

Chapter 3

On Believing

“That's my problem — I don't believe. I want everything proven to me.”

— Vern Rode

Beliefs are the ideas, thoughts, premises, images that we decide to accept as truth. At any one time there is very little that we actually know. Despite how important it appears to know things, when it comes right down to it, there is very little that we can actually prove. Most of our actions and decisions are based on beliefs. Our beliefs work to guide our actions at all times whether we are aware of them or not.

For instance, I am on a plane right now on my way back to San Francisco. I believe that the city will be there when it is time to land. If I didn't believe this I would not have gotten on the plane in Chicago. However, right now in the air somewhere over the Rockies, I can not know if the city is actually there. In fact, given the destructive capacity of humans, I can imagine a scenario where the city has been destroyed. Yes, perhaps the pilot is in a good position to verify the existence of San Francisco, but sitting in the back of the plane in my seat, I am left to my beliefs.

I tend to hold my beliefs loosely. Beliefs are not the same as truth. When I hold a belief, I have made a decision to accept something as true. I do not think that my belief regarding the state of San Francisco will influence the actual state of the city. For instance, if I think it is there and it turns out to have indeed fallen into the sea, my belief will not influence reality. (However, I do entertain the possibility that beliefs, especially those held by groups of people, may be able to change physical reality.) In addition, if I act on something that is not true, the world will provide me with feedback that will allow me to correct my belief.

The way I hold my personal beliefs is analogous to the common practice in science of creating a model to explain phenomenon. A best guess model is designed based on available information. Then scientists design experiments to test the validity of the model. For instance for many years it was believed that high consumption of saturated fats led to heart disease. More experimentation has revealed that model to be wrong and we now believe that saturated fats are fine and trans fats promote heart disease.

One of the reasons I hold my beliefs loosely is that my background as a scientist includes the knowledge that use of the scientific method cannot prove anything. Experiments are best designed to eliminate possibilities. Positive results simply lend support to a hypothesis or idea. The results of an experiment only apply to that experiment or trial. The knowledge gained is specific to the time of the trial, the subjects in the trial, the investigators who conducted the trial and the specific protocol of the experiment. If any of these are changed the results may be different. If you drop an apple one hundred times and each time it falls to the ground, you haven't proven the law of gravity, but if you drop an apple once and it flies upward, you have certainly disproved the law of gravity. Demonstrating an idea is wrong is easier than proving it right.

Changing any of the parameters of an experiment may affect the results and frequently we do not know for certain what factors are important. For instance, experimenters testing the effects of radiation on laboratory animals uncovered some surprising results. In one experiment, using a specific protocol, they found that irradiation ultimately killed about 40% of the animals. When they went to repeat the experiment the kill rate dropped to 25%. Another time 95% of the animals died. What wild variation! Where they doing something wrong? No, what they had inadvertently stumbled onto was the importance of timing. A closer look at their results showed that if the animals were sleeping at the time of the irradiation, the rate of kill was 40%. If they were just waking up

the survival rate was the best and if they were in the middle of their active period almost all of the animals died when irradiated.

Timing is important. In this case, the mortality rate was probably due to the natural biological rhythm of the anti-inflammatory hormone, cortisol. In the animals they were studying, cortisol peaks in the early morning, hence the lower death rate at that time.

We also know the color of a pill can affect the results. Blue pills are more sedating than pink pills (even when the pill contains no active ingredients at all) and anxiety symptoms tend to improve more when the drug is colored green while depressive symptoms are most relieved by yellow capsules.

It matters who, where and with whom an experiment is conducted. In fact, how a particular lifestyle or medication will effect you is always speculative. As soon as we go to apply the knowledge gained by an experiment we are just guessing about the results.

For instance, my mother has high blood pressure. Her doctor has recommended that she take a baby aspirin a day to prevent heart attack. His recommendation is based on scientific research. Aspirin use has been associated with reduced heart attack rates. However, a recent study involving 40,000 women indicates that aspirin use in women does not protect them from heart attacks.¹ As it turns out the study that cemented the use of aspirin in preventing heart attacks involved predominantly white male physicians. It appears aspirin affects women differently. I would speculate that the effectiveness of aspirin might also be different for other races or perhaps people in different socioeconomic groups.

Indeed, aspirin use might actually help my mother prevent a heart attack, despite the fact that on average it doesn't show any benefit in

¹The study did show protection from stroke.

women. On the other hand I would expect aspirin to not benefit men who are already consuming a diet rich in vegetables, maintaining normal body weight and participating in regular exercise. In fact, I would expect that in such a class of men aspirin might actually be detrimental.

This is just an example of the limitations of scientific research. How anything affects a person is highly individual. We can't afford to do large scale studies on every possible variation in experimental design. So, when someone tells me a certain herb, nutrient or practice cured their disease, and I know research has shown that particular herb, nutrient or practice to be ineffective for their condition, I still believe them. Anything is possible, so I hold my beliefs loosely. I also consider the benefit they are attributing to the thing they tried may be due to something unseen factor.

I don't ascribe to the theory that our beliefs are handed down to us. Therefore, given that everyone simply chooses what to believe, I don't feel threatened if other people believe differently than I do. In fact, I don't think that my belief system would necessarily benefit everyone.

How do I choose my beliefs? Let's take the imaginary San Francisco disaster as an example.

I'm on the plane and the person in the next seat has just had a premonition and has "seen" the disaster in California. They are upset because San Francisco is no longer intact. I have a choice as to whether to believe this story, or not. I could also decide not to set my opinion on the matter at all. As tempting as it may be, I don't base my belief on the credibility of the person sitting next to me, the plausibility of the earthquake, or even my attachment to my daughter and friends in California.

When I hear something stated as fact my first impulse is to determine if it is true. However, searching for the truth in many instances is irrational or at least not practical. Especially if I am looking outside myself for truth that is specific to me. A good many things we don't really know and can't really know. If a drug works 80% of the time and kills 0.01% of the time, how do you know if when you take the drug it will help you and not kill you? You don't know. You must decide what to believe and act on that belief. It is a risk either way.

Back to the scenario. My neighbor in the seat next to me on the plane is psychic. I'm told the Bay Area is under water. Since this is my home and the home of my family this information is relevant to me. Once I've snapped out of my mode of trying to determine if it is true, I ask myself four general questions. These are the same questions I ask when I am deciding between any two opposing beliefs.

- 1) What belief will bring me the most joy, happiness, peace, satisfaction in this moment?
- 2) Will believing one way or the other change what actions I take in this moment?
- 3) Will the way I change or the actions I take in response to the chosen belief allow me to live more in line with my personal values?
- 4) Will my belief impact my future well-being?

I am a practical person. Although I'd like to base my beliefs on truth, I know that many things can not be known. As a melancholy person, I experience life as very hard and somewhat unpleasant, so one of my personal goals is to choose thoughts and beliefs that will make life more pleasant. I value creating ease for myself and others and this is a primary goal of my life. I also value honesty. I believe that we all have

the answers within. My questions are designed to assist me in getting more in touch with what I value and acting in alignment with my values.

The choice is before me. Is San Francisco gone or not?

For me, on the plane flying to San Francisco, it makes no difference if San Francisco is really there or not. If it is there, my day ends as planned. If not, I can't change my plan mid-flight. If San Francisco is not there, my life will be so disrupted that it would not make any difference if I wasted a couple extra hours in flight. If we get there and can't land and don't have enough fuel to return I may die or become injured during the process of a crash landing. However, given the fact that I just lost everything and have another belief that I am taken care of, I wouldn't care about dying myself.

In the San Francisco situation, I would choose to act from my belief, "San Francisco is not under water," since it would bring me the most peace in the moment and the opposite belief wouldn't change my actions or benefit others. I would also be comfortable with my neighbor believing that San Francisco was gone and acting from her belief. (Well, if she freaks out I may not be exactly comfortable, but I would be okay with her choice of belief.)

For me, beliefs are practical. When I receive the new information regarding San Francisco from my neighbor, I may decide not to hold a belief. Neither belief really benefits me, nor will it matter what I believe. Someone else might have a completely different answers to the three questions. Perhaps their home is Chicago and they don't want to end up crashing in San Francisco. They might decide to verify the story and inquire if the pilot is in live radio contact with the San Francisco Airport.

There is a tendency for us to get bogged down in determining truth. My

father struggles with the fantastic tales in the bible. He rejects the concept of God because he cannot believe that Jesus turned water into wine or that Moses parted the Red Sea. For me these things are unrelated. I see the existence of God and the stories in the bible as two separate things. I don't believe in God, but also have no problem holding loose beliefs about the miracles that Jesus and Moses did. I choose to believe they happened or are possible because they meet my need for inspiration and mystery. They make me smile. No harm done if they aren't true. Debating the truth of the tales is a waste of energy for me since these stories don't really impact my life. I wouldn't act differently if they were or were not true.

There is one bible story I like a great deal. In fact, I absolutely love the story of Noah. This story is a fantastic depiction of surrender. Imagine yourself waking up one morning and getting the urge to build a large boat. Never mind that you live in a dry, barren area hundreds of miles from water. Perhaps Noah was told to build the boat by God or an angel, but since I haven't spoken to God or angels I prefer to imagine that if I was Noah the message comes to me as an inner sense or quiet desire.

I can imagine myself there, in the Holy Land, trying to get this crazy urge out of my heart/mind. Day after day I'd keep thinking about building the boat, until finally I just start doing it. Then my friends and neighbors would stop by and laugh at me. "Hey, how you going to get that boat to the sea?"

This story reminds me of the many times I have gotten the sense to do something that doesn't quite make sense only to find out later what gifts were brought by my action. The desire to do something is one way we are guided. When a friend first told me that following our heart was right action, I was not sure I believed it, but it certainly made sense. Why wouldn't following my heart make me happy? I still clung to some fear that it would only make me happy on a short term basis. I still

worried about being irresponsible and thought that following my heart might eventually lead me to ruin. I tested it out and have been quite pleased with the results.

Often times when choosing which belief to act from I consider the flip belief. For instance, one of my core beliefs is, "I'm taken care of." The flip side of this belief is "I'm not taken care of." Or perhaps, "Bad things happen to me." I chose to believe that I will always have what I need and/or the resources to fulfill my needs. A neutral position is also possible. I could believe that stuff just happens - good and bad. I like the "I'm taken care of" version because it reduces my anxiety in the moment. I worry less about being prepared for every disaster. The belief that I am taken care of may not be true. I know people who have been raped, tortured and killed. I know people who have lost their homes or had their possessions taken from them. However, these tragedies often come without warning. Believing that "I am not taken care of" or that "Bad things happen to me." will not prevent or alleviate their impact. My choice of beliefs is not based on what I believe to really be true. It is based on what serves me best in this moment given my accumulative experience.

What if I am acting from a belief that is not true? Once I've made a choice regarding what to believe, I actually study the results of my actions based on that belief. If we are acting from a place that is not true or doesn't match reality then this will show up in our day to day life.

If we believe that drinking wine isn't a problem, but find we just got our second DUI (driving under the influence) and our partner wants to break up with us because we drink too much, our belief might not be true or complete.

The fun thing about beliefs is that I can always change them as I gain insight and learn more. For instance, for a long time I thought I could

control my eating. However, when I honestly looked at my life, I found that I couldn't. I observed that often times I would not want to eat something because it was not healthy or because I wasn't really hungry and still I would feel compelled to eat it. I also noticed I avoided admitting I couldn't control my eating because I believed, as a human, I was supposed to be able to. Once I accepted the reality of my situation, I was free to investigate options that have provided me with greater sanity in regards to eating.

My understanding of the flexibility of beliefs has led to my current practice. These days I seek to discover my core beliefs by observing my life and specifically how I act and react. If I am uncomfortable receiving a praise or a gift is that because I believe I'm not worthy? Or perhaps I believe that I will "owe" the person that gives to me? What is the belief behind my irritation with slow drivers? Why am I scared to ask for what I need at work? What about my feelings when people forget my birthday? Do I believe that people that really love me would remember my birthday?

We really can choose beliefs that support ease and happiness in our life. The first step is to tease out those beliefs that don't serve us any more. The next step is to replace those beliefs with ones that do serve us. Techniques like cognitive behavior therapy and Theta healing can facilitate the belief improvement process.