

Carlin, OSHA, Class Guilt, Vonnegut, and the Lowest Common Denominator

written by Holly

June 30, 2003

By Holly Lisle

The job of any good comedian is to kick your head out of your ass. To throw the parts of life that make you uncomfortable in your face in a way that shocks you, makes you laugh, and makes you think. People in general go through life tucked under the warm, dark blanket of their assumptions and beliefs, eyes squeezed tightly shut, ears plugged against anything that might disturb their slumber; comedians are the guys who lift the covers and douse the sleeper in icewater, and shout, "Hey, wake up! You're missing this!"

George Carlin is one of the best there is with the bucket of icewater. He's fearless. He's quick and smart. Mostly he's dead on, but even when he's wrong, he leaves you thinking about **why** he's wrong.

On his newest CD, taken, I guess, from his most recent HBO special, he does this bit on the US exploration of Mars. He's against it. He's very funny in presenting his reasons, but his reasons boil down to: We could use all that money to feed poor people; and, We aren't worthy to take our culture out into the universe because we still have wife-beaters and child-molesters and McDonald's and cultures that forcibly remove the clitorises of women so they won't enjoy sex and any real civilization would be appalled to see us coming.

We're not going to get into the "feed the poor people" argument here. Okay? It's one of Carlin's last gasps of Liberal Economoronica, and if he thinks about it he knows

better, and if you happen to agree with him but **you** think about it, you'll realize that you know better, too. If you want a laugh, follow the path of this search I did on Google – “use the money to feed the”/“use that money to feed the”. If you **can't** figure out why “use that money to feed the ... whatever” is a seriously stupid concept, e-mail me and I'll post your e-mail (anonymously, if you prefer) and whichever others I get in a separate column, and then I will SHOW you.

But not today.

Today we're hunting bigger game. We're going after the Burden of the Lowest Common Denominator, and the first peg in the BotLCD is the “We're not worthy” argument. And that argument goes like this: We're not worthy to go into space, build new skyscrapers, celebrate our own culture and our own lives because vast portions of this planet are political, economic, or human-rights shitholes. Frequently all three at once. We're not worthy because our own culture is materialistic, and full of stupid people. We're not worthy because we have stressed the ‘wrong values’.

That's Point One. Hang onto it. “We're Not Worthy.”

Here's Point Two.

I was watching a documentary on the building of the St. Louis Arch the other day – a fascinating story about a magnificent achievement that developed new construction techniques, created an architectural triumph, and stands today as a symbol of daring and creativity. And one of the men talking about the building of the Arch mentioned that the insurance company underwriting the building of the Arch had predicted X number of deaths during construction, but that no one had died. And then he added this chilling little throwaway line – “Because

of OSHA regulations, something like this probably couldn't be built today."

OSHA, for those of you who have never had to prep for an ISO inspection, is the Occupational Safety & Health Administration, a US government organization whose mandate is to ensure a safe and healthful work environment. OSHA is the enforcer of hardhats, safety harnesses, non-lethal cleaning and disinfecting supplies, dirty needle disposal, handwashing technique, and a whole lot of other important stuff. Like most government agencies, it is humorless, unimaginative, and more than all other government agencies combined, it is dedicated to the creation of Life Without Risk. It and insurance companies walk in lockstep to prevent people from doing things that will hurt others, but also to prevent them from doing things that will hurt themselves. That second bit – barring people from choosing their own risks – is a Bad Thing. But it's important to those who would have us bear the Burden of the Lowest Common Denominator.

So along with "We're Not Worthy," hold "Life Without Risk" in your head.

Point Three. Whiteness Studies FredOnEverything has an intelligent overview of Whiteness Studies but the main point is that, if you're white, you're supposed to feel guilty for what your race has achieved, cumulatively, over the past couple thousand years. I haven't heard anyone suggest that I'm supposed to feel guilty for my guys stripping naked and painting themselves blue and taking heads in battle to stick over their door frames way back when, so I'm guessing it's only when we started developing interesting technological and scientific and literary and artistic achievements that we became Evil Oppressors.

Whiteness Studies is just the newest offshoot of the mindset that claims that the playing field should be level. That everyone should have the same stuff, be treated in the same way, be allowed to do the same things. That everyone who runs the race should get a fucking ribbon. Yeah, my kids went to one of those schools too, for a while.

So now we have “We’re Not Worthy.” “Life Without Risk.” “Level the Playing Field.”

There’s our triad of the Burden of the Lowest Common Denominator. That everything should be fair, that everything should be safe, and that until everything is safe and sane and equal for everyone, no one should do more than anyone else does. No one should go into space until fuckheads stop whacking the clitorises off of their baby daughters so that when they grow up, some other fuckhead won’t have to worry about them cheating on him because he sucks in bed. No one should build a mansion because not everyone can have mansions. No one should build another St. Louis Arch because building it wouldn’t be safe and who cares if it’s glorious.

Kurt Vonnegut once wrote a story titled “Harrison Bergeron” about a world in which everyone was handicapped. Where those who were not born with handicaps had them artificially applied. Weights and chains for the fast and graceful, distorting glasses for the keen-sighted, disruptive noises to keep the brilliant from thinking too long about any one thing. Two talented beautiful people stripped off their shackles and their blinders and danced, and they flew, and for a few moments they were wonderful and glorious and they created something magnificent. And then the envious who remained bound to the ground killed them. We’re inching toward Kurt’s nightmare, and some days, we’re running.

Guess what. The world is not fair. People are not equal, except (in some places) in the eyes of the law. The poor are always going to be with us – NOTHING is going to remove poverty from the face of the earth. Stupidity is going to be here, too. Stupid people have kids just like smart people. Envy is here to stay, and so is ignorance, and evil, and disease, and criminality. There is no fix for the whole entire world, and in all likelihood there never will be. Neither is there any all-encompassing WE that brings everyone into the flock and makes them all the same, nor should there be.

So do those of us who are willing to take risks, who can achieve, who have access to education and intelligence and the courage to use them embrace the Burden of the Lowest Common Denominator? Do we crawl into a hovel with no water and no sewer and no electric and sit rocking back and forth, beating our breasts and tearing our hair because we feel bad that we dare to dream of better things when others can't or won't?

Do we choose degradation and mediocrity and filth and guilt? If we do, then nothing will ever get better for anyone, anywhere. **It is not the breast-beaters and the hair-tearers that make good things happen.**

If we do not dream, then no one will dream. If we do not soar, then no one will soar.

No one will have to feel bad about himself either, of course, because everything will be shit, and that's what some folks want. To share the pain, because they can't or won't pursue anything better.

Or do those of us who can dream, and reach to the stars, those of us who are willing to take the risks in order to achieve – do we go ahead, and do worthwhile things now because now is

when we have? Do we, regardless of our own race or creed, or anyone else's, step up and **do**, and in doing hope that we can inspire a few others who, without our example, might not have dared?

**I dare to dream. I dare to achieve.
I hope you will, too.**

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved