

## THE ELEGANCE OF BELIEF

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I may be too old, too apparently single (though I am not; I am married to a Jewish man now, who is respectful of the religion, though not interested in conversion), or too peripheral, but this talk has been given only in my thoughts. I have many speeches to give, but alas, it is now the turn of others. Thanks to *Dialogue* for allowing those who don't give talks to give them here.

Please know that it is my pleasure to speak to you today and convey some of the ideas that flit through my brain. May the Spirit guide and direct these thoughts.

Popular phrases regarding belief float in the contemporary wash of air: I believe I can fly; I believe in love; I believe in you (and me); I believe in miracles; I believe in yesterday; I believe in music. But what is belief? What does it mean to believe something? What is the real meaning of the word belief?

Of course there are the *American Heritage Dictionary* definitions: "(1) The mental act, condition, or habit of placing trust or confidence in another; (2) Mental acceptance of and conviction in the truth, actuality, or validity of something; (3) Something believed or accepted as true, especially a particular tenet or a body of tenets accepted by a group of persons." And a religious person would most likely focus on the shade of the word that speaks of "conviction in the truth" and "something . . . accepted as true."

Belief: BE. LIEF.

The root word BE: to exist in actuality. To be or not to be. I am or I am not, present, past, and future. The Almighty. I am that I am. To be. Being: *be-in-God*.

The root word LIEF: readily; willingly. (“I would as lief go now as later.”)

A rather interesting definition of belief can be extracted from these root words. Be. To be. Being is to *be-in-God*. But willingly? To be, I am. But am I willing to be what I am?

God Almighty is spoken of as the great I Am. We are children of the great I Am. It is logical to consider ourselves as seeds of I Am, thus I Am, at least in embryo. Are we willing to be all of what that infers? To rise to the I Am in ourselves? The crux of the proposed question could be cast in this way: To be. The I am that I am. Willingly. I am willingly a human being who is I Am.

All of this defining and jostling with words can seem like philosophical nonsense, like, get over it. Belief is simple. Just believe. End item. But that may be what this analysis is all about. Parsing words and considering how they were born into the language raises a question: what is it that I personally believe? How am I conditioned by what I believe? It seems we are set in a grand landscape so much larger than we are and that we have many notions about how to find the way from one end to the other. But is a belief an absolute? Is belief divisive? Does it more closely resemble faith and hope? Or do we have anything to say about it?

In 1953, Jane Froman, a popular singer, hosted a television show. She was troubled by the uprising of the Korean War in 1952 so soon after World War II and asked several songwriters to create a song that would offer hope and faith to not only the citizens of the United States of America but possibly everywhere. She talked to songwriters Ervin Drake, Irvin Graham, Jimmy Shirl, and Al Stillman, all together now one, two, three, and they wrote the lyrics to “I Believe.” Crooner Frankie Laine made the song popular. It became a household motif, played on the radio endlessly, or so it seemed in the 1950s. Lately, as I’ve been rum-

maging around with the idea of belief, I've been waking each morning with that song in my head. I hadn't heard it for years but remembered the first verse:

I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows  
I believe that somewhere in the darkest night, a candle glows  
I believe for everyone who goes astray  
Someone will come to show the way, I believe, I believe.

And I said to myself when I heard these words and their tune inside my head: "Yes. I believe. I believe someone will come to help us find the way. I believe God is love and that a Good Shepherd checks on the strays." But I wonder if it might be a greater challenge to trust a larger context.

I sometimes listen to others whom I respect and love telling me what it is necessary to believe: "If you go in this direction, you will get where you need to go"; "If you do x, y, and z, you will get what you want." But that sort of logic seems closer to a manipulation of divine will: "If I hold tightly to this belief, if I obey blindly no matter what I think about it, God will love and bless me." To me, that seems a bargaining stance rather than a God-like or God-inspired way to proceed or to live. Possibly the text of an insurance policy. A set of rules for a rewards program or for five stars on the forehead. And I ask myself another question: if I believe something totally, have I closed my eyes to other ways of seeing, other possibilities? God is infinite, after all. Can a belief be kept in a box with iron sides? Is belief a solid chunk of granite that never yields until it comes up against a force greater than itself? Is belief like India rubber that can stretch?

It seems a matter of importance to believe because we believe, not because we will be rewarded or gifted or praised. To believe because I am, willingly. To believe that, as the sun rises every morning, God is in us and with us, no matter what our quibbling minds can manufacture. Consider Job, who loved God no matter what happened to him, who never lost his faith even though every circumstance seemed to bend its force against him. He was a faithful man. A steady man. A believer in

the ways of God. He asked his pleading questions of the Lord, his God, but ultimately accepted that God. No quarrel. Acceptance of being. To be, with all that implies: willingly.

THE UNNAMABLE:

Do you show the hawk how to fly, stretching his wings on the wind?  
Do you teach the vulture to soar and build his net in the clouds?

JOB:

I am speechless: what can I answer?  
I put my hand on my mouth.  
I have said too much already;  
now I will speak no more.<sup>1</sup>



“That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:7–8).

Returning to the scriptures, the state of believing in God’s love differs from the state of being in God’s love. How does one proceed from belief to being? Most of us cannot see through the glass darkly, even those of us who are sustained by belief and hope. But when belief moves beyond hope and trust into being with all that is, that is another matter. But how can that happen, and does it sound too Buddhist?

Each of us has our own particular trials, which can be a path to going beyond trust in God to being with God. Maybe I have been in love with the mystery of the refiner’s fire, of trials, of questions, of the ongoing

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1. Stephen Mitchell, trans., *The Book of Job* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 84.

effort to sharpen the point of my particular pencil, but I believe that faith is not about knowing. It is about believing, trusting, and surrendering what we think we do know to allow God's arms to surround us.

I sometimes feel doubt rising like a bad stomach ache when I hear others express their absolute beliefs in Sunday School as if they are speaking for everyone everywhere across all time. (I acknowledge the cynicism in my voice, of which tendency I am aware and to which I am attending.) The sheer certainty I sometimes hear can set me on my ear. I also confess to feeling tossed by waves of cultural attitude that remind me of Eric Hoffer's "true believer" captured by the language, the concepts, the emotions, the particulars, and the phrases with little use of one's critical thinking tools. I become judgmental from my "elevated" point of view. But I do believe that doubt is necessary to understanding. Brigham Young said to not "narrow ourselves up."<sup>2</sup> Thus, our trials. Our challenges to see through the smoky glass. A path to being, willingly.

"The fundamental principles of our religion," said Joseph Smith, "are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it."<sup>3</sup> If I get caught up in a wrangle with the details, I can find myself wondering why I am at church. But when I turn my focus back to the unspeakable joy of God, his love, and his creation, I can settle back down to essentials. My focus needs to return to the effort to love well, which is no small effort. Actually, a life-time effort, every day and every hour.

I accept the fact of groping, of seeking, of praying, of studying, of wanting to know. But I know that each day I can cross paths with a moment of wonder: a brilliant orange autumn leaf floating innocently

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2. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 8, no. 9 (Mar. 4, 1860).

3. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 121.

on a rambunctious stream, face wide open to the clouds and all of creation; a seven-year-old's front-toothlessness; a robin-egg-blue day; fields of snow; a hawk presiding at the top of a skeletal tree. To me, these are reminders that God lives, that there is "joy unspeakable." As Simone Weil, author of the classic *Waiting for God*, says, "the beauty of the world is almost the only way by which we can allow God to penetrate us. . . . [It is] Christ's tender smile for us coming through matter."<sup>4</sup>

Or I might look into another human face, see a glimpse of the divine, and marvel at what is standing in front of me. This I believe: to look at the flower or a face and behold its glorious design, its intrinsic beauty, and to be humbled by what I see, for I see into the mystery of what is called God and Christ. In this act of compassion, of truly beholding another, I can move beyond mere contemplation into the act of receiving God, just as I believe God beholds and receives each of us. I can be I am, willingly.



The thought of "dwindling in unbelief" is a sad thought, even for a person who reserves the right to doubt anything about a god or a creator. Melting away into nothingness without belief in something or anything seems a despairing state of being. In his remarkable book *St. Francis of Assisi*, G. K. Chesterton quotes Rossetti as saying "bitterly but with great truth" that the "worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank."<sup>5</sup>

I am grateful for the gift of believing: of being in the ultimate sense of being, willingly. I see God in the clouds shaped like the wing of a bird. The hills. The mountains. The green ecstasy of a rain-washed hillside. I see God in the purple aster and the goldenrod that set off each other in

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4. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 102.

5. G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (New York: Image Books, 1989), 70.

beauty. I believe that God is much larger than I can understand. I believe in this largeness/hugeness/magnificence and am humbled in knowing I have only a mere glimpse of the mysterious ways of the divine. But God's face is everywhere: in small wildflowers, in a face close to mine, in love.

I believe in connectedness, not divisiveness, and people's beliefs can be divisive. We are all together, raising and supporting each other. Our stories, our lives, our experience of trying to love, or of being rebuffed at times, turning away, turning back again. Facing. Avoiding. I believe in reciprocity—giving back to God by receiving God as we look upon each other with tenderness and charity, as we look upon his creation with wonder, gratitude, and care, as we bask in being this creation. The voice of God speaks from this earth and from the bodies created to people this earth—these children of God.

To make it through every day, one needs belief that the sun will rise (though there is sufficient evidence that it will). To doubt that the sun will rise while one debates the truth of the diurnal round doesn't make a difference in the sun's rising. To doubt the change of seasons does not stand in the path of the seasons (however diverse they can be). Our beliefs do not affect the changing of the guard from solstice to solstice, from equinox to equinox.

"I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility" (Mosiah 4:11).

If I believe anything, this would be to honor the greatness of God's goodness and long-suffering toward all of us unworthy creatures. The state of true humility, not false self-effacement, which can be a temptation, is one I have known but have not always remembered. I wish for this state of mind as well as I wish for the guidance to discern what is truth, what is the path I need to follow for my own particular spiritual journey, my own "awful rowing toward God," as Anne Sexton says, though

I might dispute the word “awful.”<sup>6</sup> It isn’t always easy, this rowing, but we can learn from each phase of our life and in the belief that we are progressing toward a more refined sphere.

I do believe, though my boat glides at its own pace and sometimes wobbles on that watery, sometimes tempestuous, voyage toward God. To be, I am. Willingly. And I wish the same for all of you.

I believe above the storm the smallest prayer will still be heard  
I believe that someone in the great somewhere hears every word  
Every time I hear a newborn baby cry or touch a leaf or see the sky  
Then I know why I believe

In the name of our brother, Jesus Christ, Amen.

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6. Anne Sexton, *The Awful Rowing toward God* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).