

What I Believe
By
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Today's message, "What I Believe," is a departure from my usual kind of sermons. I'm much more apophatic in my thinking, meaning I strive to reduce the number of things I believe in by questioning everything and attempting to always see things from different angles. Beliefs, to me, are, at the core, just personal opinions, and, to paraphrase Dirty Harry, "Opinions are like nostrils; everybody has at least one." And beliefs, in one of my opinions, ought to be well reasoned, not rationalized, and substantiated with empirical evidence. Even so, nothing, in another of my opinions, can be known with absolute certainty, and our beliefs should, thus, be held with humility, doubt, an awareness of their flaws and fragility, and uttered sparingly.

More usually, it seems to me, people use the term, "I believe," as if it alone is enough to validate what they are saying, seldom going deeper into the reasons for their beliefs, and becoming easily offended, sometimes to the point of feeling attacked or becoming angry, if their beliefs are challenged. It doesn't happen often, but occasionally someone even stands up in the middle of one of my sermons and marches out in protest over something I've said, as if they are morally justified in only listening to what they agree with.

Such a reaction, in another of my educated opinions, is indicative of magical thinking, what psychologists used to call the omnipotence of thought, the unconscious sense that ideas hold power in and of themselves, even without us acting on them. As such, they are revered, like totems, and, therefore, it becomes taboo, offensive, sacrilege, for us to touch them or try to take them down. Those who do are viewed as dangerous and wicked and are to be avoided at all costs. As Sigmund Freud said, "An individual who has violated a taboo becomes... taboo and has the dangerous property of tempting others to follow [one's] example. [One] is therefore really *contagious*... and... must be avoided."¹

He is right, ideas are contagious, and it's no surprise those who dread catching them will flee a contaminated scene. But I'm not afraid of ideas themselves. There are no ideas so sacred, in my opinion, that we can't touch them. I dread only those who act on their ideological totems in ways that are destructive, harmful, and unjust to others. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the European and Salem witch-hunts, McCarthyism, Vietnam, the Cold War, and now ISIS, are all rooted in an unwillingness to live in a world with different beliefs. These are some of the ways humans have collectively attempted to walk out of the room upon hearing ideas they disagree with. In realizing the world is too small to escape, however, some, instead, commit genocide, erect walls, build prisons, and ban immigration to prevent their ideological totems from being contaminated.

¹ Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, Barnes and Noble, New York, NY, 2005, 1913, p. 32.

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So, I would be embarrassed to walk away from someone just because I disagree with their beliefs. I might walk away if the conversation is no longer constructive, or if the idea is accompanied by harmful behavior, but not just because I can't stomach hearing something I don't believe. Such a reaction is no protest, but shows, rather, the insecurity and weakness of my own beliefs. But, more often, I'm embarrassed to utter the phrase, "I believe," at all, at least without justifying my beliefs with sound reason and empirical evidence. For I do not use "belief" in today's vernacular, as if, by reciting this magical incantation, "I believe," my ideas become immediately justified and untouchable, with no need for further explanation or argument.

When I say, "I believe," rather, I mean only that I am giving my opinion, and there is nothing sacred or untouchable about my beliefs, and that by calling my ideas "beliefs" I am admitting they are only conclusions based upon my own examination of the evidence. When I say, "I believe," I'm admitting I'm not certain about what I'm saying, that I'm only making my best educated guess, but realize that my logic might be flawed, or my evidence incomplete, and that there is always more to be considered. Thus, when I say, "I believe," I'm inviting dialogue so that through the dialectic process I might discard old errors and discover new truths and obtain greater understanding.

So, all of this is the preamble to me talking about what "I believe." Usually my approach to sermonizing is to challenge our beliefs, assumptions, and paradigms in a way that opens our minds. I strive to offer sermons that, like a woodcarver or stonecutter, chip away at the truths we hold so we can better get at the hidden truth obscured by our rigid mental constructs. Mine is a kind of shamanic preaching through which I try to provide consciousness expanding, mind-altering experiences.

So, yes, talking about what "I believe" is a departure for me. But, given that we are celebrating our first five years of ministry together, I thought today it might be fun for me to attempt playing on the plus side of the ideological equation, rather than staying on the minus side. (So, are we having fun yet?) Obviously, so far at least, it's not been as much fun as I had imagined, mostly because I've felt compelled to begin with this lengthy apologetic without yet having mentioned anything I believe in.

This is so, again, because I want to be clear about what I mean by the term, "I believe," so you know my beliefs, expressed in their rawness, without a lot of in depth explanation regarding my reasons for holding them, are merely my opinions and assumptions, and I don't mind you disagreeing with me about them. But, in truth, I've also been stalling. Sitting down to prepare this sermon was accompanied by some of worst writer's block I've ever had. Trying to put together an affirmative list of what, exactly, I believe in, has been challenging. I much prefer the blank page, which is much more reflective of what's on my mind, than any list of my inadequate personal opinions.

I've also been stalling because, as you shall discover, some of my beliefs are just plain weird. I believe in things like Bigfoot and UFOs, and what I believe about them is weirder still, unlike anything you've ever heard before. Nevertheless, I realize I have stalled long enough, that if

I don't fulfill my promise soon, you're apt to walk out in boredom, not protest. So now that I am more than a third of the way through my sermon, let me begin.

The first thing I believe, if it isn't already obvious, is that we cannot know anything with certainty. I believe that if humans were capable of understanding this, atrocities like the Crusades, the Inquisition, the witch-hunts, McCarthyism, Vietnam, the Cold War, ISIS and so many other injustices now and throughout history could have been avoided. If only we understood there is nothing sacred about our ideas, nothing untouchable about them, and that they aren't worth fighting and killing over, we'd become a much better species.

At the same time, being an Empiricist, I believe truth is objective. I know Kierkegaard famously said, "All truth is subjective," but I think he meant that we can only understand it subjectively, from our own limited perspective, and not that truth doesn't exist beyond our perception of it. To the question, *if a tree falls in the woods and there's no one there to hear it, does it make a sound*, I say, "yes," because I believe truth, in the form of empirical reality, exists beyond my awareness. It's called object permanence, something we learn early in life, that if the ball rolls under the bed it hasn't ceased to exist just because we can't see it. Of course, technically speaking, only the longitudinal waves that produce sound exist outside perception, but it takes something for them to bounce against to produce sound, like an ear drum. This is why there's no sound on the moon, because there's no atmosphere for these waves to crash against. So, like I said, there's always more to consider.

Our species, for example, has evolved to perceive only a narrow range of the light spectrum. We can't see ultraviolet light like bees can, or see with x-ray vision, or see the world in grayscale like dogs and wolves and other predators do. But this doesn't necessarily mean truth itself is subjective, but only that we are extremely limited by our abilities to perceive it. I believe that if our senses were unlimited, and our logic impeccable, we would better grasp the truth. This is so, I believe, because truth is objective, by which I mean it is empirical, or physical. It exists independent of our minds and what we think about it, and with the right senses or sensory devices, like telescopes, microscopes, particle colliders, MRIs, ultrasound machines, and so on, we can better grasp objective truth.

Another way of putting it is to say that I believe reality is empirical. When it comes to the old mind/body problem, the question of whether the Universe is nonphysical or physical, I lean toward the physical. We perceive it subjectively, and, therefore, interpret it with our minds, but, I believe, what we are perceiving is physical, and that even our mental and emotional processes are physical, chemical reactions. So that's my first belief, my first assumption, that truth is objective, physical, and empirical and that it is only, but always, our interpretations of it that are subjective.

At the same time, even if I do believe consciousness is physical, I also believe the Universe is becoming increasingly conscious all the time, increasingly aware of itself. This is so because I believe evolution is a fundamental process at work in everything throughout the Universe. In short, I believe, the Universe itself is evolving. And here's what I believe about evolution. Evolution causes simple constructs to become increasingly complex. Evolution occurs exponentially, meaning things become more complex over shorter periods of time the longer

they've been around. And I believe evolution is a process of unification. In other words, things become more complex over time because evolution merges them with other things. The Universe itself began, for instance, with just one element nearly 14 billion years ago, and now 118 elements have been discovered, a few of which we've invented ourselves. Likewise, life on Earth began 3.5 billion years ago as single cell organisms. Then, a billion years later, some of those cells came together to form complex communities of slime and algae, then invertebrates, then vertebrates, then the Cambrian explosion, and dinosaurs for 165 million years, then mammals took over 65 million years ago, with the first hominids appearing only about 2 million years ago, followed by modern humans about 200,000 years ago, and within just the past few decades our rapidly evolving technology has allowed us to go to the moon and develop the Internet. And just as single cells came together to form increasingly complex creatures at an exponential rate, we see that even our technology is merging together at an exponential rate, as all sorts of items that were separate just a few decades ago, cameras, flashlights, magnifying glasses, games, telephones, tape recorders, music players, albums, clocks, radios, televisions, photo albums, note pads, watches, calendars, games, compasses, computers, and so on, are all contained within one tiny smart phone.

I also believe that the underlying nature of reality is information. All forms are formed by information, including life. Life is information, which isn't so hard to accept these days given all we've discovered about genetic code and DNA. I also believe the same algorithm DNA uses to construct various lifeforms is the same algorithm that constructs everything. In fact, I believe life wouldn't exist if this wasn't true, that this information algorithm existed before life in the Universe and that biology is only one of its expressions, but so are rocks, planets, and stars. As physicist Frank Tipler says, "'life' is a form of information processing... life is information preserved by natural selection."² Or, as MIT professor, Cesar Hidalgo says in his book, *Why Information Grows*, "Information is a fundamental aspect of nature that is older than life itself."³

Again, I do not know, but I believe there is an underlying algorithm that informs everything and originates from a low frequency vibration that hums throughout the Universe, the same sound Hindus try to imitate when they chant the primordial sounds of *ah* and *ohm*, and that Tibetan Buddhists emulate through that droning hum they call throat singing. This algorithm is expressed biologically through DNA, which has four bases, three of which combine to make one of 64 possible nucleotide triplets called *codons*. These 64 codons are the words that make up the language of life that's responsible for providing the genetic instructions that shape every living thing. The *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese oracle I spoke of just a few weeks ago, likewise has four base numbers that are arranged into triplets called trigrams. These trigrams, like DNA, are stacked on top of each other, forming a kind of information ladder, and, like DNA, there are only 64 possible combinations. This similarity, and others like it, suggests, to me, that information has an underlying structure that can be expressed biologically, but in other ways too, including something as inorganic as the *I Ching*.

² Tipler, Frank, *The Physics of Immortality*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1994, 1995, p. 125

³ Hidalgo, Cesar, *Why Information Grows*, Basic Books, New York, NY, 2015, p. 5.

What this further implies for me is that as information evolves, it's going to have to find a way to escape the limitations of being crammed inside our genes. I realize I've already pointed out that information is everywhere and isn't confined to biology; but, as far as we know, its biological expression is, thus far in its evolution, its most complex state yet. In its biological phase, it has become increasingly conscious or self-aware, especially in its human form. And there is, undeniably, a lot of information crammed into our tiny genes. Each one of us contains 125 billion miles of DNA inside our bodies, enough, as anthropologist Jeremy Narby says, "to make 70 round trips between Saturn and the Sun."⁴ That's a lot of information infrastructure, but it's still miniscule compared to the enormity of the Universe. If the Universe is going to become completely conscious of itself, it will eventually have to find a way to transcend its biological limitations and communicate through an energy infrastructure instead.

I believe humans represent this bridge between information's biological expression and what, for lack of a better term, I would call its coming *spiritual* expression. For ours is the only species on Earth we know of that can already transmit information inorganically. In other words, we are not limited to passing on information through the exchange of genetic materials like other animals. Just as I am doing at this moment, and do each Sunday, we can pass information through our ideas without ever coming into direct physical contact with each other. Again, as Hildago says, "Humans are special animals when it comes to information, because unlike other species, we have developed an enormous ability to encode large volumes of information outside our bodies."⁵

I believe this transformation from the biological to the spiritual, or purely energetic expression, will soon pass through a technological stage during which we will integrate more closely with our machines, allowing us to, at first, transcend the limitations of our bodies through telepathic like abilities. Eventually, however, we, or at least what we become, the people of the future, will exist entirely as energy, having learned to live in carrier waves and other subatomic states of being. Right now, the quantum particles that make up our bodies are not conscious, so far as we know, except as much as we are conscious, which isn't very much. Compared to the vastness of the Universe, to all that we don't know, we are less conscious than a simple, single, photosensitive cell seems to us. What I'm envisioning is a future in which consciousness permeates the entire Universe on a quantum level and, because everything is interconnected at this scale, the entire Universe will be aware of itself.

This brings me to what I believe about the afterlife. Usually, when people ask me what I think happens after we die, I simply say, "I don't know, but, just as we see the renewal of life all around us, in the phases of the moon, in the rebirth of Spring from Winter, in the worm whose body becomes its own sarcophagus through which a butterfly is reborn, I think, in some way, the energy that makes us up continues on in some way. For physics tells us energy can't be destroyed, only changed, and everything, according to Einstein, even matter, is really energy." But what I believe, more specifically, is that someday, when the Universe becomes

⁴ Narby, Jeremy, *The Cosmic Serpent*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1998, p. 88.

⁵ Hildago, *ibid*.

conscious, when Brahman awakens from his dream, as the Hindu myth says, it will become conscious of everything that has ever been, and all consciousness, including mine and yours, will become part of a greater cosmic consciousness, just as a small drop of rain eventually returns to become part of the vast ocean. When this happens, I won't be less aware, but more aware of who I am, and will understand more than I ever thought possible. And I believe we will all be there together, part of this shared consciousness, gazillions of times more connected than the Internet is today, which, nevertheless, may represent its fetal beginnings.

It might also surprise you to learn, given that I freely admit I don't believe in a personal god and don't like using the word *spiritual* very often, that I do believe in things like Bigfoot and UFOs. I do not believe, however, that they occupy physical space, at least not like automobiles and bears do. They are, rather, I hypothesize, dream like images that appear while those who witness them are awake. To understand why I say this, imagine you take a psychoactive compound like peyote, ayahuasca, psilocybin, or LSD, and suddenly you are aware of things in your environment you couldn't see before. The best explanation I've heard for this experience is that it's like dreaming while being awake, as state in which ordinary reality gets mixed up with symbolic reality. Jeremy Narby suggests, further, that the symbols we experience while under the influence of these compounds represent microscopic, if not, quantum realities. Since our senses don't ordinarily allow us to perceive reality at this scale, our minds overlay them with symbolic representations we can recognize. So we see the double helical structure of DNA as entwined serpents, or viruses as poison darts, as Shaman describe them, or dissociated and repressed feelings as aliens, and, if I were to guess, atomic particles as flying saucers, and, perhaps, envision our unconscious instincts and wildness as Bigfoot.

Keep in mind that seeing UFOs and aliens is a common experience for those under the influence of these consciousness expanding compounds, as is the experience of ingesting them and feeling as if one shrinks down, like Alice in Wonderland, to microscopic proportions. We also know that a certain amount of N-Dimethyltryptamin, or DMT, the psychoactive molecule in all these compounds, is endogenous in the human brain, meaning a sudden over production of it could induce visionary states, including seeing UFOs and Bigfoots, which, I believe, represent some quantum or unconscious reality we have no other ways of imagining.

See, I told you some of my beliefs are pretty weird, even if I do have sound reasons and evidence for them. Even so, as I faced the ominous emptiness beneath the title, *What I Believe*, I think these are the beliefs that eventually spilled onto the blank pages before me, because, weird as they are, complicated as they seem, as difficult to understand as they might be, these are the beliefs that most give my life meaning and inform my worldview. They make me open, accepting, curious, and unafraid of others. They make me optimistic, even in the wake of suffering and injustice, that we're going to get through this and the future will be better than we can imagine. They fill my mind and heart with a sense of awe and wonder that fills me with enthusiasm and joy, even amidst adversity. They make my inner life rich, yet also help me transcend myself by feeling a part of everything that ever was, is, and is to be. Inadequate, incomplete, perhaps even untrue, as they might be, these are the strange beliefs that give my life meaning. I hope, whatever they are, your beliefs do the same for you.