

Thinking about Your Basic Beliefs, Principles, and Values

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Summary

As we move into and through our older years, we benefit from having a firm grasp on our most fundamental beliefs (including principles and values), because if we do, they will shape what we do and how we feel during those years. So it is well for us to examine those beliefs. If they are not right for us, we can perhaps change them. And when they *are* right, we can renew our commitment to them, and arrange our lives around them.

Understanding your own beliefs, and where they come from

We have many kinds of belief, and any of them can be true or false, helpful or harmful. It is no easy matter to determine which beliefs are true, but it can be a little easier to decide which ones we want to commit ourselves to – or else try to let go of, or at least try to ignore. Here are some kinds of beliefs you might want to examine:

- Beliefs about Reality:
 1. Do you believe in God and, if so, what are the characteristics of your God?
 2. If you do not believe in God, do you believe in some other form of spiritual reality?
 3. Do you believe in any kind of personal existence after death?
 4. Do you believe that any of these issues do have or should have an effect on how you live your life?
- Beliefs about Ethics and Morality:
 1. Do you believe that all of us – and you in particular – are here for a reason? And if so, do have a specific idea of what that reason is?
 2. Do you believe that it matters how you behave?
 3. Do you believe that you have authoritative instructions, from scripture or some other source(s), about what you should do and not do? If not, do you have other broad principles of right and wrong that you believe in?
 4. Have you adopted specific rules that guide your thinking and behavior in what you believe to be the best ways, and if so, do you follow these rules faithfully?
- Beliefs about Yourself and Others:
 1. Do you believe that you are basically a good person, a bad person, or something in between?

2. Do you feel confident and capable, or do you feel weak and full of self-doubt?
3. Do you believe that other people are similar to you, better than you, worse than you?
4. Do you believe that other people tend to like you, dislike you, not care about you?

For each of these items – and perhaps others that will occur to you – there are three important questions to ask right off the bat:

1. What do I believe about these issues?
2. Am I really committed to my belief – i.e., do I want to live my life based on it, and do I actually live my life based on it?
3. Why do I believe it and, if I am committed to it, why am I committed to it?

Even if you feel you know the answer to all these questions, think about them seriously. What if you were really put to the test? Would your beliefs and principles and values hold up, or would you let go of them?

That is not merely a rhetorical question, because in reality your life does depend on your beliefs – at least, the quality of your life does. If you do not really believe what you think you believe, or if you are not really committed to it, then your life may lack purpose and direction, or you may be pursuing a direction without real conviction about its value, or you may be pursuing a direction that doesn't support (or that actually opposes) your beliefs, principles, and values.

Getting our beliefs and intentions and actions in line with one another is worth pursuing at any stage of life, but especially in our older years. At this stage, we are less likely to be tied down by jobs or family obligations, so we are quite possibly more free now than we have ever been to live life on our terms, to be who we want to be and do what we want to do. But if we don't have a grasp on what we believe life is about, and what our own particular life should be about, then we end up squandering this chance – the last great chance that we will get.

Examining your beliefs

Test the validity of your beliefs by asking:

- Where did they come from?
 1. Do you even know where they came from, or have you just always believed some of them, or did some of them just grow within you unawares?
 2. Did you choose them, or did someone choose them for you?
 3. Did you consider alternatives?
 4. If you were choosing again today, starting from scratch, how confident are you that you would end up with the same beliefs?

- Do they still seem correct to you?
 1. Do you have any specific reason for believing they are true?
 2. Do any of your beliefs contradict one another, or contradict other information that you have or experiences that you have had?
 3. Do other beliefs or principles or values, which you are aware that other people hold dear, seem equally plausible to you, or possibly more so?

- Deciding whether to reaffirm, change, or drop individual beliefs:
 1. Which beliefs, upon serious reflection, are you confident are true?
 2. Which beliefs are you unable to be certain about, but you want to live your life *as if* they are true even though you can't prove them?
 3. Which beliefs are you uncertain about, and perhaps need to give more thought – and perhaps even serious study – to?
 4. Which beliefs seem unlikely to be true, or unworthy of your commitment?

“Truth” is an elusive quality. It is important to us to *believe* that our beliefs are true – if we didn't, then they wouldn't really be beliefs, would they?

At the same time, belief also implies “Doubt,” which is discussed in more detail below -- because if there were no room for doubt, then we would not be talking about “belief,” we would be talking about “knowledge.”

What belief really entails, then, is a willingness to commit ourselves to something, even though we cannot be certain that it's true. This is what religious people call “faith,” but it applies to beliefs of all kinds.

There are usually two reasons why people are willing to accept particular beliefs: because they feel that the beliefs are very probably *true*, and/or because they *want* to have those beliefs. Wanting to believe that something is true does not have to be mere wishful thinking, though. Usually we want to believe something is true because, given the way we live our lives, it *works* for us in some way: it provides an explanation for what happens, a sense of coherence, a source of hope, a means for us to belong to a community (or family) of like-minded people, a basis for participation in celebrations or rituals, a way to make sense of who we are and why we fit (or fail to fit) into the world around us.

Having beliefs that *work* for you in these ways is a big deal, and for many people, this is much more important than whether their beliefs are literally true.

So in examining your beliefs, you should be asking not just: Is there any good reason to believe that this is true – and is there some alternative belief for which there is strong evidence? You should also ask yourself: In what ways is this belief making my life better or worse, and are there other beliefs that might work better for me?

Committing yourself to beliefs, even where there is doubt

Doubt is normal. Even the most strongly committed, those whom others believe never doubt, usually do have doubts, at least some of the time. It is probably true, in fact, that some doubt is a good sign, an indication that your judgment is well balanced, that you are not a fanatic or an intellectual push-over. Still, doubt is uncomfortable. So in the face of uncertainty, how do you keep your commitment strong? Here are some ways that have survived the test of time:

- Accept doubt as part of the bargain. All you can do with life's deepest questions is to think honestly about them and then make the best guess you can. If you were to flip to the other side, you would still have doubt, probably even more doubt. So just accept some ongoing second thoughts as an inevitable part of your beliefs and commitments. But they don't mean you have to change course.
- Act on your commitment, not on your doubt. Unless some very strong reason to reconsider comes along, keep in mind that it is the strength of your commitment – that is, your decision to believe – not the strength or even the truth of the belief itself – that lets your beliefs bear fruit in your life. When you *act as if* your belief is strong, you actually strengthen your belief, and you receive the benefits of having acted firmly.
- Associate with other people who share your belief. If it's a religious belief, then it will probably be a religious group. If it's the belief that you actually are (or can be) a good person, despite being told repeatedly as a child that you were not, then associate with people who like and appreciate you, and avoid people who will undermine you.
- Continue to examine your beliefs. The more you learn about how they work for other people, about reasons for continuing to believe, and even about reasons against your beliefs, the more your doubt will dissipate. Yes, even reasons against your beliefs strengthen you, because when you withstand those arguments, you prove your own strength to yourself. And if, as it happens, those arguments win you over and change your mind, then you are even better off, because you find a better belief that will now stand even more firmly.

Changing your beliefs

Of course, it is not so easy to change beliefs. It is usually uncomfortable, at least for a while. Your doubt increases, you try to hold on (perhaps using the methods outlined above), but the doubts do not go away, and you feel torn. Finally, you begin to think maybe you were wrong all along – an awful feeling, for most of us. But then you reach a tipping point where the new belief – or the simple absence of the old belief – begins to look good to you. You see the new belief as more and more likely to be true, you start to focus on the positive differences a change would bring, and you feel at least a little bit liberated by letting go of something you now see as probably wrong and therefore limiting to your growth and happiness.

How do you help to move this kind of change along? To start with, you can use the same techniques described above that help you maintain an old belief:

- Although you cannot be certain that the new belief is true, accept uncertainty as an inevitable part of the bargain, and choose to make the leap.
- Act on your new belief, and stop acting on your old belief. Make a commitment to change how you think, and your new patterns of thought and activity will reinforce the change.
- Associate with people who share, or will otherwise reinforce (or at least not tear down) your new belief. Occasionally there will be a family member or others who will want to hold you back – and if so, you will probably have to insist to them kindly that this is an important decision to you, that you have made it after careful deliberation, and that while you are willing to explain your reasons, no one but you gets to vote on them. More important, though, is being with people who will encourage and support the change you are making.
- Continue to explore and think about your new belief: why it is a good change for you, what you need to do to make it an even better change for you, and how you deal with whatever mental, emotional, or other challenges it may entail. If you get stumped, talk with someone who has already been there, and who might be able to enlighten you further (a religious counselor, a mentor, a psychologist, or someone else, depending on the nature of the change you are making).

In addition:

- Deliberately try to stop thinking in your old way. Old beliefs often cannot be completely eradicated, especially if you have held them all your life. Still, you can fight against the patterns of thought, speech, and action that they entail. Prune back the visible parts of your beliefs energetically enough, and the roots will begin to decay.
- Use the “Release and Affirm” method:
 1. Observe the circumstances and emotions that are present when your old belief is strongest.
 2. Set an intention to change.
 3. Release the old belief in a deliberate way, perhaps in writing, perhaps in front of others – whatever will make the decision feel real to you.
 4. Affirm the new belief in a positive and immediate way that is just as strong as your release, and that fills the same intellectual and/or emotional space as the old belief.

This method can be used in conjunction with the other points mentioned here.

- Expect side-effects, and try to welcome them. Our beliefs – about the nature of the universe, about the meaning of our lives, about how well we fit into the world around us – are not isolated, independent structures. They intertwine. And so if you change one belief, it is likely to strengthen, weaken, or otherwise modify

some of your other beliefs. If your new change is in a healthy direction, you should find that most of these side-effects are also beneficial. And if you deliberately accept them, and reinforce them the way you reinforce the principal belief(s) you are trying to change, then all of these changes will support one another.

For More Information

Tens of thousands of books, pamphlets and websites exist that try to persuade people to believe in, commit to, and live their lives according to one set of beliefs or another. If you want to re-commit to or are ready for a conversion to or from a religion, people who already share the belief you want to have will help direct you to the best resources. If you are trying to change the way you feel about yourself, there are lots of self-help books to guide you. The following are some free internet sources that are helpful in a more general way.

- **Websites:**

- Spiritual Beliefs Selector Quiz, at <http://www.selectsmart.com/RELIGION/>.
- Exercise: Exploring and Living our Deepest Beliefs, at http://creative-spirit.info/femininepower/e_explore_deepest_belief.htm.
- “[InwardQuest](#)” is a site that lets people pose and/or answer questions about spirituality, philosophy, religion, and related topics.
- “[Important Caveats Concerning Personal Belief Revision: A Health Warning](#)”
- “[10 Ways to Be Your Own Life Coach](#),” a series of instructive pages by Victoria Moran on the belief.net website, explaining in a general but clear way the steps you can take, starting from figuring out what’s good for you to making specific changes in your life.