

Problems With Belief

NORA CHURCH PROGRAM

April 3, 2016

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In a used book store I found a copy of the book by Gary Zukov called *The Seat of the Soul*. I like used book stores because I never know what I am going to find there. There is a sense that as I need them the universe presents me with interesting books. So it was with *The Seat of the Soul*. It offered an approach to understanding the soul that I had never before heard about, and the more I read the more I liked it.

I started thinking about this book as my personal bible, and started talking about *this is what I believe*. I found myself going back to the book repeatedly to re-read things I didn't quite remember. Over time it has become dog-eared and is falling apart, filled with underlined and highlighted text.

Well, a funny thing happened as I began to share these ideas with others. Some people were critical of my new found belief. I noticed that I became defensive and felt attacked. I decided that it was NOT the feeling I wanted to have with relation to these pretty powerful new ideas.

For some reason, I made a choice – to stop talking about these ideas as beliefs. So I began a new narrative, which went something like this:

“I have been reading this book by Gary Zukov that I’m really liking. It has a completely different explanation for the soul than I ever learned in Catholic school as a kid. It offers some clearly stated ideas about how to manage my own life, and it is not dogmatic about its message. I don’t know whether what it says is true or not, but I do know that it has given me a new way of looking at things that has been very helpful and it is easy for me to wrap my arms around....”

With that I would talk about how the new narrative worked better for me, and how it has given me a new way to think about the meaning of life. If others didn’t like what it had to say, it wasn’t up to me to try to convince them otherwise. In fact, I soon came to realize that my task in life is to discover what I need to know in order to understand my life and create a philosophy to live by. It is not my task to convert

others to my beliefs.

So, when I stumbled upon an essay by Jim Walker called, *The Problems With Beliefs*, I understood immediately how the simple approach I took many years ago disengaged my conversation about the *The Seat of the Soul* from something I had to defend as a belief.

I presented these ideas on belief at my church, Dakota Unitarian Universal Church in Burnsville on October 11, 2015, after grappling with them for eight to ten months. The more I have talked about this the more things keep opening up for me. For example, I am learning some helpful distinctions about how to talk about this topic.

There is an essential distinction between the *content* of beliefs and the *structure* of beliefs.

Our cherished beliefs are sacred cows. When we hear something that is new or different, our first impulse is to get defensive.

We all have beliefs. In my limited experience, most people I talk with about beliefs - structure not content - have not spent much if any time thinking about them.

While we, as Unitarians, are not grounded in religious dogma, we still may have deeply held convictions that we cherish in much the same way others do with dogma.

We build beliefs over time, and when they reach a critical point we park them in a container, and whenever that topic comes up we simply open up the container and present our prepared remarks.

Let's begin with the The Free on-line dictionary definition of belief:

The mental act, condition, or **habit** of placing trust or confidence in a person or thing; faith.

Mental acceptance or conviction in the truth or actuality of something.

Something believed or accepted as true; especially, a particular tenet, or a body of tenets, accepted by a group of people.

I highlight the word, **habit**, because I have tended to NOT think of my beliefs as habits, yet recognizing this has helped me become more aware of what I continue to hold onto as beliefs.

As children we are taught the beliefs of our parents and the community we are born into. My Catholic upbringing was much like most protestant upbringing - as children we were placed in the situation of needing to publicly accept the religious beliefs we had been taught. With such an anchor, it is considerably more difficult to form our own beliefs as adults. I now consider this to be a huge disservice to children.

Belief is a mental act, a thinking process in the brain that requires two things: a *feeling and a logical statement* – a thought and a conscious

feeling of truth. (The same process also provides the basis for dis-belief – a thought and a conscious feeling of untruth. Quite interestingly, something I read recently is that some scientists have discovered that belief and dis-belief actually reside in separate areas of the brain.)

I've always liked this saying – “It's not what you don't know that gets you in trouble. It's what you know for certain that just ain't so that really puts a hurt on you.” I am unable to find an attribution for this quote, but just love it. *What we know for certain that just ain't so...*

This connects closely to the idea of ‘what we don't know that we don't know.’ The things we know for certain are our beliefs.

The degree of feeling with which one accepts the validity of personal beliefs can vary from mild acceptance to absolute certainty. Certitude is a clue for our beliefs.

What we don't know we don't know is an interesting phenomenon that raises the question, how can we ever have access to what we don't know we don't know? It is probably better to re-phrase this to ‘*what I am unaware of that I don't know.*’ A first step is to recognize that there does exist such a category called, ‘what I don't know I don't know.’

Awareness, in and of itself opens up possibility.

When we say, “I didn’t know that!” we are simply saying we weren’t aware of it. It also helps us create the possibility for new ideas.

I have come to consider that one of our biggest problems with our language is how easy it is to be sloppy about what we are actually saying. We use words like faith, hope, belief, hate and love without considering what we actually mean by those words. For example, When courts of law listen to evidence presented in a formally structured setting they write a *legal opinion*. Yet, when most of us engage in conversation, we usually are stating our personal opinions, which often have nowhere near the same level of consideration as the opinion given by a court of law. We even defend our opinions by saying, “my opinions are as good as yours.” It saves us the need to actually consider someone else’s point of view.

The most difficult part of learning is having enough integrity to make a good examination to see if I am guilty of not considering other points of view. Becoming aware of *packaged beliefs* is the first step in altering beliefs. Please note – having certitude about some things doesn’t mean that we need to stop being advised by the certitude, only that we

entertain the possibility that we could be wrong. For example:

In the courthouse of a small rural town they were impaneling a jury, a process known as *voir dire*, in which potential jurors are questioned to decide if they are well suited to sit on a jury and decide a case. As a matronly lady was called forward, she paused and said – *“Before we even begin there is something I must say. I am completely opposed to the death penalty. I have spent a lot of time considering this position, and I could never find it within myself to vote in favor of that, so you should know this before we even begin.”* One of the attorneys responded, *“Maam, this is a civil matter, so capital punishment is not something that would even be considered. This case involves a woman who is suing her husband for damages in replevin because they had put aside \$15,000 in a separate account to remodel their kitchen, and the husband took those funds without her consent and bought a fishing boat.”*

“Oh!” the woman said. *“Thank you. I didn’t know that distinction before.”* She paused briefly, then as she continued forward said, *“You know, I could be wrong about capital punishment!”*

There is a fascinating article on *Belief* from the Stanford Encyclopedia

of Philosophy. Most of it is quite esoteric, and deals with minute discriminations that sometimes occur to me like picking fly poop out of the pepper. Once I heard it said that all of the most important decisions in life are made with insufficient information. That was obviously written before the Internet. Getting information from the internet is like getting a glass of water from Niagara Falls.

However, I found some of the philosophical ideas helpful.

Beliefs are entities that are in some sense contained in the mind. So there is a slippery distinction between belief as just a fact or proposition represented, OR, a particular stored token of that fact or proposition. Memory is a fascinating consideration of belief.

It is also common to suppose that beliefs play a causal role in the production of behavior.

I have included the link to this article in the Bibliography I have attached

to my transcript. Those who enjoy academic pursuits may like this.

A quote from Marilyn Ferguson's book, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, has stayed with me for years: "*Our identities are constituted more truly by our beliefs than by our bodies.*"

That quote captures me! Of course, there are many people, especially younger people, who are oblivious to their beliefs, and focus more intently on their bodies. But – what she said is not that we are more *aware* of our beliefs than we are of our bodies – only that our beliefs constitute a larger part of our *identity* than do our bodies.

When we look into our mirror we do not see our beliefs.

And if that *is* true it presents a challenge, because we probably *are* more *aware* of our bodies than we are of our beliefs. In fact, this insidious way in which beliefs come to inhabit us is reason for alarm.

In a personal development course I was in many years ago, they used a metaphor: "A fish has no distinction for water, because it is the reality they swim in." I've found that to have application to many things that happen in my life, and it particularly fits for looking at how easily we

can adapt ideas or concepts into beliefs without ever being aware of what we are doing. We live in a sea of beliefs and often times do not distinguish what our beliefs are.

There are interesting theories about how humans came to have beliefs, but that is a discussion for another time. However, one fact worth noting is that beliefs probably evolved *after* humankind acquired language, which sets us apart from the animal world. Beliefs proliferated around inanimate objects, spirits, gods, angels, ghosts, alien UFO's, and exploded under the advent of religious beliefs and structures of faith. Beliefs are the vehicle through which we have learned to install understanding and meaning into an incomprehensible world.

Jim Walker's essay, *The Problems with Beliefs* had a profound influence on me, probably because he put forth the notion that beliefs, in and of themselves, serve no critical purpose, and that is exactly what I learned directly when I stopped thinking about *The Seat of the Soul* as my personal bible, and talking about it as my belief.

He makes an interesting distinction described as; *Beliefs have no*

bilateral symmetry requirement.

This is a somewhat esoteric term has taken me numerous readings to begin to comprehend. What I will share now is somewhat cursory, but I think it is useful information.

Examples of Belief Has No Bilateral Symmetry.

Although one can have a belief in acquiring knowledge, one can acquire knowledge without having any beliefs.

Although we can accept our own beliefs, not all things we accept require beliefs.

Although we may believe in the actions we perform, we can take action without having any belief.

Although we may believe in what we know, knowledge and data have no requirement for belief.

Beliefs have no bilateral symmetry.

Walker also makes the point that *the path of belief progresses toward intransigence.* Interesting, eh!

This point is intended to show that beliefs have a path they follow in

becoming established, and that as ideas move along this path they tend to become more entrenched, which leads to default settings that take us to the same place, and when we arrive there we do not have to pause to consider what that belief is, we simply open the file and start reciting the contents. When this happens it can be said that we have *owned* the belief. Or, perhaps more accurately, the belief has owned us.

The path of belief progresses toward intransigence.

The path of belief requires no agreement with knowledge or nature, even though it may coincide with it. It operates without reminding us what is happening. No bell goes off when we start reciting our litanies.

Even scientists and philosophers, perhaps the most rational of thinkers, tend to own beliefs about their knowledge. Indeed, even great thinkers can become dogmatic about their beliefs.

Maxwell Planck observed, “*A scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up without this intransigent belief.*”

Some people make the argument that belief is essential to functioning.

Jim Walker rejects this argument, and I've come to accept his line of reasoning. (*Note the substitute language I've used in place of belief.*)

If you think knowledge requires belief somewhere between strong belief and no belief, then tell me, just what degree of belief do you think is necessary for the proper understanding of knowledge? Seriously!

I love this example Walker gives to demonstrate the problems beliefs can cause.

Aristotle believed in a prime mover, a "god" that moves the sun and moon and objects through space. With such a belief, one cannot possibly understand the laws of gravity and inertia.

Isaac Newton saw through that, and established predictions about gravitational events, and developed a workable theory of gravitation. (a new belief) But there were many things that his theory could not explain.

Albert Einstein saw through that and thought in terms of relative time in forming his famous theory of General Relativity.

But even Einstein owned beliefs which barred him from understanding the consequences of quantum physics. He could not accept pure randomness in subatomic particles, which led to his famous quote, "God

does not roll dice.” Regardless, physicists now recognize randomness serves as a requirement if one wishes to predict with statistical accuracy. And so it goes.

Now consider for a moment the above example of how theories progress in science and philosophy - being ready for what happens next - compared to organized religion, whose basic tenets come from ancient narratives that evolved during the Bronze Age, (3,000 BC to 1,000 BC). Those narratives are now being urged as the guide post for how we should conduct human affairs in the twenty-first century.

Fundamentalism literally *is* backward-thinking. Knowing the place to which they must arrive, the inquiry is guided by the goal, and does not allow for the finding of any new knowledge.

As belief progresses towards faith and dogma, the problems escalate and become more obvious. We see this in religious and political ideologies, especially those that contain scripts (bibles, manifestos) which honor war, intolerance, slavery and superstitions. We see this in the religious inquisitions, "holy" wars, and slavery.

During the period of the black plague, millions of humans died because

of ignorance of the disease based upon beliefs that God or Satan caused it. Meanwhile their religious leaders did little or nothing to encourage experimental scientific investigation, because *they already knew the truth.*

The Salem Witch Trials were the triumph of dogmatic certainty over verifiable knowledge.

In the 1930s and 40s the world saw the fanatical idealism of communism (which has far more in common with religion than it does with atheism) as they destroyed millions of lives. We saw how Christianized Germany produced Nazism and the holocaust in order to defend against the Jews, and to fight for the Lord (Hitler's belief). To this day, one can observe religious and ethnic beliefs being the cause of war and intolerance in Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Israel, Africa, Russia and in other Muslim countries. The tragedy of 9/11 could not have occurred without religious belief in an afterlife. Consider the beliefs that are used to justify the insanity of ISIS - [Also known as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant \(ISIL\)](#)[Also known as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant \(ISIL\) State \(IS\).](#) It is considerably more difficult to recognize our own insanities.

We are all heroes in our own narratives.

The beliefs that comes from religion produce strange results, like the concept of moral war. Strongly grounded beliefs lead to creating a government that would allow science to flounder while emphasizing faith-based programs.

Why does religious belief create such monstrous atrocities? Religion expresses nearly everything in terms of belief, faith, and absolutes, without a requirement for reason or understanding.

Religion tends to put concepts like reality, morality, love, happiness and desire in a supernatural realm that is inaccessible to the mind of man. It removes those concepts from being subjected to scrutiny, and allows them to become accept them without examination.

Meditation not only stops belief, but all forms of thought. When is the last time you heard of a group of renegade Buddhists monks under the influence of meditation who went on a shooting spree at a college campus?

As functioning people we all experience beliefs. But we have the ability to think critically about our own abstractions. This is called meta-

cognition. Meta-cognition simply means cognition about cognition.

Observing the observer, if you will.

A Mark Twain quote is: *“I was greatly relieved to be asked a question to which I knew the answer. I quickly responded, ‘I don’t know!’”*

Much of the problem with beliefs lies with the casual way personal opinions are bandied about. Opinions are defined as a belief or judgement on grounds insufficient to produce complete certainty, or a personal view, attitude or appraisal. Many of us are, or have been given to on occasion, speak with certainty to bolster what we are saying.

Rather than equivocate by qualifying what we are saying to conform with what we know, we get on a soap box and orate.

I do hope this kind of behavior for me is confined to my younger days.

Now I am no longer young enough to know everything.

Owning beliefs means we blind ourselves to their abstractions and act upon them as though they are real. By disowning beliefs we need not defend them or feel oppressed when someone attacks them. We not only avoid the emotions that come out of such confrontation, but we avoid all of the problems associated with them. We can feel that something is true

or false, without having to think of it as true or false. Yet we can continue to be advised by the content of those convictions.

Many otherwise rational people, including most scientists, insist on the value of having beliefs, with the proviso they must be accompanied by evidence to support them. It seems more prudent to attach evidence to our beliefs than to own beliefs without evidence. But why should we feel compelled to attach beliefs to evidence at all? Why not simply rely upon the evidence?

For example, mathematicians have been able to establish the speed of light as roughly 186,000 miles per second. Does attaching a *belief* to this add anything at all to the evidence?

Mathematics represents a symbolic language of logic that provides a tool for reasoning. But it must accommodate external events if it wishes to explain them.

As an aside, the Catholic Church today continues to allow Catholic women to use birth control by applying mathematics – but forbids them to use physics or chemistry.

Doctors knew that aspirin was an effective pain blocker long before they had a workable knowledge of how it worked.

I really like what Jim Walker has to say about bias:

“The negative aspect we usually associate with bias does not come from the bias itself but rather the belief that comes with it. Belief produces a set of brackets around a point of view that say in effect “*The answer lies here!*” Once you have found the answer, your point of view becomes biased, (intransigent, prejudiced) and prevents you from looking at other possible alternatives. Belief acts as a barrier to further understanding. If a person develops faith in a point of view, then it becomes overwhelming, to the point that nothing, even in the light of convincing evidence, will cause the faithful to yield to better information. A biased belief can convince its believers that they hold the key to all understanding and ‘truth’ without providing any evidence in support.”

Between ignorance and knowledge lies a wasteland of uncertainty. Often times creating a construct as a belief is a way we might try to remove the uncertainty without grappling with the conflict.

Another way of dealing with uncertainty is to acknowledge it head on and focus upon it, looking for possibilities. As possibilities emerge, consider the likely probability that each might succeed. After you have done your due diligence, choose to act upon the best possible alternative. And once you have acted upon the best possible alternative, do not second guess yourself unless you come across new, credible information.

Conclusion

In concluding my remarks today let me say, please do not believe a word of what I have said!

Bruce Peck
Service on April 3, 2016
NORA Church

Bibliography for Problems With Belief

Here is a list of resources I've drawn upon in putting together this presentation.

The principle influence for this comes from the writings of Jim Walker.

<http://www.nobeliefs.com/beliefs.htm>

2. Aberant Belief Systems

A number of articles about mental illness and how it interacts and impacts with beliefs have been both interesting and useful:

Natasha Tracy has provided eye-opening insights into schizophrenia, bipolar disorders, and related areas.

Her bio at her blog site:

<http://www.healthyplace.com/blogs/breakingbipolar/2010/05/natasha-tracy-author-breaking-bipolar-blog/>

She has considerable information on this

Fascinating web site.

Her Article from her blog, "What is Schizophrenia?"

<http://www.healthyplace.com/thought-disorders/schizophrenia-information/what-is-schizophrenia/>

Article by Allison Eck on Wed, 22 Oct 2014

What Schizophrenia Can Teach Us About Ourselves

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/next/body/schizophrenia-identity/>

This is a transcript from a fascinating program on NOVA.

Article: Long Held Beliefs on Arson Science Have Been Debunked
By: Mark Hanson; December 1, 2015
http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/long_held_beliefs_about_arson_science_have_been_debunked_after_decades_of_m/

Article on Beliefs in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
Schwitzgebel, Eric, "Belief", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/belief/>.

5. Transform Fear Through Core Belief Work
Article on working through your fears by focusing on your core beliefs.

<http://www.wanttoknow.info/coreissue>

6. Example of how Belief Systems Work.

Example of How Belief Systems Work

A few days ago in a Bloomberg interview, [businessman Michael Moritz was asked about businessman Michael Moritz was asked about](#), Sequoia Capital.

His responses — among them that the firm is seeking women but is "not prepared to lower our standards" — were described by many as "[open mouth, insert foot](#)." Similar remarks across sectors and industries have been described this way, too.

But this foot-in-mouth characterization is wrong: It suggests that the speaker fumbled his words and misspoke.

What's happening when Moritz talks about "lowering standards" is not a clumsy handling of speech. It's this: In that moment, *a deeply hidden synaptic pathway is temporarily illuminated*.

When asked about Sequoia's lack of women, Moritz said they were looking to hire more. But "what we're not prepared to do is lower our standards," he said. Now, no one had asked, "Are you willing to lower your standards?" No: That was *the question he heard* when he was asked about hiring women. That was the association he made automatically.

The synaptic pathway was revealed again at various points [throughout the interview](#). As evidence of the company's eagerness, he said, "We just hired a young woman from Stanford who is every bit as good as her peers," and later, "If they can meet our

performance standards, we'll hire them." No one had asked, "Will you hire women who can't meet standards or are not as good as men?" That was *his* association: women → not as good → exception → as good as a man.

Again, the problem here is not that he misspoke. The problem is that the idea that *women are not as good* is so deeply embedded in the minds of so many people in positions of power that it is not even recognized. It's a belief system that leads one to automatically, and without awareness, connect "women" with "lower standards" and "woman as good as a man" with "the exception."

The cumulative effects of this belief system are profound.

It's why women must be [two and a half times as good as men to be considered equally](#). It's why holding blind auditions for orchestras [increase women's chances of](#). It's why professors who receive requests for mentorship from prospective students are less likely to respond if [the request comes](#). It's [why women are hired and promoted based on proof while men are](#).

Moritz himself is a great example of these studies. In the interview, he suggests that the pipeline of women in tech is the problem. But he was a history major and journalist when hired by Sequoia. They "took a risk" on him; at the time he was hired, he says, he ["knew nothing about technology."](#)

Transgender people who experience the workplace as both men and women are often [the most eloquent observers of this phenomenon](#).

As transgender biologist Ben Barres famously overheard another scientist say after he'd transitioned from Barbara to Ben, "Ben Barres gave a great seminar today, but then his work is much better than his sister's."

Why don't we notice this phenomenon most of the time? Because except for during moments like Moritz's interview, this deeply embedded belief system is rarely given explicit, legible form. And because it's usually unspoken, so it's difficult to fully examine, question, and eradicate. *A slip-of-the-tongue like Moritz's is like the scent added to natural gas: tangible evidence of an invisible presence.*

So this is where we must start: We must first acknowledge the existence of this belief.

When Moritz says, as he did in the interview, "I like to think, and genuinely believe, that we are blind to someone's sex," it should sound an alarm.

Classic studies have shown that those who claim to be objective make the most biased judgments of all. Moritz is widely considered a leader in his industry, but true leadership would begin with this history major examining his belief that the "pipeline" of women in technology is the problem.

Foot-in-mouth moments are not fumbles, they are the opportunity.

We must seize these moments to draw attention to a pernicious belief system, excavate it, and ultimately eradicate it. The gifts of 50% of the population are at stake. And the world's problems are too great to do without them.