

Can Thinkers Be Believers? Can Belief and Critical Thinking Coexist?

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Blurb: Bob will explore the meaning of *belief*, its value and its possible dangers. Does *belief* prevent spiritual growth? *Belief* is defined as the state of mind in which a person thinks something to be the case, with or without there being empirical evidence to prove that something is the case with factual certainty. Should we embrace our *beliefs* or be wary of them?

Quotations for frontispiece:

Throughout the long period of religious doubt, I had been rendered very unhappy by the gradual loss of belief, but when the process was completed, I found to my surprise that I was quite glad to be done with the whole subject.

-Bertrand Russell, British philosopher, mathematician, author, Nobel laureate (1872-1970)

Nothing is so firmly believed as what is least known.

-Michel de Montaigne, essayist (1533-1592)

Inquiry is fatal to certainty.

-Will Durant, American writer and philosopher (1885-1981)

[People] become civilized, not in proportion to their willingness to believe, but in proportion to their readiness to doubt.

-H.L. Mencken, American writer, editor, and critic (1880-1956)

Great Doubt: great awakening.

Little Doubt: little awakening.

No Doubt: no awakening.

-Zen Saying

Song: "I Believe"

CAN THINKERS BE BELIEVERS?

These are beautiful thoughts. Poetic. Yes, "Somewhere in the darkest night a candle glows..."

But... "Someone in the great somewhere hears every word" ??

Today I want to share thoughts on *belief* and *believing*. And we will look at the flipside of belief, and that is *doubt*.

This is not an intellectual exercise in the proper use of words.

I want to suggest that we think deeply about the concepts of *belief* and *believing*.

Why? I'm going to discuss three main reasons --

- In doing so we may avoid pitfalls for personal growth and learning.
- We may discover how better to understand our world.
- And we can better bring about harmony in the place of divisiveness.

Those claims may sound extravagant, but stick with me.

In advance promotion of this talk I provided the definition of *belief*: *Belief* is “the state of mind in which a person thinks something to be the case, with or without there being empirical evidence to prove that something is the case with factual certainty.”

In other words, one may hold something to be a belief, but just because it is their belief, it may or may not be factual, or true.

There are two opposing effects to believing – beliefs can be helpful and good, but beliefs also can be harmful to ourselves and others.

First, how are beliefs good?

Beliefs can be good if one knows why one believes and if one understand the limits of belief.

Since a belief may or may not be true and factual, one needs to be prepared for discovering that their belief may not be true or factual.

Also, belief can have good effects because it can bring people together as a community. In Louis de Bernieres wonderful book, *Birds Without Wings*, he immerses us in a traditional village in Turkey that is divided between Christians and Muslims.

Everyone in the village is a believer in their own religion.

Everyone’s respective belief defines their manner of living, their expectations, their family life.

Their beliefs cement relations on each side of the community.

Anyone who strays from their own belief betrays his or her side of the community.

While each person in the village is devoted to his or her own belief, they refrain from claiming that their own way is the right way.

In fact, it seems that they don’t know why they hold their particular beliefs -- Christian or Muslim -- other than that is what they inherited from their predecessors.

Believing defines their community and holds it together.

Another good effect of belief is that it can be comforting.

My mother believed deeply that when she died she would be actually reunited with my father in heaven. This gave her great comfort.

But her belief did have a down side to it: she was anguished that her two sons had taken another path and might not be there with her in heaven.

So how are beliefs potentially harmful?

Believing may be harmful, when one believes just for the sake of believing in something. Some believe because it simplifies life by avoiding thinking deeply.

A guy I worked for in industry told me that he had converted from being irreligious to Roman Catholicism.

He was enthused about his new belief to the point that he was teaching catechism classes and attending mass regularly.

I was very curious about his “conversion,” but it wasn’t something to talk about in the office.

Finally, when we were together on a business trip, I asked him at breakfast what was behind his decision.

I will never forget his simple answer: “You have to believe in something.”

He explained that his church told him what to believe and he liked that. He no longer had to wonder about things – he had the answers to all his questions.

There are other ways that believing can be harmful.

Believing can be harmful when it imprisons our minds and prevents us from learning and discovery.

All advances in learning have been achieved by people who were willing to let go of fixed ideas. [REPEAT]

In earlier times everyone believed that the Earth was flat and that the sun circled the Earth. We remember Galileo today because he was willing to let go of the fixed belief that the Earth was the center of the universe.

He was able to discover evidence that the Earth revolved around the sun like the other planets. He was open to letting go of his earlier belief. His courage in rejecting the orthodox belief was duly punished – but his courage opened the way for others to take our knowledge of the world to new levels.

In every scientific field -- medicine, chemistry, physics, geology, etc. -- it is the willingness to set aside the beliefs that have been passed down that enables the advancement of knowledge.

Every advancement, every invention, was by someone who did not accept the common belief.

Even in the area of religion and morality, there is room to question the handed down beliefs.

H.L. Menken, framed it this way:

All human progress, even in morals, has been the work of [people] who have doubted the current moral values, not of [those] who have whooped them up and tried to enforce them. The truly civilized [person] is always skeptical and tolerant. His culture is based on "I am not too sure."

Here at UUFRR we remember the Unitarian Universalist Principle: we “covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

Another way that believing can be harmful is that it is divisive.

When a person says, “I believe ...” they often imply that if someone believes otherwise, or does not accept that belief, that person is wrong.

Rather than search for truth, rather than look at all sides of a question, people grab a belief and hold it tightly.

In day-to-day matters, a person who believes that there should be restrictions on who can buy and carry weapons becomes an enemy to those who believe there should be no restrictions.

In such cases we turn an opinion, or a preference into a belief.

A person who believes that abortion should be banned becomes an enemy to one who believes that it should be permitted. Again, once a preference, or an opinion, becomes a belief we set up walls of division. *Opinions* are safer – we all have opinions, and opinions are subject to change. *Belief* implies a more rigid stance.

In our current raging arguments within American society about so-called religious freedom, “religious freedom” means to many that they should have the right to discriminate against those whose beliefs differ.

Stating one’s belief often stops the conversation.

Once a person states their belief, people who hold a different point of view see no point in further discussion.

They perceive a believer as a person who is not open to other ideas.

There are many other harmful effects of belief. Holding a belief stops the learning process.

Holding a belief stops growth.

Belief stops innovation, because innovation itself is literally a contrary recognition that there is another way, or a better way.

Polls in America tell us decisively that a politician who does not profess a belief in God could never be elected president.

An otherwise qualified agnostic or atheistic or even “non-professing” man or woman would have to cross over to the *believers* side to be elected, regardless of her or his other qualifications.

Our society could be the worse off for such exalting of belief.

How is it that so many of us get stuck in our beliefs?

We enter the world with no belief.

In our first learning we come to believe that if we cry we will be fed.

As we mature the world becomes more complex and we want to understand it.

We acquire our understanding of the world in two ways: by experience (the stove is hot and it burns), and by instruction (Santa Clause will bring you toys and candy if you are obedient.)

Early on, children begin to be taught about what to believe.

In many cases this early instruction later substitutes God for Santa.

We can ask God for favors.

Like Santa, God rewards correct behavior and punishes wrong behavior.

Through instruction we are given an explanation for the world – right or wrong.

(Johnny and Jimmy leaving Sunday School class:

Johnny: “Do believe all that stuff about the Devil?”

Jimmy: “No, that’s just like the Santa Clause story – it’s really your dad.”)

Now what are the alternatives to these negative aspects of belief?

The remedy lies in what we think and say about *belief*.

We all hold our own views, developed over time, about our world – religion, science, human relations, sports, business,

Those views are opinions.

Once we state our *opinion* as a *belief*, or think of it as a belief, that is when the negative effects of belief occur.

Last Sunday Lee Anne Washington spoke here and in her talk she provided a good example of what I am trying to say.

Lee Anne said, “I am a theistic person.”

She did NOT say, “I believe in God.”

She didn’t draw a line between her and those who might not believe in God.

She didn’t close the door on others.

She left herself open to discussion: “I am a theistic person.”

Another helpful approach is to remember that if we hold a belief, we have chosen to hold that belief. Having chosen to hold a belief, we can choose to let it go. One's choice of belief may have consequences and needs to be approached thoughtfully. In the world of religion, if one is drawn to a particular belief, it can avoid some of the negative possibilities if one "professes" that belief. For example, "he professes to believe in the power of Shiva."

The world of science gives us the perfect example of alternatives to *belief*. What were thought to be immutable laws of physics, laws of the universe, have been found again and again to have been only a first approximation. Even the scientific understandings about space, time, and gravity, have radically changed. They were *true*, but their truth has been undermined by new discoveries, theories, and testing. There are new discoveries in particle physics that were long ago predicted through mathematics, and only after many years did the technical means exist to test those predictions. Yet, no serious scientist will say, "I believe this." The scientist will say, the mathematics say this, and our experiments prove this to be true, so far.

Of course, the words, *belief and believing*, do have benign everyday uses. "I believe in her." "I believe it's going to rain." "I believe in love."

There can be great advantages to skepticism. Some of the quotations in the bulletin today are right on:

- "Nothing is so firmly believed as what is least known."
- "Inquiry is fatal to certainty."
- "People become civilized, not in proportion to their willingness to believe, but in proportion to their readiness to doubt."

But if we can see the pitfalls of holding on to a chosen belief we can be open to new and productive ideas, we can be open to the world, and we can avoid contributing to divisiveness.