

This I Believe

Defining my beliefs, even to myself, is no trivial task. It used to be a natural thing for me to do, but not anymore. This might sound strange, but there are times when I look in the mirror, consider the image staring back at me, and think, "This is too weird to even be real. My existence, my self-awareness, my thought... it's all too strange to be real." So when I'm struggling just to make sense of my own reality, you can imagine how difficult the task of defining my beliefs becomes.

When I try and wrap my mind around my own beliefs about the world, the universe, my place in it, and its meaning, at every turn I find there's just not enough mind in my head. I can't stretch it far enough. I have a pretty lively imagination, but there are places that it just can't go.

As an example, our eyes only perceive a small portion of the entire electromagnetic spectrum. There's all this radiation of different wavelengths moving through the air, but we only see a small part of it in the form of visible light. If we were capable of seeing more of the spectrum, what would those new colors look like? I've nearly driven myself mad on several occasions trying to imagine a new color. I just can't do it... But what is color anyway. I mean, can I really say that certain colors exist? They're just my brain's way of interpreting different wavelengths of light: an internal rendering of the outside world. And the questions go on and on. It seems that every question I come up with follows a similar trail of infinite depth.

Making absolute statements of belief used to be second nature to me. From the time I was old enough to listen I was told exactly what it is that I believe. For two years I walked the streets of Poland as a missionary, telling people what I believed and what they ought to believe. That unwavering (and I might add, haughty) confidence was empowering in a lot of ways. I held my lamp up high... and I held my doubts at bay. But piling up my questions and doubts on the shelf couldn't go on forever. Eventually the shelf collapsed and I came face to face with myself, and all the baggage of beliefs I carried. For the first time I began critically examining my world view, without having already assumed the conclusions I must come to. Needless to say, my world view didn't make the cut, otherwise I wouldn't be here. It was a painful process. I felt betrayed. I felt afraid... But I also found a new sense of freedom. I found a world even richer than my supernatural theology had imagined... a world of unending complexity and beauty.

And so I hesitate now to make unequivocal statements of belief. I no longer feel like my life is defined by my beliefs, but rather by my experiences and my desires. So I think the best I can do is to simply share a few experiences that hold special meaning to me. These aren't especially pivotal experiences, but are sort of representative of the many moments that I've gleaned special meaning from.

The first story is about the death of a duckling. When I was a small boy, some friends and I were playing at Willer Farm (which is something like the American West Heritage Center). We were throwing rocks in the river, as boys do, when a family of ducks and ducklings came by. My friends redirected their aim towards the ducks, and I felt compelled to do the same. My first throw was much better aimed than I had hoped, and the rock hit one of the ducklings. We ran off as quickly as we could, but were spotted by a woman nearby, who told one of the workers. It

wasn't long before we were approached by an elderly man. I saw with horror that he held the limp form of a duckling in the palm of his hand. I was overwhelmed with regret, and that experience left a lasting impression on me. I learned that all life is precious.

The next story takes place in Poland. During our 2-year stay there, the other missionaries and I were expected to take a break from the normal rigors of proselyting each week and spend some time doing genuine community service. During my first year, not long before Christmas, we began visiting a small, poorly-funded care center for mentally handicapped children. The place was run-down, messy, and smelled. Initially it was very difficult for me to reach across the barriers of culture, language, and social condition. When I finally did, it was like a new place opened up inside of me. We played games, we sang songs, we danced. That holiday season in Poland, far from my family and the consumerism of Christmases past, I experienced another lesson: My family spans the entire globe, and lives high and low.

After returning from Poland and finishing up another semester of school, I found myself feeling lost and uncertain about my direction in life. The culture shock of returning to the United States was mostly worn off, but something still felt wrong, or superficial about my life. I was under a lot of stress with approaching exams. I was considering a 180 degree change in majors. And deep in the back of my mind I was beginning to feel doubts about the spiritual foundations of my entire life... doubts that I wasn't even ready to admit existed. On a December night (after abandoning a student dance) I walked to a large field and lay down on the chill grass. The sky was perfectly clear, and I found myself entranced by the stars and the vast space before me. Something about considering the scale of the universe, or the mystery that lay behind it, brought me a deep sense of peace, even if I'm not exactly sure why. The lesson: There's peace in perspective.

This reminds me of something the author and scientist Carl Sagan wrote. In 1990 the Voyager spacecraft shot a photo of the earth from its vantage point at the edge of the solar system. In the photo, earth shows up as a pinpoint-sized dot. Speaking of the image, Sagan wrote:

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

That peace helped me take steps forward, even when the path lead to something unknown. Eventually, as I've already described, I would take an even larger step into the unknown, by leaving behind the absolute "known" of my religious heritage. But, like I said, I was surprised to find a world of even more richness, complexity, and beauty. When I stopped assuming that I already had the answers for everything around me, when I no longer explained everything as the act or will of a supernatural being, I discovered that the world was full of exciting surprises. The diversity and complexity of life, the vastness of the cosmos, the discoveries of science, the miracle of human consciousness and creativity, art and music... all these gained new meaning for me. I found beauty in the mystery.

Life continues to be a journey into the unknown, and I'm fine with that. I'm trying to live in the present, savor the moment, and appreciate the experiences that define life's path... And perhaps the most splendid part of it all is that we all share that path together. Thank you.