: Write a six line poem, about anything, but thumped. No fair tennis without a net. Make it as good as you possibly can. But don't tell anybody what you're doing. Don't show it or recite it to anybody, not even your girlfriend or parents or whatever, or Ms. Lockwood. OK?

Tear it up into teeny-weeny pieces, and discard them into widely separated trash recepticals. You will find that you have already been gloriously rewarded for your poem. You have experienced becoming, learned a lot more about what's inside you, and you have made your soul grow.

God bless you all!

Kurt Vonnegut
Works Cited


