

Entry Title: Confessions of a Compulsive Believer

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Can you identify with an ordinary soul thrust into a lifetime of extraordinary circumstances despite his best efforts just to be “normal?” Might you relate to my candid confessions in this brief inquiry? Meet a once-raving lunatic who, over the last seven decades, evolved into a compulsive believer. And I’m just getting started. Are you curious and open-minded enough to explore with me the raw power of beliefs, the little lies we tell ourselves, the perplexing truth about memories, and fears or superstitions we all face in a chaotic but wonderful world? If so, let’s dig in.

I am a compulsive seeker of truth, whatever that is, despite the physical and mental risks—its vagary draws me in with inexorable appeal. I’ve known cult members whose beliefs have come and gone. I’ve experienced altered states of consciousness—some natural, some drug- or alcohol-related. I’m a disabled veteran from service to my country, defied death on dozens of occasions, either self-induced or by fate. I helped save over fifty human lives. Inspiration drove me to become a political activist in a small way as a young man. My body and mind have fallen prey to insidious life-threatening addictions, later to be rescued by a power greater than myself. I’ve been mugged, been shot at by smugglers and thieves, and stalked for months by a sociopath. I even contemplated suicide once, and have been physically beaten—just once. Through all of

this, I still find immense joy in life, a redemptive belief in the basic goodness (and evil) of people (including myself—especially myself). I still eagerly anticipate my future wrapped in each new dawn, yet another gift, even at seventy-three years young. I celebrate life and respect everyone's desire to seek their own passion. *Because* of what I believe, *because* of what I have *become—am* becoming.

Beliefs are the most powerful force in the universe, at least for us humans here on this planet.

With a white-knuckled fist, they govern physical, emotional, spiritual and metaphysical reasoning—even that which we cannot see or understand except perhaps through parables or similes or metaphors. They paint our past, present, and future with a broad but stiff brush. Beliefs launch hope, despair, desire, cruelty, compassion, and love. They astound and amaze, or crush. They constrain or expand the human experience—*my* experience. If our belief is focused enough, we achieve or perceive what might otherwise seem impossible.

Our species clings to a basic compulsion to believe—in something. But this is a learned behavior. We are not born with beliefs. They are an *acquired taste*, a mortal *art form*. We are born blank canvases. Nothing is true or false. Everything just is. None of us *remain* blank canvases, however, and yet “truth” as an absolute remains elusive to many of us, certainly to me. But why does only one yardstick for absolute truth even make sense amidst so much chaos, so many possibilities? I have been blessed with an interesting life that has allowed me to transform my beliefs many times over. And it ain't over yet.

Beliefs transform thoughts into actions, no matter what we hold to be true. When we decide to do something with a belief, we choose to construct or destruct. I do not seek to offer guidance, but perhaps to open a provocative window into a dark room where you might find yourself staring back at you.

Beliefs are so much more compelling than facts, even in the presence of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Why? Allow me to confess to my own dubious credentials. I tell lies for a living as an author and publisher of fiction. Dramatic effect? Action? Conflict? Suspense? The improbable? Tools of my trade. Larger-than-life characters breathe life into my stories—into *me*. And when my readers seem unable to differentiate fiction from what I call “faction,” I empathize.

Now, what of beliefs and memories? Beliefs amplify, shrink, or distort memories—the very texture of our lives. Memories are facts we recall, but are they *really* facts plucked from our personal histories? The corrosive element of time’s passage is rough-grit sandpaper that textures my memories. Yours too, I’d wager. Details grow coarse with age. Time grinds my memories down to little more than vague premises. There have been so many. My mind also constructs armor to shield against bad memories. It distorts them the worst, but they fade the least. My memories sometimes morph into little lies, even though they usually contain more truth than not. And those lies meander out of my mouth with spirits of their own. The weird twist? I believe them.

Buddhism suggests the only constant is change, to let it flow like water through our fingertips. I find that comforting. But I still crave structure around my beliefs and my memories. Let's call this essay one of my many *living amends*—water through my fingertips. So, I take rigorous inventory and promptly admit when I am wrong, or at least question what I think I know. Step Ten of the Twelve Step Program: yes, I am a grateful, recovering drunk. Thank you, Alcoholics Anonymous. You've kept me clean and sober for eleven exhilarating years. Yet, everything still changes. That includes my memories—what I believe from my own past. I've mentioned all memories change with time. Each new experience also changes our recollection of them, as does each retelling. Likewise, they mold our beliefs. I am convinced a rich quiver of memories opens our eyes to a broader acceptance of more diverse beliefs—a bigger bullseye. I find that fulfilling.

There is a world out there that is not what we assume, my friend. We color our perception of that world through lenses shaped and tinted by what we learn, accept and remember—or forget. *We only paint our reality with the brush of what we suppose to be true, what our minds allow us to perceive.* That perception may have nothing—or everything—to do with how the past or present world actually exists, including our anticipation of the future. Fascinating... and frightening... is it not?

Do we truly know the basis of our beliefs? Do we care? How were we raised? In what country or region, and as a result, within what religion, if any? Does geography, then, determine our destiny for all eternity? Is geography how we become mired in specific moral values—or a lack thereof? By whose measure?

What of the science of belief itself? Yesterday's magic is today's science, so what comprises today's magic? Some suggest that is *faith* for which we need no knowledge, because we cannot know everything, anyway. Scientific fact may or may not transform long-held or even newly found beliefs into our thinking of them differently. Even then, it may not matter. Science sometimes *does* tether knowledge to beliefs, but we *still* choose what to accept, perhaps regardless of what science suggests. Yes, I pose more questions than answers, but without questions, answers get lost in a mental morass until we're prepared to ask such hard questions. The scientific method.

What is the unique human genome that allows or enables all this to happen? Yes, even more questions. Sadly, with communication media's proliferation, *junk science* also propagates *junk beliefs* like viral pathogens. I find this a profound disappointment that sometimes shakes my faith in the human spirit. I'd like to blame technology or its purveyors, knowing this is a fool's errand.

When we question our beliefs because of some new experience, we seek alternatives to fill a "belief vacuum." But based on what—*truths* portrayed as *facts* we see everywhere? If it's gone viral on the Internet, it *must* be factual, right? I'm discouraged by those who look no further. When we use such potential junk as a test for truth, when such patterns of behavior aren't supported by any objective measures, this is called confirmation bias—*belief in that which supports what we already believe*. That's why I am always anxious to further refine my own network of beliefs. I seek any perspective that provides credible answers to endless questions,

though some may seem outrageous at first blush. But I always apply rigorous critical thinking. Don't you?

So, what are some lies with which we delude ourselves? We put things into our mouths that run absolutely contrary to our beliefs, or to facts as we understand them. Some of us will eat or drink or snort or inject any substance that will ease our current emotional or physical pain. We'll abuse ourselves or our environment contrary to what we *know* is a healthy respect for ourselves and for our progeny. Why? Some kneel to habits that can easily become addictions that hurt us, or even kill us. Maybe intentionally. Why? Because we are mystical creatures. We relish lying to ourselves when it suits the moment, often in the papery guise of emotional self-defense. That is our imperfect nature. Is that bad? Depends on the lie, or what you *choose* to believe. You decide.

Further, we are complex mechanisms driven by a life force that we are unwilling or unable to comprehend. We often say we must accept on faith anything we don't understand. We must be okay with that. *But must we?* Slapped in the face with our mortality—we're all dying, just on different timelines—do different choices become more likely? Some circumstances not yet understood will always exist. Given that, what must we do to survive emotionally as individuals, as a species? For example, *might we accept a different set of beliefs at death's door?* Why? Yup, more questions.

What of fear regarding our beliefs? Beyond physical fear for our safety, a fearful or abject state of mind most often results from ignorance or irrationality. But who is to say what is irrational or

logical, especially if the object of our fear is incomprehensible? Or what of a subject that is all-consuming, like our very identity in the universe? Who is to judge whether we are fearful or ignorant of life forces we only pretend to understand, or ignore? Perhaps we fear a sense of insignificance. What is fear but a response to an unknown future event that we suspect might further limit our already finite mortality, or the loss of some precious possession, or fear for the safety of those dear to us? Is that a rational response to an inevitable state of mind? But then, fear usually is irrational.

And one last correlation I will posit: between beliefs and superstition. I submit that our superstitions, however we define them, are the ultimate inevitability. At their epicenter is our choice of what we put into our mouths *and* our minds, physically or metaphorically. What we savor reflects our belief system and our knowledge, or lack thereof. Physical and mental nourishment—or the absence of it—determines where we place our faith, and what we presume to be factual. It influences how we perceive ourselves, others, or our world—our entire notion of reality. On what do we base at least some of these perceptions? We may ultimately act on what is unknowable. Likewise, when an outcome seems inevitable, like when in free-fall after fate decides our chute will not open, how do our beliefs change because of such an inevitable or irrefutable outcome? Why? Why not? Call it faith or superstition. Does not matter. It's how we cope as intelligent but imperfect beings.

Bottom line? What we do and who we are projects one predominant theme—we *are* what we believe. That drives how we feel, what we think, perceive, and act. Yes, I have more questions

than answers. I guess that's why I remain a seeker and a compulsive believer, always seeking to understand the incomprehensible. I call that purpose, though you may call it crazy. This lunatic is okay with that.