

This I Believe
December 6, 2009

I am very pleased to get the opportunity to participate in our This I Believe series.

In recent years, as I have listened to the NPR series of TIB on the radio, I have often reflected about how nice it would be to take the time to articulate my own beliefs (for I have rarely done this systematically, and never in writing). I have also long thought that it would be great for members of our CVUU group to take turns sharing their beliefs in order to make it easier for us to come to know & understand one another. Though away on sabbatical last year in Wisconsin, I was thrilled to learn through the grapevine that the congregation had initiated a ‘this I believe’ series as part of our regular worship services. As I will elaborate in a minute, for groups such as our own – premised on the absence of a common dogma or creed – building a community and working through difficult organizational issues depends (in part) on our mutual ability to recognize and celebrate our diversity, and to find ways to respect the standpoints of our fellow CVUU members.

Let me begin with three broad observations or caveats before I dive into the details.

First, I think it is rather ironic (even humorous) that you are only now learning what I believe – AFTER I have been elected to serve as President of the CVUU Board of Trustees for the next 3 years. I can only hope that you won’t be alarmed or surprised when you learn more about what beliefs I do, in fact, hold dear in my heart.

Second, though I missed the last presentation by Bruce Pendery, I have heard enough about that presentation (and have read the written version on the website) to convince me that I share several core beliefs that he articulated in his talk. These include the fact that a deep exploration of my religious or spiritual beliefs has not been a central part of my daily life or personal life journey (unlike some of you). In addition, I have no problem affirming the 7 principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association that we have printed on the back of our order of service each week. I believe deeply in the inherent worth and dignity of each and every person, in the acceptance of one another, in the inherent value of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, in the importance of justice, equity and compassion in human relations, in the goals of peace, liberty and justice for all, and in the importance of respecting the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. As with Bruce, I accept these core values as important to my life (and to the work of CVUU) without a lot of deep soul searching or philosophical introspection. While I might touch tangentially on a few of these below, I won’t spend much time elaborating on these important beliefs, but celebrate their importance in my life and my desire to remain affiliated with this religious community.

Third, I want to note that while I DO have some strong personal beliefs, I have very little need to assert that these are in any way essential truths that I know to be correct or a full accounting of our spiritual and moral world. I know that my beliefs are not the product of systematic meditation or study, nor are they likely to be set in stone. My comments today reflect an attempt to state publicly some of my stronger convictions or beliefs. At the end, I will reflect a bit on how and why I came to these particular points of view.

What I Believe

OK - to the heart of the matter.... ***This I Believe.***

- **I believe that all people see the world from a particular perspective**, but that their individual perspectives – however true – always reflect part of a more complicated reality. I like to think of the story of the blind men and the elephant. Each reaches out and feels a part of the beast, but none can understand the whole until they accept the limitations of their own perspective and open up to hear from the points of view of others. In my daily life, I am constantly exposed to situations of potential conflicts and misunderstandings – many of which have their roots in an inability of people to adopt a relativistic view of their own perspective. I find myself constantly searching for ways to see through the eyes of others (or to use a different metaphor, to stand in their shoes) in order to find ways to move beyond disagreements and problems and find areas of middle ground on which to build consensus and things of collective value. On a grander scale, I have been fortunate to live in many different places around the US and around the world, and am deeply aware of the tremendous diversity of personal and cultural beliefs, assumptions, worldviews, and norms that help people make sense of and manage their lives. These cross-cultural experiences have contributed to my belief that the world is a better place when more of us can step outside of our own perspective and let go of some of our natural desire to stay within the confines of our comfortable assumptions and beliefs. It is important to be humble, but the very experience of listening to those who touch a different part of the elephant has a transformative quality.
- **I believe that all people have an innate capacity for good.** I believe that our divergent perspectives explain why we often misjudge the intentions and motives of others. Of course, I also believe that people can be mean, selfish, cruel and insensitive. For the purposes of a meditation on spiritual or religious beliefs, it is important to point out that I do not believe this duality reflects any kind of competition between some ethereal sentient beings (like gods or devils) struggling for control over the human soul, but rather an inherent quality of the human condition. For the humanists among us, it is also important to emphasize that I believe that this duality is not merely “human nature” (in the sense that it might reflect a genetic or evolutionarily hard-wired foundation for behavior or morality), but rather reflects the nature of humans as both self-interested individuals and also as social beasts – particularly as members of families, groups, communities, cultures or societies. It is in our roles as members of these social groups that we learn about and observe the consequences of our actions for ourselves and for those around us, and develop a moral sense that extends outside of ourselves.
- **I believe that many conflicts and much harm in the world arises directly from a failure to see beyond our own perspectives and convictions.** There are two important implications of this belief. First, I have found that there is usually more common ground across all people that might be apparent in the midst of intense disagreements. Second, I have found that creating situations in which people can learn about or get to know their supposed adversaries is an essential component of finding that common ground. When you can see the good in the ‘other,’ it is much more likely that you will be able to relax your defenses and engage in true self-sacrifice to achieve the best outcomes. I believe that this is true in our interpersonal relationships, in our more formal work in groups (like CVUU), and in international relations.

- **I believe that there is a difference between good and evil, between right and wrong.** My belief in the seven principles of the UUA reflects this conviction. However, given what I have said above, these beliefs serve as my own personal ‘leaps of faith’ – things about which I have little doubt, but which I can accept as inherently partial and somewhat personal. Because they are among my core beliefs, I feel compelled to hold my own actions accountable to these beliefs, but I try to stop short of judging the worth or merit of others based on whether they measure up to my standards.
- **I believe in the importance of selflessness and service to society.** It is my personal experience that our life journeys are both individually and collectively made more meaningful and satisfying to the extent that we are able to step outside of our immediate petty interests and devote serious time to the collective good.
- **I believe the glass is half-full.** I have no particular reason to believe this, except that it seems to be true and it serves as a very useful basis for negotiating through life.
- **I believe we should walk our talk,** but that we should not be discouraged when we fail. It is in the sincere striving that we should judge ourselves and be judged.

What Don't I Believe

At the risk of offending some of your beliefs (for which I apologize in advance), I think a full and fair picture of ‘My Beliefs’ includes clarification about my take regarding some things that commonly are part of religious beliefs.

- **I don't believe in a God,** at least not in the existence of some sentient being or force that might provide meaning, purpose or structure to our human existence. I think we have full responsibility for our fate, and should be held accountable by our friends, family and peers for how we treat one another here on earth.
- **I don't believe in an afterlife.** Rather I believe that the reality of our life as humans here on earth is where it all goes down. This is not something that depresses me – rather I take daily delight in the goodness I see in individuals and in the rich potential of human society. I believe that there are plenty of reasons to seek truth, justice, love, and compassion because of their impacts on our conscious lives while we take our turn here on planet Earth. I can understand the view that belief in an afterlife might offer comfort to those of us dealing with death or suffering, and I am curious to hear people speak of experiences and sensations that provide evidence for realities beyond the reach of our normal sensory existence. But I haven't had any personal experiences or cause to think that a parallel reality exists.
- **I am not sure what the word ‘spiritual’ means.** I am easily moved to tears by the joys & pains of human experience, and I think I have experienced things that some might see as spiritual (such as whole body tingling sensations upon hearing a special song, or becoming overcome with emotion when hearing a story, watching a movie, or spending time in a beautiful natural place). Put simply, I marvel at the ‘spirit’ of life around me, but see these things as inherent aspects of the known & real world in which we live, and not as clues to an alternative, parallel, or unseen reality. .
- **I see the Bible (and other religious texts) as human creations that reflect the search by humans for truth and meaning.** As such, when the stories or lessons resonate for me, I can see their words as evidence that others have followed some of the same paths as I have. When they do not, I am curious to understand how they came to these ways of believing. I see none

as evidence of the existence of a divine being, unless by that we mean the wonder that is humanity.

- **I am very suspicious of organized religion.** Because of the beliefs listed above, I cannot accept the value of adopting a single creed or belief system unless it is done so with humility and is fully accepting of alternative points of view. I am intrigued by organized religion (as a sociological phenomenon) and have great respect for religious leaders & people who search for truth and meaning in the fellowship of others. But I have a fundamental distrust of anyone who really believes that their way of understanding and believing is the only true path.

From Whence Came These Beliefs?

To understand my beliefs, it is perhaps helpful to know several facts about who I am and from where I have come.

I was not raised in any type of organized religion. I was baptized in an Episcopal church in Massachusetts (since this is the denomination my parents attended in high school and got married in). The importance of this event is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that I had to ask my Dad this weekend whether it was an Episcopal or Presbyterian church. Needless to say, I was baptized more out of tradition/habit and for the benefit of my grandparents than out of a deep conviction on the part of my parents that this would provide me with entry into a particular religious community. I like to think it hedges my bets if & when I get to some pearly gate. I have a godmother, with whom I stay in touch, but from whom I have received no spiritual or religious guidance. This does not bother me (or her). My parents moved to Salt Lake City in the 60s when I was only 6 years old, and during my formative years the only church we ever attended was the First Unitarian Church, which we attended mostly for social reasons (including the fact that the Wasatch Mountain Hiking Club met there at the end of services to head off on group hikes that we often participated in).

While I didn't appreciate it at the time, perhaps the closest I can to a systematic 'religious' upbringing relates to the nearly mandatory nature of family trips to what my father called the "Church of the Wasatch" on Sundays throughout my childhood. Our family skied almost every week in the winter, went hiking or camping most other weekends somewhere around the state, and – while I remember resenting or resisting this during my slightly rebellious teenage years – I recognized that we had little choice in the matter. In retrospect, those were some of the most valuable times I spent in my youth. My family regularly talked, ate together, paid attention to what each other was doing, and prioritized time together. I am convinced that my parents & family experiences were a major source of my beliefs and moral sense. I learned to love and appreciate the out-of-doors and to respect the place of humans in a much larger interdependent web of life. I learned much of what I know about how to treat others by seeing how seriously my parents treated the importance of telling the truth, taking responsibility for one's actions, and thinking of others. I learned that stealing is wrong because it hurts others (and is only possible if you ignore the faces of those you might harm).

My core beliefs were also shaped by the two years I spent at an unusual college – Deep Springs College – a small (24 students), all-male, liberal arts 2-year college located in a high Great Basin

valley at the California-Nevada border. Based on a working cattle ranch, Deep Springs brings together strong minded & passionate youth where we juggled intensive academic work, ran the ranch, and engaged in complete self-governance (the students were the legal owners of the college and ran the admissions, hiring, and self-assessment processes). L.L. Nunn, the founder of Deep Springs, believed that true understanding & moral character comes from the combination of (1) reading great books, (2) experiencing physical or manual labor, and (3) relying entirely for your material and social needs on members of a small insular community. I believe these things to be true. Mr. Nunn introduced me to the ideas of selflessness and service to society (mentioned above) and the experiences of living in this unique social & academic setting served to hammer home some of the things that I now see as my own personal truths.

As most of you know, I am also a sociologist at Utah State University, and my beliefs about life, humanity, individuals & society, and the role of values & norms in governing human behavior have both shaped and been shaped by my 25 years of studies of human societies (both here in the US and abroad). In my professional life, I've come to understand some of the deep complexities, contradictions, and diversity of social life. I know – both emotionally, instinctively, and intellectually – that there are always many layers of meaning to social interactions and cultural life, and that these layers reflect both different material bases (e.g., one's position in society) as well as one's beliefs and values. Awareness of these realities enables me to both understand and accept the clash of values, perspectives, and beliefs that I encounter on a daily basis.

A final word. While the act of writing down some of the things that I believe has been – at least for me – a valuable exercise, I am painfully aware of the things that I do not yet understand, and already notice holes in my beliefs that give me pause. I appreciate the chance to share some of my beliefs with you today and welcome your questions or reactions.