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[Experience](#), [Meaning of Life](#)



Slaughterhouse Five, by Kurt Vonnegut, is a novel in which the laws of physics are broken -- apparently. Billy Pilgrim, the main character, is loose in time and is free, though not in control, to experience any moment of his life, including the moments before he was born and after he dies (experienced as hues with sustained sounds). At random times in the main sequence of his life he literally jumps to other times, something which he is fully aware of. He can be on Tralfamadore one moment, back on earth with his wife the next. This could be puzzling to the cursory reader, but Vonnegut makes sure to spell out his reasons why such events can be believed as realistic and perceived as happening, to some extent, to everyone everywhere -- at all times. The Tralfamadorians, who explain this nature of time and existence to Billy, are shown as enlightened creatures while the humans back on earth are seen as backwards -- to such an extent that they believe in free will. Billy towards the end of his life becomes a preacher of these virtues of existence taught to him by his zookeepers on Tralfamadore, going around and speaking about his experiences and his acquired knowledge. Much like Billy, Vonnegut tries to preach his own view of the universe and of existence, but through fiction. Billy's view is Vonnegut's view and it is through Billy and his experiences that Vonnegut explains its nature to us. But the point here is not purely physical. Vonnegut applies it to everyday human life through the events in the novel, and in a strange twist, this application leads to a philosophy that Billy does not actually embolden. Through Billy and the Tralfamadorians Vonnegut introduces us to his ideas on the nature of time and physical existence. When Billy travels to Tralfamadore for the first time -- after having been unstuck in time for many years -- he is taught by the

tralfamadorians the nature of time. They tell him that the human perception of time as linear and flowing with the possibility of only one moment existing at 'once' is erroneous. The Tralfamadorians exist in 4 dimensions and so have perspective on time. They tell Billy that time does not flow, that all moments exist concurrently and it is only an illusion if they appear to have any linearity. This makes sense to Billy for he has been traveling to odd places in time ever since his experiences in the war. The Tralfamadorians also have a philosophy of life based on their ability to have perspective on time. They tell Billy that it is pointless to be concerned with the bad things always happen to us in our lives. They say that it is wiser to only focus one's attention on the good moments, for no moments are capable of being changed -- they just are. Billy to some extent is capable of applying this philosophy to his life for he is blessed enough to be loose in time -- and know it. But Vonnegut may be saying that we are all loose in time, for if the Tralfamadorians are correct, all the moments in our lives exist 'simultaneously.' And so whether or not we are aware of these other moments in other moments is irrelevant to the fact that the moments all function at the same 'time'. The universe, with all its moments, is the same as when we 'were' babies as it 'is' now. By the end of Billy's life we find him preaching this knowledge to various adoring masses. Billy preaches the philosophy that was taught to him by the Tralfamadorians. Vonnegut seems to be aware, though, that none of us possesses the abilities that Billy Pilgrim possesses. We can't visit other moments in our lives. We don't have the luxury of turning our attention away from the present and looking at some other moment. So as good as this philosophy of the Tralfamadorians sounds,

it doesn't seem to be reconcilable with our humanness. It is possible that this philosophy was a reaction to the troubling experiences that Billy and -- through the novel -- Vonnegut have had. Billy may have experienced more hardship than Vonnegut did, and his apparent traversals through time and visits to Tralfamadore may have all been illusory, may have acted as a sort of coping mechanism. But Vonnegut did experience the War and the fire bombing of Dresden. Vonnegut states in the beginning of the novel that trying to stop a war is like trying to stop an iceberg -- it cannot be done. If humans were gifted like the Tralfamadorians are, then they would know for a fact the parallels between war and icebergs because all moments past and present are immutable. They would view all of existence like they view the iceberg metaphor. Of course, humans don't have these abilities anywhere near to the extent to which the Tralfamadorians have them (Human artistic vision and other faculties resemble the Tralfamadorian abilities, and we are blessed to be aware of stretches of time, not just living solely in the moment.) By the end of the novel it seems that Vonnegut comes to terms with these limitations. The pendant that Montana Wildhack, Billy's human zoo-mate on Tralfamadore, was wearing sums it up nicely. It states: " God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to tell the difference." The 'God' in this motto could be anything, so when we view it in terms of Vonnegut we don't have to ascribe any sort of religiosity. God, if you will, could be time and all of its moments. And taken as such, this motto becomes a simple wish expressing some of the limitations, as Vonnegut sees it, of the human race, and of the human solution to these limitations -- an aspiration to know one's

limits and abilities and will enough to act accordingly. Whether or not Billy actually traveled to Tralfamadore, it should not serve to bolster or denigrate the substance of his message. If we understand what is meant by the Tralfamadorian paradigm -- the philosophy of life based on the ability to have time-breaching perspective in four dimensions -- and we see that the facts of the physical universe as stated to Billy by the Tralfamadorians -- time and all its moments being all-existent and immutable, etc. -- are believable, we can understand our limitations. To Billy wars are unstoppable but to the optimistic human they aren't. Vonnegut realizes this, it seems, and as an aside, it may have been what enabled him to ultimately come to terms with his experiences -- especially the events surrounding Dresden. The two philosophies are very complimentary, however. Billy had the advantage. He was right to put on a passive attitude most of the time if he wasn't insane; but the optimistic philosophy derived later on doesn't try to discount the facts of the physical universe propagated by the Tralfamadorians -- it realizes how absurd it would be to try to grasp them as the Tralfamadorians are able to and so makes cinders of its philosophical import and constructs one of its own that fully considers the human condition. It's sad to say, but Billy Pilgrim probably was insane. I don't think I'd want to be like Billy, jumping schizophrenically from time to time, but I wouldn't mind giving a go at being Tralfamadorian.