

This I Believe

Thank you for the challenge of adding to the heartfelt and articulate insights of those who have already shared their beliefs in this forum.

I believe it matters what we believe. But I also believe that the substantive “processes” by which we develop and live our beliefs, how and why we come to believe some things and not others, are every bit as significant as—if not more significant than—“what” we specifically believe in.

Permit me to draw from a few scholars of theology/faith development/moral psychology to explain why I think that the process of believing is as important as the content of our beliefs. As soon as I run through my notions of how that process works, I’ll get to the specifics of today’s assignment, and, for whatever value it serves, explore what I believe.

The development of beliefs, of faith, of certainty, is very similar to the process of moral development for each of us. It occurs on a fairly predictable path, with fairly predictable milestones.

When we are children (chronologically or developmentally) we are most likely to believe we are powerless. We tend to act out of fear that some authority figure has total control over us, that we will be rewarded or punished according to that authority figure’s whims or according to a set of rules we have had nothing to do with creating. Blind obedience to authority is the norm. Like most people at this stage of moral and faith development, I accepted the notion of an omniscient, omnipresent, dogmatic, and ornery god...a fundamental, Old Testament judgmental old man. (In my case, it was a natural response to living with an omniscient, omnipresent, ornery, judgmental, and dogmatic father.) Being faithful, acting morally, or doing the right thing were matters of pleasing the old man. Survival had little if anything to do with conscience.

Later, after years of attending the Episcopal church, being active in youth groups, choir, and serving as an acolyte, I took the logical step of “going along to get along.” I conformed to my community’s expectations rather than just to the authority figure’s expectations. The community helped me define what was right and wrong, good and bad, worth believing in and not believing in. The “stuff” that was right/good/worth believing in tended to be mainstream Christian thinking. I was officially “confirmed,” because I had learned and agreed with the community standards. That didn’t mean I had taken ownership of them, but just that I agreed with them. In other words, there was no real moral/theological autonomy involved in that middle stage of “working and playing well with others.” Indeed, if the church community had changed some of its standards for one reason or another, I’m sure I would have changed mine, as well, because at that stage I was very much a moral/theological relativist.

Fast forward through the college years and into adulthood. I, like so many others, decided that religion in general, and organized religion specifically, was irrelevant. This

was the turbulent 60s, which might help explain some of my indifference. However, even today many of our youth question the value of the religion and faith enterprise. It is only natural to rebel against the authoritarian controls of our childhood, and then to further question the adolescent wisdom of going along with the crowd. It wasn't necessary to exchange institutionalized theological beliefs with any other particular kinds of beliefs, because as young adults we tend to have other challenges to cope with: completing our academic and professional training programs; getting meaningful employment and taking care of basic needs such as food, shelter, and entertainment; finding a life partner who will put up with us; repopulating the species; aligning ourselves socially and politically, etc.

Well, a funny thing tends to happen while committing adulthood. When we cope with all these challenges, and find ourselves becoming gainfully employed citizens and members of our community, raising a family, and thinking about the future, something starts to shift in our cosmology. At some point we start asking "Why am I spinning all these wheels?" or "What difference does it make?" or "What's it all about?" We wonder what to make of our autonomy, what positive or negative legacy we are leaving behind. We know it's not all about us, that there's something bigger and more important than our personal quests, achievements, and frustrations.

This, as they say, is a teachable moment. At this phase of life we are likely to begin a transition into commitment—theological and moral. Some of us return to the faith of our fathers, but rather than having that faith jammed down our throats, we openly and fully commit to it, taking ownership of it on our own terms. Others of us reach around and seek a new faith community that closely aligns to our newly articulated values. But, by and large, we become committed to a world view that makes sense to us, that we freely choose. That world view tends not to be selfish. It encompasses others, in a social contract that says "I care for something other than myself." In short, we move toward commitment for commitment's sake.

I believe I've gone through this process, and am now, as a senior citizen, committed.

Permit me to share what I now believe:

I believe in being good for nothing.

I believe in obedience to the unenforceable.

I believe in agnosticism, and not in theistic monism or dualism, or atheism, or paganism, or pantheism, or some other –ism. I don't believe anyone in authority is keeping score, meticulously tracking all our deeds and misdeeds in some cosmic and eternal grade book. I don't believe there is some cynical cosmic system in which the final mark determines our passing on to a traditional heaven or hell. (If that were the case, Google may very well be God.)

I believe we are accountable to posterity and not to a supreme scorekeeper for our deeds and misdeeds, our commissions and omissions.

I believe it's natural for an agnostic to try to be moral and ethical. An agnostic believes it is impossible to know whether or not God exists, and doubts that a particular question has a single correct answer or that a complete understanding of something can be attained.

Indeed, I believe that an agnostic, with ultimate uncertainty about an afterlife, may very well be operating on a more defensible level of morality than one who is blessed with cock-sure certainty about all the big issues. The agnostic by definition has to remain open to evidence and arguments; the agnostic does not operate from a closed mind or dogmatic belief system. This means, of course, that the agnostic has a tougher job, day in and day out, than one who has a ready explanation for every question. And it also means the agnostic has to remain open to the possibility that someone who does proclaim ultimate certainty might actually be right! (In other words, the agnostic, of all faith orientations, is morally obligated to be extremely tolerant of everyone else's points of view.)

I believe in "owes" and "oughts." Absent a supreme scorekeeper, and, indeed, absent a belief in an afterlife, I believe we owe it to one another, to our progeny, to the universe, to be good and do well in the here and now. Doing so is a moral obligation, to be sought for its own sake. This is what I mean when I say I believe in being good for nothing.

I believe in stewardship for stewardship's sake. That is, I believe stewardship is its own reward. We do not own this planet, this country, this community, this church—but we are obligated to be stewards of each and every one of them during the brief time we are leaseholders. We are morally obligated to leave each and every one of our campsites better than we found them, to generously commit our time, talents, and treasures whenever and however we can. We shouldn't be motivated to do this because we think we'll be rewarded for doing so or punished for not doing so. Rather, we leave our campsites better than we found them because that is what stewards do, with joy in their hearts.

I believe in caring for, and caring about. We care for those near and dear to us, those with whom we share DNA, time, intimate space, hope and despair. But, as social liberals and Unitarian Universalists, we also care about those we have never met, people at a distance who are hurting and people yet unborn who are going to inherit this planet. We care about them and we try to relieve their suffering because we have the capacity for empathy. Empathy is a curse we accept as part of our liberal system of morality.

I believe in responsible liberalism—a very old-fashioned values-based notion. I believe it is inappropriate to proclaim Unitarian Universalism as a faith community that is centered on freedom from—freedom from external controls, freedom from dogmatic certainty, freedom from lock-step authoritarianism, freedom from

commitment and obligation. “Freedom from” may be a good starting point, and it certainly brings curious visitors and committed members to UU. But I believe it has to be coupled with freedom for—the positive notion of using freedom responsibly, as conscientious stewards, for the betterment of one another, for the disenfranchised, for the broader community. This is a values-based notion, despite the argument of many who say liberals are pretty confused about and not committed to any particular values. I believe we are duly motivated by very specific values...the values of freedom and independence coupled with values such as diligence and hard work, honesty, a belief in progress, a sense of accomplishment, family security, a world at peace, a world of beauty, inner harmony, and wisdom—among others from which we pick and choose in our daily living. These are positive values; they motivate us; they serve as a moral compass and a moral gyroscope. They transcend the simple value of “freedom from.”

I believe this building is a sacred place. It is a very special environment for the gathering of souls; for openly sharing joys and concerns, food and wine; for deep thinking; for quiet reflection; for shared music; for faith exploration; for outreach to the wider community; for demonstrating ecological stewardship; for watching—and helping—our children grow into mature, responsible adults. (Because I believe this is a sacred place, I admit to being uncomfortable when it seems to be used as an indoor gym or arena or left in a state of disarray—but then, I’m a 65-year-old curmudgeon who wonders how we can concern ourselves with saving the planet when we don’t always take care of our own special little place.)

My bottom line: I believe I’m a passive aggressive secular humanist. I love humanity, and despite all sorts of evidence that would warrant cynicism and pessimism, I am optimistic about this life, this religious community, this world, and the future. (“I love humanity; it’s people I’m worried about.”) I believe I—like many others—get cynical and pessimistic when I spend too much time reading, listening to, and watching the news—despite my having spent most of my professional life in journalism and media ethics. I sometimes get skeptical about people in public service and business who appear to put themselves and their interests ahead of the public interest. I get depressed when I see the selfless efforts of others being met with indifference or unjustified criticism. I am disappointed when I see people talking the talk without walking the walk, or being unwilling to make minimal effort, let alone the extra effort, or to use their time, talents and/or treasures as selflessly as it would appear they could be used. Those behaviors cause me to scowl and grumble more than is appropriate or effective.

Meanwhile, I believe I’m my own most severe critic. Because I have such high expectations of others, I certainly hold myself to almost impossible standards. You don’t have to point out all my shortcomings; I do a more than adequate job of flailing myself.

I believe I’ve said enough, and that you don’t have to believe anything I’ve just said.

Therefore, I believe I will sit down now.