

# A famous dad and an infamous illness

With mental illness, says memoirist Mark Vonnegut, the trick is to not take your feelings so seriously

BY JULIA CECVALA  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

A few years before he died I had the pleasure of seeing Kurt Vonnegut speak to a sold-out crowd at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. I remember him saying he didn't have much hope for the world, we've screwed it up too badly already, but that a few things still make life worthwhile, one of them being music. On that note he ended his talk, cued the auditorium to fill with the transcendent notes of Strauss' "Blue Danube" and proceeded to waltz around the stage with an imaginary partner.

Kurt passed on his enjoyment of the arts as a saving grace to his son Mark Vonnegut, who includes a few of his own paintings in his new memoir, "Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So." Growing up in a household with a long history of mental illness and a father who spoke of suicide casually, Mark tells how the arts have been a coping strategy throughout his life in dealing with bipolar disorder.

Mark's story of humility and grace in striving to live a normal life and maintaining a demanding career – all while living with mental illness – is worthy in it's own right. That it offers insight into what it was like to be the son of one of America's most famous authors is just a bonus.

Mark's writing voice contains a touch of his father's, combining irreverence and humor in observing the improbable and ironic nature of life. He writes, "If you take good care of any disease by eating well, sleeping well, being aware of your health, consciously wanting to be well, not smoking, et cetera, you are doing all the same things you should be doing anyway, but somehow having a disease makes them easier to do. A human without a disease is like a ship without a rudder."

Readers of Mark's first memoir, "The Eden Express," will be relieved to find that his new book reflects his improved mental

health and reads in an easy, orderly fashion without going into the delusional stream-of-consciousness episodes illustrating his breaks with reality. My only complaint is that in paring the story down to interesting vignettes he skips over many details of major family events like births, deaths and divorces. My curiosity, as well as love for his father's writing, makes me want to know even more about this deeply imperfect, yet brilliant family, this family in which, Mark says, no one was average.

Having grown up with parents with mental illness, gone through his own psychotic break, recovered and then gone through it again, Mark has such a familiarity with the subject he is able to speak in frank, honest terms that normalize, without romanticizing. "There are no people anywhere who don't have some mental illness. It all depends on where you set the bar and how hard you look. What is a myth is that we are mostly mentally well most of the time."

Mark also tells of his struggles with addiction to alcohol and prescription drugs. Illness and achieving a tenuous hold on wellbeing have been such an ever-present element of his life it is no wonder that he was attracted to the healing field. Yet Mark recognizes the degree of irony fitting to a Vonnegut that the only medical school to accept him was Harvard. He has seen the

healthcare system from both sides, and offers multiple perspectives on its successes and failures. He tells of helping choose who is allowed a chance at becoming a doctor though admission to Harvard's medical school, and of treating children in Honduras on a volunteer medical trip. He also rants about the corruption and brokenness brought into the field by the insurance industry.

Mark's greatest insights though, come from his own journey toward wellbeing: "With mental illness the trick is to not take your feelings so seriously; you're zooming in and zooming away from things that go from being too important to being not important at all. ... I could zoom in or out to see how they looked without trying to change them. If I was lucky, I might find things that could be part of how I try to tell the truth."

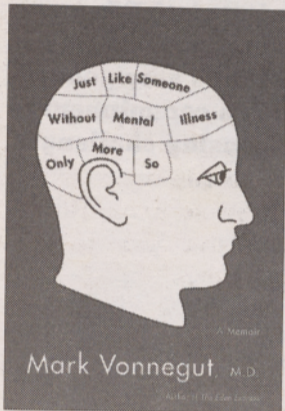
The first truth is that none of the thoughts going by are worth drinking over.

The one other thing I remember about Kurt's talk is how he emphasized telling the truth. Mark seems to have picked that up as well.

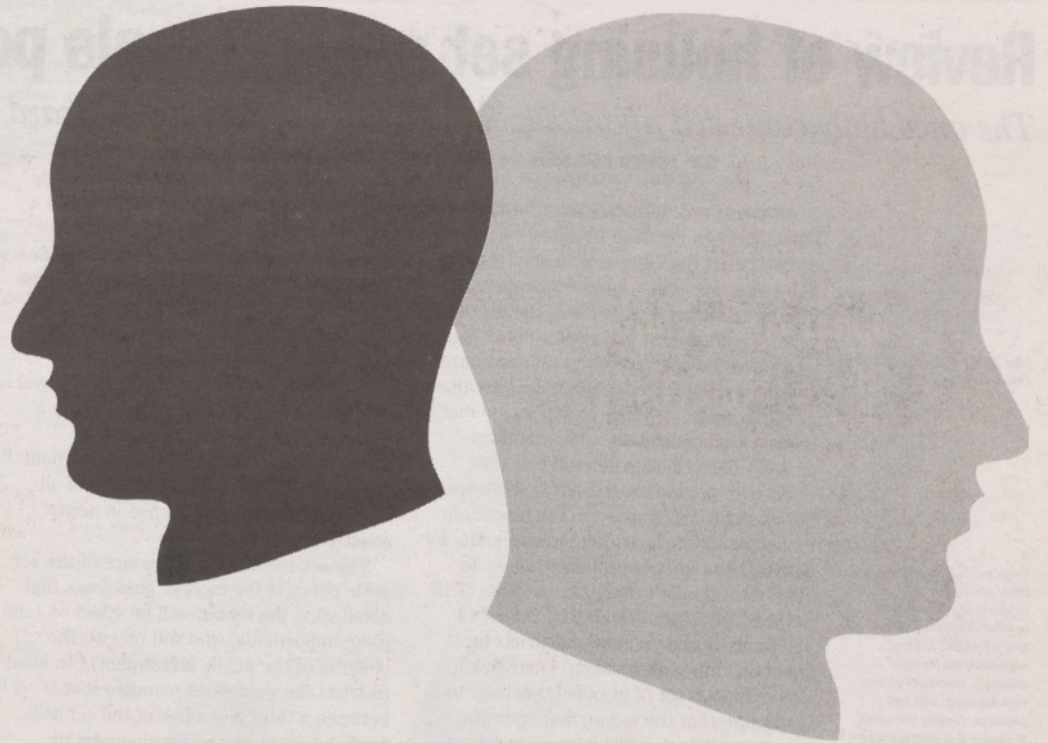
## Blank

by Brian Feist

Outside right now beasts are swallowing rigid thoughts digesting defecating out sanitized sound bites of soft freedom



Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So  
By Mark Vonnegut, M.D.,  
Delacorte Press, 2011,  
Hardcover, 203 pages, \$24





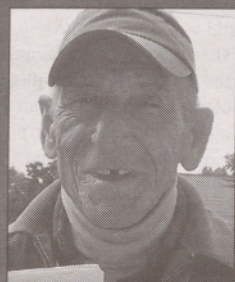
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