

This I Believe
Jay Black
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More than a decade ago, I presented a “This I Believe” statement at CVUU. I had just retired from a 40-year career and was thinking about what had caused me to believe the things I believed at the time. In the years since, as I have meandered down the winding path enroute to geezerhood, my beliefs about life have evolved. And, as I get closer to shuffling off this mortal coil, new beliefs are emerging. When the time comes, I’m not sure what I’ll believe. That makes the unknown rather exciting to contemplate, doesn’t it?

Thank you for the challenge of adding to the heartfelt and articulate insights of those who have already shared their beliefs in this forum. May my thoughts be an inspiration to those who follow.

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 my own life experiences and 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, share what I believe. I modestly hope the exercise will prove to have some value for others of you.

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 highly predictable path, with very observable milestones.

When we are children (chronologically or developmentally) we are most likely to believe ourselves to be quite 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 being raised by 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.

By the way, being a child didn't preclude being very active participants in our church services. How well I remember joining in the singing of some of the old classics, including "Bringing in the thieves, bringing in the thieves, we will come from Joisey, bringing in the thieves."

And all the impassioned religious sermons were, to me, Jabberwocky. All I recall is that "'twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe; all mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe."

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 had no articulated opposition to 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, note that even today many of our youth question the values and dictates of their 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. These challenges, and their solutions, are what author David Brooks describes as building up our resume virtues. (More on that in a moment.)

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?” (Or, as one of my favorite songs from CVUU services asks, “Why am I painting the living room?”) We wonder what to make of our autonomy, what positive or negative legacy we are leaving behind. We begin to recognize that 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. Unitarian Universalism has been my and Leslie's faith community since the 1980s, and I see no reason for that to change.

Permit me to share what I have believed for years, and continue to believe:

I believe in being good for nothing.

I believe in obedience to the unenforceable.

I believe in agnosticism and secular humanism, 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 omnipotent cosmic system (Google notwithstanding) in which the final tally determines our passing on to a traditional heaven or hell.

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 from a more defensible level of morality than one who is blessed with cock-sure

certainty about all the cosmic 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. This is far more than simple relativism, than not believing in anything.)

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 or mere squatters. 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. Again: Be good for nothing.

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/Unitarian Universalists/secular humanists, we also care about those we have never met—all the George Floyds of the universe. We care about 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—unlike some elected “leaders”— 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 such values 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 continue to believe our CVUU 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. Along with my wife, I’m somewhat embarrassed that this building has been named the Jay and Leslie Black Fellowship House. However, we join all of you in advocating fellowship for all comers.

My bottom line is captured in the *Desiderata* I read at the opening of today’s service. 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. I cannot fathom a lack of empathy. So, perhaps our motto ought to be “empathy in action.”

I still believe something that I said in a university commencement address 25 years ago: We should each carry a small cudgel, and use it freely—albeit lovingly—to pummel those who say to us, “I don’t make the rules; I just work here.” Tell them to get a life, to think about the message they’re conveying about their sense of their own self-worth and their sense of other. 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.

Over the past decade or so, I’ve come to believe a few more things that have been reinforced by exposure to several engaging books. A couple of us have read and appreciated David Brooks’ profound and eloquent new book “*On the Road to Character*.” Brooks, a *New York Times* columnist and PBS commentator, explores the differences between “resume virtues” and “eulogy virtues.” He says resume virtues are the ones we list on our resumes, the skills we bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. Eulogy virtues are deeper. Eulogy virtues are ones we would want talked about at our funeral, ones that exist at the core of our being—whether we are kind, brave, honest, or faithful, and what kind of relationships we formed.

I believe most of us spend an inordinate part of our lives focusing on the resume virtues. Think about our educations—and consider the central messages delivered at graduation ceremonies. Aren’t they mostly about how to succeed, how to be an individualist who can make it in the competitive world? Aren’t our books (“Oh, the places you’ll go!”), our newspapers, magazines and podcasts

with their self-help columns and advertisements, our non-fiction books on how to get ahead, our political realities that stress making ourselves great...aren't these all loaded with advice about how to build up our resume virtues—to become the Big Me?

On the other hand, don't most obituaries—once they've skimmed over the resume and the litany of interesting life experiences—address what made the deceased a special human being, what kind of moral compass the deceased appeared to be guided by, how she or he contributed to the world? Aren't they in essence eulogy virtues?

I believe it's not either-or; we should have both resume and eulogy virtues. The question is, where do we put our greatest energies as we gain an education, join the work force, build a career and a reputation—or as we slow down, change our moral ecology, emphasize service above self, wrap things up, and try to leave our world better than we found it?

For example, from my own life: I tend to play things pretty close to the vest, and have spent most of my adult life (as a parent, a journalist and college professor) objectively surveying the world around me and guiding—not proselytizing—others. As I've grown older I've become somewhat of a militant moderate. Therefore, for me to talk in public about the evolution of my beliefs, and my resume and eulogy virtues, is somewhat out of character, even if it might be an impetus for others.

My resume virtues include things like going to college on an athletic scholarship after winning state and national wrestling awards, being the first college grad in my family, earning a PhD, getting tenure at four universities, winning campus, regional, and national teaching and research awards, authoring a dozen texts,

including the best-selling intro text in my field, launching an international academic journal that is now in its 35th year of publication, holding leadership positions in several academic professional organizations, getting a few grants, producing more than 500 professional papers, seminars, and workshops, yada yada yada.

And what do those resume virtues amount to today, a few weeks shy of my 77th birthday? Nada, I suspect. They do little if anything to assure that I'm aging well. It's painful to acknowledge that 20 years of education and 40-plus years of gainful employment may amount to zilch!

So much for resume virtues. What about eulogy virtues? I think my list might include a successful marriage now in its 53rd year; sharing the parenthood of two incredible children and grandparenthood of four amazing young 'uns (all of whom have become or are in the process of becoming responsible world citizens); seeing a scintilla of evidence that at least a few of my 10,000-plus college students are better human beings for having suffered under my tutelage; sustaining some meaningful friendships over years; producing, possibly, meaningful stewardship and generosity with time, talents, and treasures; enjoying scattered and highly amateurish efforts to engage in the arts—including the art of cooking--; having a willingness to expend the effort to learn new skills (build a dog park, for heaven's sake?), etc.

I believe I've been affected by the messages continually offered by **Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's *The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk and Adventure in the 25 Years After 50***. Her book is filled with observations that amazingly parallel the first two of seven guiding principles we covenant as Unitarian Universalists and as maturing adults: We do well to affirm and promote the inherent

worth and dignity of every person and we ought to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

I believe aging people do well to learn and grow into what moral psychologist Erik Erikson calls the penultimate stage of development: the stage in which we successfully manage conflicts between generativity and stagnation. By generativity, he is referring to the impulse within us to nurture and guide the next generation—not just our children and grandchildren, but all our efforts to teach, write, innovate, engage in artistic expression, activism, advocacy, and service.

Unfortunately, for all the factors that motivate generativity there are equally compelling forces of stagnation. For instance, our declining health, our disappointments in not being taken seriously, our inability to do things we used to do reasonably well, etc. These forces may leave us thinking we're just killing time, until time kills us.

The struggles? Appearance is not always a completely accurate measure of our reality. In my own case, I have to fight stagnation: the impulse to expect others to do things my way; to have too many opinions and to seek closure too quickly—based on having been there, done that; to not listen as empathically as I should; to appear sarcastic; to be overly eager to impose neatness and orderliness on a world in chaos, discarding stuff I see as useless although others may see it as having sentimental value; to be disappointed in playing mediocre golf and unhappy with a body that seems to be ever softening and slower to respond to the challenges I pose to it; to be reluctant to jump into new adventures when the old ones suffice ...etc etc

I believe a challenging aspect of maturing is to move beyond our careers by doing other meaningful things as we invest our substance, energy, and core being in life and work that will outlive us. This is “giving forward”—being useful, making an imprint. People in this stage want (perhaps subconsciously) to “repair the world.” As Lawrence-Lightfoot says, they want to preserve their dignity and self-respect even if they are willing to relinquish their status and seniority; they want to be useful, not used; engaged, not isolated.

Personally, I have found this to be incredibly challenging. The transition from career to retirement has necessitated curtailing the 60-hour weeks—much of it tilting at windmills, but most of it a rewarding by-product of the real or imagined status deriving from being a senior scholar, administrator, and national leader in professional organizations. Retirement has been a different ball game: I have only half-jokingly said my PhD has expired. As a voluntary board member of several local non-profits—the humane society, CVUU, Rotary, Logan Men’s Club, and a couple others—I have sometimes struggled to be relevant, to be heard, to make the significant contributions I wanted to make. I, like many other retired people, have too often been tempted to lament, “I used to be somebody.” But then, I have to ask myself, why bother? Is this worth fighting over?

I struggle to live up to one of my core beliefs: The belief in staying reasonably open-minded. Even when life-long experiences have taught us that some ways of thinking about and doing stuff have repeatedly made perfectly good sense to us, that doesn’t necessarily mean we have to impose our opinions and conclusions on everyone else, at every turn.

In particular, we are not mandated to impose our heart-felt political views on all the world’s unwashed, mouth-breathing, knuckle-dragging, dogmatic troglodytes. I have become a militant moderate, well aware that dogmatists—regardless of their political, social, or religious

orientation—are immune to persuasion. The values struggle I face is between being open-minded and respectful all the while trending toward dogmatism and certitude. The struggle is unlikely to have a decisive winner. Besides, who am I to believe my beliefs are any more valid than anyone else's beliefs?

Meanwhile, I continue to believe in giving back—to family, friends and the wider community—with no expectation of reciprocity. That means I believe in being a faithful mentor and steward of whatever household that will have me.

I believe in maintaining a sense of wonderment, awe, and spirituality. Like many of you, we live in Utah because of the persistent sense of wonderment and awe nourished by our natural environment. And, as are you all, we are committed to do our parts to nurture that environment. Likewise, I am enriched by the plethora and high quality of good music, art and drama our community provides. The older I get, the more likely I am to tear up when absorbing good music (and the less I tear up at political ranting and raving).

As I age, I believe more and more in spirituality, even if I don't have a great regard for the trappings of organized religion. In his book *Aging Well*, George Valliant says "In theory, spirituality should deepen in old age for all of us. For if growing older does not inevitably lead toward spiritual development, growing older does alter the conditions of life in ways that are conducive to spirituality. Aging slows us down and provides us time and peace to smell life's flowers. Aging simplifies our daily routine and facilitates the acceptance of things we cannot change. Aging banks our instinctual fires and increases our capacity to be internally quiet. Aging compels us to contemplate death. Aging forces us toward becoming one with the ultimate ground of all being. Aging allows us to feel part of the ocean."

I believe there is a significant difference between the elderly who are extremely religious, and those who are extremely spiritual. From my reading, I'll vote to align with the latter camp.

I believe in accepting the fact that getting older probably entails getting ill, but avoiding the temptation to make every conversation an organ recital—in short, learning that it's OK to be ill so long as we don't always feel sick. Thus, I believe in being glad I've made it this far, and have good reason to wake up tomorrow.

Finally, I believe in accepting the inevitability of death, but with the satisfaction of having lived—really lived—and having left my campsite in somewhat better condition than I found it. I just hope that when it comes, it comes without undue prolonged suffering or employment of artificial life-supporting tools, and that I die from what the obituaries imply is the single most frequent cause of death: being surrounded by loved ones.

However, I don't believe I have any right to cosmic clarity before I shuffle off this mortal coil. But just in case there is some grand scheme, some overarching principle, some ultimate universal value, some dynamic operating force, essence or power which creates or infuses existence with reality or meaning—just in case there is a God sitting in judgment, I think she/he/it/they will not be terribly disappointed that I've made the effort to tidy up my campsite, extinguish the embers, and leave some firewood for the next wanderer.

All this being said, I believe I'll stop now. And, it should go without saying, you are under no obligation whatsoever to believe anything I've just said.

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