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INTERCOLLEGE PROGRAMS

PENN STATE BELIEVES: WHEN THE VALUE OF SHARED BELIEF AND THE
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY OF SELF-MEDICATION COLLIDE

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Abstract: This paper is a personal reflection on the value of being aware of our belief and on the technologically flooded environment that might, when all is said and done, distract Penn State students from making the effort or taking the time to become aware of the beliefs of ourselves or those around us.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The following thesis is a pilot study, and will serve to test the waters for a much larger experiment in the future. Nonetheless, this thesis will explore belief and public scholarship. Before we get into the thick of the introduction, let us momentarily discuss what inspired me to pursue this project, what this project is, and why I ultimately decided to follow through with it. I believe that my motivations are relevant to the study itself.

Facebook Contest

It started as a game. As a bored sophomore, I created a contest on Facebook aimed at my peers. Basically, I posed a question (via my Facebook status) daily, and friends commented on it. At the end of each week, I doled out points to worthy commenters, and there was ultimately a prize drawing at the culmination of the project. It was meant as a fun way to interact with my friends, but it was also a disguised opportunity to see how well social networking facilitated community sharing. It went well, with over a hundred different participants over several months, as well as about forty regulars that commented at least three times a week. I was happy with the results: I single-handedly created an online community that was not only responding to me, but responding to each other. While the contest was a success, I was not entirely happy with it. Specifically, there were three problems that I encountered.

Initially, there was a fear that people would not participate without material incentive, and so, I succumbed and offered prizes to participate. But by doing so, I was afraid that I diluted the sharing community. In a survey conducted after the contest, most participants said that they would have done the contest sans prizes, and thusly, I wondered whether this would have been the case in the first place.

In addition, I noticed a trend within the contest that I wanted to further explore. The contest itself was quite light-hearted. Most questions were comical, or at least fantastical, in nature. In consequence, the answers that people provided were also as such. Furthermore, when I provided a serious question, many people still responded comically, and the overall participation for the day went down significantly. This phenomenon concerned me. I debated whether this occurred because I conditioned participants to respond this way (since most of the questions were comical), or if it was due to people straying away from expressing themselves in a serious manner on Facebook.

The final problem with this initial contest was its limitations: specifically, Facebook statuses and comments are limited to several hundred characters, severely curtailing response depth. I was curious to see if people would share more if they had the ability to.

The Year Following the Facebook Contest

Following the Facebook contest, I became set on a thesis revolved around creating a community of sharing. Except this time, I would not offer material incentives, it would be rather serious, and participants would have to be more descriptive with their answers. This, I believed, would foster an interactive community interested in sharing life experiences and beliefs.

I was quickly put into contact with Dr. Jeremy Cohen, the creator of a program at Penn State University that focused on public scholarship and civic engagement. We met a handful of times during the fall semester of my junior year, started talking things out, and then I went to study abroad in New Zealand for the spring semester. It was in New Zealand that the outline of this thesis came together.

While taking a graduate biodiversity class in New Zealand, I learned about trophic models, which are similar to food webs. Certain species depend on others, and there are special species that the whole chain depends on (called keystone species.) I wondered, is there a trophic model of belief, just as there is a food web? When we're atop the food chain, it's hard to think of anything other than the fact that humans are dominant. But within our species, unique beliefs separate and unite us. I hoped that I could possibly model a system of beliefs that would depict Penn State as a functioning, breathing ecosystem of belief that corresponds with thousands of different "species" of people, and adjusts with the changes presented on a day to day basis.

I came back for my senior year, ready to begin the initial phase of my thesis. It was going to be grand; a show part civic engagement, part ecological theory. Dr. Rosa Eberly (my independent study professor and acting thesis advisor for the fall semester) and I focused on reproducing NPR's "This I Believe" project because of its proven success and ability to coax serious beliefs out of people. Details on "This I Believe" can be found in the following section, so for now, just know that it is a project that called for ordinary citizens to write page-long statements of belief. Originally, I set my sights high: I wanted to collect statements of belief from all walks of life at Penn State, i.e. professors, students, lunch ladies, bar owners, etc. This would provide a full spectrum to work with.

It should be noted that I have written a "This I Believe" statement before, and it had quite an impact on my views on beliefs. It is my opinion that no one sincerely knows what he or she believes until they sit down and write it out. The process of selecting a single belief to write about is deceptively difficult, and it often leads to profound realizations. In consequence, much like a Mormon is obliged to go on a mission to spread the faith, I feel the same distinct compulsion to impress "This I Believe" on others. I think everyone should write one.

Unfortunately, I realized that this was not feasible. Analyzing hundreds of statements in less than two semesters would be nearly impossible, and obtaining said statements would be rather difficult as well. In result, I had to pick a particular demographic to focus on, and essentially hold the trophic model of belief theory testing for a future experiment.

The Project

Now that you've seen the evolution of the theory behind this thesis, let's look at what it actually is. This thesis sets out to focus on the beliefs of people my age (college age or right out of college.) Using Facebook as a forum, I set up a group page that would serve as the meeting place for the community that I hoped to create. Hundreds of people my age were invited to participate by writing their own "This I Believe" statements, and said statements were analyzed by me after the fact.

It should be noted that no hypothesis was tested. In consequence, this methodology is less research oriented, and should not be considered social science at its purest. Instead, this thesis better fits the mold of long-form, personalized journalism that hopes to dig up some questions and apply selective research that can answer them. The author takes artistic liberties in the discussion and thusly, this thesis also serves as a personal reflection. The following introduction will explore "This I Believe" in its specific historical contexts, and the merits of Facebook as a community will also be discussed.

"This I Believe" and 1950s Society

The Cold War era began as tensely as World War II ended. Specifically, the increasing friction between Soviet Russia and the United States caused an unrest that profoundly shaped

American society. The capitalistic ideals in which the United States was founded upon were threatened by the spread of communism and socialism. In result, the late 1940s/ early 1950s were dominated by the powerful Senator Joseph McCarthy.¹ The former Senator from Wisconsin led a campaign that made unsubstantiated accusations concerning the loyalty of American citizens, typically taking advantage of anti-communist sentiments. Later coined McCarthyism, these accusations violated the same rights they wished to protect. McCarthyism targeted individuals who thought differently, and consequently permeated all societal constructs, including Hollywood.

The ensuing atmosphere in the United States was one of apprehension and fear. Citizens were pressured to fall in line or risk being persecuted for their views. Furthermore, the impending threat of nuclear war left people in a state of anxiety. Many Americans literally burrowed into the ground for safety.² Figuratively, Americans buried their beliefs deep inside themselves to avoid associations that led to communist accusations. Such a culture disapproved of any self-expression and lacked a healthy discussion of belief.

Original “This I Believe”

This I Believe began broadcasting in 1951 through the CBS Radio Network under the notable guidance of creator and host Edward R. Murrow.³ An American broadcast journalist famous for his overseas work during World War II, Murrow sought to form a community of

¹ Fried, Richard M. *Nightmare in Red the McCarthy Era in Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991

² Murrow, Edward R. "The 1951 Introduction to 'This I Believe' : NPR." *NPR : National Public Radio : News & Analysis, World, US, Music & Arts : NPR*. 04 Apr. 2005. Web. 01 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4566554>>.

³ "About This I Believe | This I Believe." *This I Believe | A Public Dialogue about Belief — One Essay at a Time*. Web. 01 Dec. 2010. <<http://thisibelieve.org/about/>>.

discussion during the peak of Senator McCarthy's influential reign.⁴ He recognized that Americans were not sharing beliefs or respecting each other. In an era in which citizens were being unjustly victimized, Murrow called for a simple positive statement of belief that would be broadcast over live radio in the writers' own voices. McCarthyism thrived on the shades of grey that the Cold War cast upon the United States, and Murrow hoped that "This I Believe" would help people differentiate black from white. In reality, "This I Believe" allowed Americans to speak for themselves, and chose sides for themselves. Those that were accused could finally defend their beliefs in a national public forum.

The original invitation sent out by the "This I Believe" team asked for a five hundred word essay that was not a sermon, but instead a highly personalized affirmation of belief.⁵ It reads (in its entirety):

This invites you to make a very great contribution: nothing less than a statement of your personal beliefs, of the values which rule your thought and action. Your essay should be about three minutes in length when read loud, written in a style as you yourself speak, and total no more than 500 words.

We know this is a tough job. What we want is so intimate that no one can write it for you. You must write it yourself, in the language most natural to you. We ask you to write in your own words and then record in your own voice. You may even find that it takes a

⁴ Jensen, Carl. "Edward R. Murrow." *Stories That Changed America: Muckrakers of the 20th Century*. New York: Seven Stories, 2000. 133-44

⁵ Murrow, Edward R. "NPR : This I Believe." *NPR : National Public Radio : News & Analysis, World, US, Music & Arts : NPR*. Web. 01 Dec. 2010.
<http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/orig_invitation.html>.

request like this for you to reveal some of your own beliefs to yourself. If you set them down they may become of untold meaning to others.

We would like you to tell not only what you believe, but how you reached your beliefs, and if they have grown, what made them grow. This necessarily must be highly personal. That is what we anticipate and want.

It may help you in formulating your credo if we tell you also what we do not want. We do not want a sermon, religious or lay; we do not want editorializing or sectarianism or ‘finger-pointing.’ We do not even want your views on the American way of life, or democracy or free enterprise. These are important but for another occasion. We want to know what you live by. And we want it in terms of ‘I,’ not the editorial ‘We.’

Although this program is designed to express beliefs, it is not a religious program and is not concerned with any religious form whatever. Most of our guests express belief in a Supreme Being, and set forth the importance to them of that belief. However, that is your decision, since it is your belief which we solicit.

But we do ask you to confine yourself to affirmatives: This means refraining from saying what you do not believe. Your beliefs may well have grown in clarity to you by a process of elimination and rejection, but for our part, we must avoid negative statements lest we become a medium for the criticism of beliefs, which is the very opposite of our purpose.

We are sure the statement we ask from you can have wide and lasting influence. Never has the need for personal philosophies of this kind been so urgent. Your belief, simply and sincerely spoken, is sure to stimulate and help those who hear it. We are confident it will enrich them. May we have your contribution? -- Edward Murrow

It asked participants to avoid topics such as the American way of life or democracy because “This I Believe” was to be an individual pursuit. In its place, “What we want is so intimate that no one can write it for you.”⁶ In the “us vs. them” culture of the Cold War, this contest was a tangible way to be a positive individual. Accordingly, the program received thousands of essays (800 of which were recorded for radio airplay) and “This I Believe” was notably successful.⁷

Edward Murrow disagreed with Senator McCarthy’s practices. In 1954, the journalist produced a rebuking See It Now report called "A Report on Senator Joseph McCarthy."⁸ Met with critical acclaim, this special is widely credited as a crucial factor in Senator McCarthy’s rapid fall from the public’s good graces.⁹ The original “This I Believe” series ended in 1955.

Here follows a series of short descriptions of twenty-five “This I Believe” essays from the 1950s. Each essay is labeled and sorted by theme by Thisibelieve.org. These essays were

⁶ Murrow, Edward R. "NPR : This I Believe." *NPR : National Public Radio : News & Analysis, World, US, Music & Arts : NPR*. Web. 01 Dec. 2010.
<http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/orig_invitation.html>.

⁷ Gediman, Mary Jo (Outreach Director for This I Believe, Inc.) "Re: Essay Count." Message to the author. 20 Oct. 2010. E-mail.

⁸ "Edward R. Murrow: A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy." *The Library-University of California, Berkeley*. 25 July 2006. Web. 01 Dec. 2010.
<<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/murrowmccarthy.html>>.

⁹ "Edward R. Murrow - This Reporter | American Masters." *PBS: Public Broadcasting Service*. 02 Feb. 2007. Web. 01 Dec. 2010.
<<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/edward-r-murrow/this-reporter/513/>>.

chosen using the following method: a random pool of essays was compiled by selecting two random essays from each webpage (essays per page) for forty pages. It should be noted that these webpages contained 1950s essays only. The five most recurring themes of “This I Believe” were tallied. Then, twenty-five essays within these themes were chosen to describe. Essays were chosen based on certain criteria (age, celebrity, gender) to create a balanced view. Each description includes a small biography (if available) as well as information deemed relevant. The aim of these descriptions is to capture writers’ sentiments and beliefs in their own words. All of the following essays can be found at Thisibelieve.org.

Faith & Religion

Faith and religion were some of the most prominent themes in 1950s essays. This makes sense because at the time, the United States’ population was dominated by Christian doctrine. The following essays reflect people’s desire to connect and depend on a higher being.

Cyril Fox’s “This I Believe” essay focuses on the faith gained through scripture. A man of science, even Cyril Fox does “not understand or grasp the essential magnificence of the laws which created the universe...all that I believe, then, comes from a faith-a belief- that these things could not happen just by chance.” Therefore, he believes that he must have faith in what he cannot understand with his finite mind. It should be noted that this essay is rather questioning; Fox struggles with his faith even when writing about its strengths. The next essay writer, Lord Elton, feels more steadfast in his faith.

Lord Elton’s “This I Believe” essay concern’s his faith in the New Testament and more specifically, in those who “spread love and hope and courage around them like an infection.” His faith is placed in those that follow his religion’s doctrines (whether or not they know they are

following said doctrines.) The essay itself comes off preachy but falls short of pushy. By placing his faith in others, Lord Elton has elected to believe in the goodness of humanity. The following writer, Barry Bingham Sr., would likely agree with Lord Elton's opinion, although in a stricter sense.

Barry Bingham Sr. was the owner of several newspapers in Kentucky that won multiple Pulitzer Prizes. His essay, entitled "A Good And Useful Life," references the Parable of the Talents (New Testament) to explain that people are responsible for the way their lives play out. Barry thought that those less fortunate in life were not expected to produce equal results in life as that of a more privileged man. He further stipulates that his generation sought to live without religion to gain independence: "As to the absolute independence we have sought in vain, the Book of Common Prayer could have told us all along that, "the answer is in God, whose service is perfect freedom." In consequence, he believed that faith in God was life's guiding factor. Note that Barry regularly references himself as an American and uses group wording such as "us" and "we." The next writer, Archibald T. Davison, relates belief to his own inner struggles rather than others' trials and tribulations.

Archibald T. Davison was a conductor of the Harvard Glee Club and was a music man of high decoration. His essay, entitled "Ten Black Seconds," follows an instance as a child that has haunted him to this day. After shutting the door on a homeless man in need, Archibald Davison decided to "try...never to speak a sentence which may affect the peace of mind of another without first putting myself in his place, weighing the chances of a misunderstanding." Relating his struggles to a passage in the Bible, his faith has helped him avoid "repeating in some form that cruelty of my youth," effectively protecting those around him. Archibald and the next writer, Julien Bryan, both believe in doing good for others.

Julien Bryan was an educational filmmaker who documented dozens of different and unique cultures of the world. His essay, entitled “Friendship Is a Passport,” looks at the endearing similarities among men and women during World War I, no matter the religion they followed. His “real faith, then, is a dream that in spite of daily headlines prophesying man’s destruction, we can build a better world, a world of peace and human comradeship.” Referencing his experiences with past cultures, Bryan places faith in religion in general, and its ability to unite, not separate.

Purpose & Responsibility

Purpose and responsibility is a theme that is only prominent in the 1950s “This I Believe” campaign. Most participants wrote about a purpose towards a greater good, something bigger than themselves.

Dora E. Dodge was a farm-girl who became an executive director of a Girls Club in Massachusetts. Her “This I Believe” essay starts: “I believe that only a life with purpose can truly achieve happiness, and I believe that each one of us must decide for himself if he will share the responsibility of making this a better world.” A highly religious person, Dora Dodge explains that only faith in God can foster the will to take on the responsibility necessary to achieve happiness. The essay concludes with an original poem written by her. The next writer, Alfred Drake, shares the same belief in purpose leading to happiness.

Alfred Drake’s “This I Believe” essay expands upon a memory of an aerialist performing on a tight wire. Thrilled by the man’s daring nature, Alfred Drake compared his life to such a risky task from then on. He then stipulates that humans were given the potential to succeed, and that “We have created a force so extreme that it can either save us, once and for all, or destroy

us, completely and forever. We are forcing the issue to a final decision. I know I must share the work and responsibility of that decision.” In such eloquent words, Drake believes that man has a purpose to fulfill, and that there is a way to do so gracefully and responsibly. Note that he talks of a “force so extreme,” perhaps the hydrogen bomb. The next essayist, Genevieve Earle, thinks that the best way to fulfill purpose is to get involved in government, where many hands make light work.

Genevieve Earle was a social worker and the first woman elected to the New York City Council. Her essay, “The Job of Citizenship,” spoke of the responsibility of being a good citizen. In her case, good citizenship was achieved through government work. A childhood experience led Genevieve to believe that “if each one of us did his or her share and lived up to the spirit of this oath, that his town, his nation, and the world would be a happier and a very better place to live in.” Consequently, Genevieve went on to committing herself to social work in New York City. This essay is written much like a motivating speech, compelling people to get involved in their communities. James T. Babb, the next writer, would be proud to call Genevieve Earle a fellow citizen.

James T. Babb’s “This I Believe” essay concerns the responsibility people have to their children, and to themselves. He begins, “I believe that I am on this Earth to make a contribution to the betterment of all humanity, no matter how small and apparently insignificant.” The rest of the essay is a focused plan on how James Babb will accomplish this through economic security and dedication to his trade. He writes sternly with an intensity found when a person is satisfied with what they believe. James wants to better humanity, while the next writer, Niven Busch, simply wants humanity to be more communal.

Niven Busch was a celebrated screenwriter and an American novelist. His essay, entitled “The Fellowship of the World,” focused on the importance of camaraderie: “I join the fellowship of the world, in humility before the mysteries that surround the journey.” He believed that life’s purpose was to ride the subway instead of a cab, or in other words, to cleanse oneself in the company of others, for solitary people can learn nothing from themselves. Niven Busch proposed that community was essential to human life.

Brotherhood & Friendship

In the previous theme (purpose and responsibility), writers often mention the need to contribute to a greater good, the fellowship of humanity. This section, brotherhood and friendship, more directly appeals to the theme of togetherness.

Emily Hahn was a journalist and author of 52 books mostly focused on Chinese themes and culture. Her “This I Believe” essay follows a theory that babies recognize other babies though they lack any substantial cognition. Emily Hahn identified a certain bond in infant-infant interactions, and realized that “self-love and love for one another are one and the same.” Therefore, she believed that only a world filled with comradeship would last. The next essayist, Lord William Beveridge, expands this theory to post-mortem.

Lord William Beveridge was an Oxford graduate, a British economist, and most notably the creator of the Beveridge Report, the basis for the Post World War II welfare state in the United Kingdom. His “This I Believe” essay shed light on vicarious immortality, the idea that one can live on in people’s memories. Though an agnostic as a child, Lord Beveridge chose to study Christianity and found that nothing could save humanity more than “the spreading to all men not of Christian dogma but of the spirit of Christ, making all men see themselves at last as

brothers.” He reasons that a man who can unite others in fellowship has lived a full and model life. The following writer, Leonard Bernstein, opts to develop the idea of fellowship that Lord William Beveridge so values.

Leonard Bernstein was a director of the New York Philharmonic, famous for his fusion of classical and new music. His essay, entitled “The Mountain Disappears,” literally states: “I believe in people.” As a director, this makes perfect sense. Furthermore, Leonard Bernstein believed that progress in the arts was a way for humans to communicate with dignity, for “Man cannot have dignity without loving the dignity of his fellow.” He ultimately states that the United States is the place where such communication can occur most readily. James Carey, the next essayist, shares a faith in people as a union leader.

James B. Carey was the first president of the International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers. As the leader of a large union, his essay, entitled “The Proud People of a Proud Country,” is full of appeals to blue-collar sentiments and mixing bowl theories. James Carey believed that “Man can be strong alone but not indomitable, in isolation. He has to belong to something, to realize he is not created separately or apart from the rest of mankind.” In essence, fellowship was not only convenient, but also necessary in Carey’s life and work. He believed in the health of humanity. The following writer, John Drummey, would agree that the welfare of humanity as a whole is vital.

John David Drummey was a disabled World War II veteran, a writer for Boston magazine, and a long-time public relations representative. His essay, entitled “We Do Not Live Alone,” detailed Drummey’s faith in brotherhood and fellowship. His “main point is that we do not live alone in this contracting globe unless the belief in belonging to the human race is most important now, with bomb tensions, rabid nationalism, and rampant suspicion.” This essay

stresses the need for a strong community, and furthermore, how the people he knew got him through such hard times early in his life.

War, Tolerance, & Fear

This section, a combination of themes geared towards war, is much like the former in that most writers stress a necessity for brotherhood and friendship. In addition, much is written about momentary weakness caused by war, and the potential ways to move past it.

Roger Angell served in the Air Force during World War II and later became a contributor to *The New Yorker*. His essay, entitled “The Dignity of Man,” paints a picture of a world torn by war and fueled by fear. Nonetheless, he believes that “Man is capable of the heights, but he is with infinite slowness and infinite mistakes, edging out of the darkness.” Furthermore, he sees himself in man:

I base my belief somewhat upon history. I base it more on man himself as I see him. Once in a while, in my dealings with other men, an astonishing thing happens. Something I cannot get out of my head. Suddenly I see straight into a man and find, to my shock, only myself there. This is a rare moment, because men do not often give themselves away, only by accident or in times of great pain and happiness. In that moment, if I dare to look, I see in any man my own desires, my deeply hidden beliefs, my need for love, my inner seriousness, and my hope. This moment is a lightning flash in an unlit room that suddenly illuminates all. After it is gone, I still see, pressed on my eyes for a few instants, the shape, the bright highlights and the true vivid colors of the dark room in which I sit. In that moment, the dignity of man is an almost visible thing.

Roger Angell has hope for the future because he thinks that man has barely scratched his potential to achieve peace. He has hope because he sees himself in others. Edwin Balmer, the next essayist, casts man in a more fallible, but equally redeeming, light.

Edwin Balmer's "This I Believe" essay charts the 'progress' that the modern world was going through in the 1950s. At first, Balmer believed that progress in science and education meant an obvious decrease of injustices. But after two World Wars and personal foundations shook by deliberate attacks on humans, he found that "This comes to me as a call to my duty today, reminding me there was never through any single great stroke that civilization was built up, but through the countless inconspicuous acts of millions like myself." Balmer's essay seems to have served as a reminder to him that morality develops from community not progress. The next writer, Paul Barnes, agrees that small acts of humanity can add up.

Paul R. Barnes' "This I Believe" essay describes a young boy, Jimmy, who slowly loses his humanity as he grows older. Paul Barnes then provides several different situations in which someone of a different denomination than his own (race, religion, opportunity, etc) has helped him through hard times. He concludes by saying that "We all meet people every day. They're not perfect, nor am I. I like them and I hope they like me. But even if they don't, I still think people are pretty wonderful." Paul Barnes successfully wades through his prejudices to find a common belief in people. The next writer agrees that toleration is paramount (if adoration is unworkable).

V.K. Krishna Menon was the founder of Pelican Books, as well as a delegate in the United Nations General Assembly. His "This I Believe" essay is about tolerance. V.K believes that "Toleration is the intelligent and conscious recognition of the essential nature of the human mind and of the self- one's own and the other presence." In other words, tolerance is necessary in that you must recognize those around you as human. Once you do this, you allow fellow humans

the dignity and respect that they deserve. Harry T. Brundidge, the following essayist, also believes in toleration and more so the human connection.

Harry T. Brundidge's essay, entitled "No Better than a Criminal," depicts the life of a man who has known criminals and written about them in newspapers. In consequence, the essay makes the case that criminals are indeed people, and do good as well as evil. Harry Brundidge stresses tolerance, a tolerance that has led him to a religion that "has rewarded me. Anyone whose religion is people is sure to be rewarded." His ability to relate to people, despite their misgivings, guides him towards a faith in mankind.

Goodness & Kindness

Goodness and kindness is a theme that is ever-present throughout the original "This I Believe" campaign. All of the essays in this section regard helping others as the highest priority, and read that way.

Lindsay is from Rancho Cucamonga, California. Her "This I Believe" essay, entitled "Where so ever you go, go with all your heart," is about a life led by kindness. Lindsay says that she has always been known for her kindness: "I live by my heart and cherish the moments, whether good or bad, that come with it. I believe that many people follow their hearts and that it is a healthy lifestyle to live." She concedes that although her blind kindness has been taken advantage of before, it has more often led her down the correct path resulting in a positive impact on someone's life. Like Lindsay, the next writer, Samuel Best, believes in giving even if it leads to some detriment to self.

Samuel Best was the president of a soap company named the Cuticura Corporation. His essay, entitled "How to Give Your Money Away," tells of the president prior to Samuel Best, a

man named George Robert White. Mr. White acts as the voice of belief, saying “If we are to be happy, if we are to be successful in every aspect of the word, if we are to live truly full lives, we must share ourselves, as well as our material gain, with our fellow men.” These words resonated with Samuel Best, who later took hold of the company and donated two-thirds of every dollar of profits despite its probable disadvantageous effects on the company. He believed in giving. The next essayist, Charles Duveen Jr., received once and was forever grateful.

Charles Duveen Jr., from New York, NY, was a fighter pilot for the United States Air Force during World War II. His essay, entitled “The Qualities of Mercy and Truth,” details a change in philosophy. Charles recalls jumping out of a plane after it sustained damage, and instantly feeling regret because he left an antique watch on it. Looking back, he realizes the foolishness of such emotion: “I am convinced, since my hour of rescue, that mankind can survive only as a cooperative unit... [Man’s] greatest talent is goodwill toward each other.” Charles once revered objects such as fine art, but finds in a time of crisis that his greatest possession is his fellow man’s goodwill towards him upon rescue. Willis Gorthy, the following writer, spreads goodwill every day through his job.

Willis Gorthy’s “This I Believe” essay revolves around Mr. Gorthy’s opportunities to help those he deems most helpless: “cripples.” He is proud of the work he does, and “believe[s] our greatest happiness comes from the satisfaction we get from serving others.” The essay also provides the viewpoint of a generous but busy, wealthy man who tells Willis Gorthy, “He envied the opportunities I have in my daily work to personally serve the disabled.” This implies that Willis Gorthy believes time, not money, is the key to enriching his life. The final writer in this section is Carroll Carroll, who agrees that cooperation is the key to a kind world.

Carroll Carroll's essay, entitled "Dreams Are the Stuff Life is Made Of," depicts a life of relative ease. Carroll Carroll maintains that he has luckily avoided the extremes of life, and accordingly likes to "hope that the world need not be a dog-eat-dog jungle. I don't think I'm my brother's keeper. But I do think I'm obligated to be his helper. And that he has the same obligation to me." Carroll Carroll believes that the world can be a level playing field when people help each other, even if they aren't helping absolutely. This essay is interesting in that Carroll recognizes how circumstantial his opinion is. Might he feel the same way if his life was more difficult?

The essays described above paint a vivid picture of the cultural atmosphere of the 1950s. There is an overarching feeling that there is something greater at work. Specifically, every essay above could be considered either a statement of belief towards a higher being, a statement of belief towards humanity, or often a combination of the two.

For example, essays by Cyril Fox and Lord Elton both highlight admiration of scripture, and the faith that the two men draw from it. Dora Dodge's essay includes a poem asking god to give her the tools to build a better life for others. Paul Barnes and Nevin Busch mention prayer in passing as they talk about being helped by strangers and getting involved in the community respectively. These essays and more acknowledge the presence of a higher being; the writers only wish to be part of the plan.

The overwhelming majority of the remaining essays from the descriptions above revolve around a belief in humanity. Whole sections (Goodness & Kindness, Brotherhood & Friendship, Purpose & Responsibility, War, Tolerance & Fear) mention a fraternity in which all humans belong, and each one urges the continuation of such. In Carroll Carroll's essay, helping others is not the end all be all. She has a life, she has hobbies; and yet, giving back is an obligation that

cannot be ignored. For Lord Beveridge, absolute selflessness is the eternal extension of man. The sentiment is not always tied up in the same type of pretty little bow, but the message is the same.

The sentiment is the belief that, as individuals, people are small. But as a community, people are strong and have the ability to change and to love. This was an anticipated outcome. Citizens concerned with surviving the Cold War wrote about the necessity to cooperate with others and respect differences. Whether people in the 1950s were truly this communal is interesting. If they were, then so be it, people are more selfless than expected. If they were not, then most writers put up a façade subconsciously to project an air of humanity they thought essential in times when people only wanted to hear about fellowship. Participants of the original “This I Believe” wrote because they needed to share belief.

A few thoughts on the overall style of writing: These essays rarely used allegorical means to prove their point. Instead, writers tended to state their beliefs with ferocity only capable in times of extreme fear. Also, many essayists used ‘we’ and ‘us,’ referring to what is assumed to be the American public.

Twenty-First Century “This I Believe”

In 2005, NPR producer Dan Gediman and new host Jay Allison resurrected “This I Believe.”¹⁰ The radio program played old recordings from the original show as well as new essays written by contemporary United States citizens. In the introduction to the “This I Believe” book published in 2006, Jay Allison claims that in the years after 9/11, “moral standards, patriotism, family, and issues of race/faith” were points of unrest in present society.¹¹

¹⁰ "The People Behind This I Believe | This I Believe." *This I Believe | A Public Dialogue about Belief — One Essay at a Time*. Web. 01 Dec. 2010. <<http://thisibelieve.org/credits/>>.

¹¹ Allison, Jay, Dan Gediman, John Gregory, and Viki Merrick. "Introduction." *This I Believe*:

Indeed, a McCarthy-esque culture rose out of fears of potential subsequent attacks on United States soil. A month after the events of September 11, 2001, the USA PATRIOT Act was passed almost unanimously, Sen. Russ Feingold from Wisconsin being the sole objector.¹² The Patriot Act gave government agencies the ability to violate certain personal freedoms in the name of national security. In the book “The Age of Anxiety: McCarthyism to Terrorism,” author Haynes Johnson explored the final report released by the United States Justice Department’s Office of the Inspector General concerning abusive investigations of suspected terrorists after 9/11. He noted “how strikingly they resembled the abuses that took place during the first Great Red Scare. I was startled, too, by how much they reflected the mind-set of the McCarthy era”.¹³ The United States government was routinely throwing suspects in jail without due process.

The United States government’s paranoid approach to national security was reflected in its culture. The public commonly mistreated Muslims and many Muslims lost their jobs due to anti-Muslim sentiments.^{14,15} Pressure to support the impending war with Iraq and Afghanistan even permeated into celebrity, the most notable instance occurring in the country music industry. After the popular band The Dixie Chicks spoke out against the war, sales plummeted and public condemnation followed. To speak out or to look out of place was to risk livelihood.

The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women. New York: H. Holt, 2006.

¹² Howell, Beryl. "Seven Weeks: The Making of the USA Patriot Act." *Geo. Wash. L. Rev.* 72.6 (2003-2004): 1145

¹³ Johnson, Haynes. *The Age of Anxiety: McCarthyism to Terrorism.* Orlando: Harcourt, 2005. 472.

¹⁴ Oswald, Debra L. "Understanding Anti-Arab Reactions Post-9/11: The Role of Threats, Social Categories, and Personal Ideologies 1." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35.9 (2005): 1775-799.

¹⁵ Allen, Christopher, and Jorden Nielsen. *Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001.* Rep. Vienna: European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2002.

The new “This I Believe” campaign was successful (93,270 essays received to date) because it again gave the United States public a voice.¹⁶ Those who questioned others were forced to question themselves, and those persecuted were allowed to say what they believed in. The books This I Believe and This I Believe II contain essays from veterans, professors, celebrities, ministers, and just about anyone else that comprises United States society. The new “This I Believe” campaign came to an end on NPR in April 2009, although it is still an ongoing feature online (www.thisibelieve.org) and on hundreds of local radio stations around the world. Teachers hoping to introduce students to public engagement for the first time have also utilized the essay theme. It is fair to say that education has strongly embraced “This I Believe.”

Here follows a series of short descriptions of twenty-five “This I Believe” essays from the 2000s campaign. The essays were chosen randomly, in the following manner: the top themes were already identified on the “This I Believe” webpage using larger font, so the top themes (a total of six) were selected. A pool of potential essays was compiled randomly by searching within themes, selecting two random essays from each webpage (ten essays per page) for seven pages. Out of each potential pool, four to five essays were then selected based on certain criteria (celebrity, age, gender.) The aim was to have a balanced number of essays with biographies provided by “This I Believe” and essays without biographies. All of the following essays can be found at Thisibelieve.org.

¹⁶ Gediman, Mary Jo (Outreach Director for This I Believe, Inc.) "Re: Essay Count." Message to the author. 20 Oct. 2010. E-mail.

Family

Family is the most prominent topic of the latest “This I Believe” campaign. In the following cases, writers’ tended to revel in their own family stories and repeat them to stress certain values.

Jessica Mercer Zerr of Grand Forks, North Dakota, is a writing instructor at the University of North Dakota. Her essay, entitled “The Love I Choose,” details marital love: “I believe in love that is sustained by deliberate kindness and the choice to see little acts as testaments of love and commitment rather than indicators of a spark that has died.” Jessica’s husband does the little things, day after day. Jessica finds that her husband’s dedication is the paramount indicator of love. Moreover, the choice to continually be kind and loving guides their marital harmony. It is noteworthy that Jessica mentions a belief that her love for her husband is stronger than that for her children. This is extremely candid. One might be inclined to disagree with Jessica in that a mother should love her child more than anything, but this essay perfectly displays the power of choice. To chose to love someone is much more brave than having to love someone, and generally, I dare say Jessica believes choice trumps obligation relative to love.

Bela Fleck plays the banjo professionally. He tends to meld his music with other genres such as jazz and classical. His essay, “Doing Things My Own Way,” stresses individualism: “I believe in figuring out my own way to do things. This approach can yield great results, but it’s got its negative sides.” Bela taught himself to play the banjo, and thusly compares himself to his grandfather, who was an accomplished businessman without a college education. Both men found a way to excel in life without following the beaten path. The next writer, Moana, wants to be a strong individual like Bela Fleck.

Moana is an American of Tongan descent that lives in Provo, Utah. Her essay, “I Believe in Clair Huxtable,” discusses a hypothetical situation in which she must choose to live as any celebrity. Her choice was Clair Huxtable (of *The Cosby Show*), because Moana is “a young minority woman struggling with identity and still dreaming of escaping my socioeconomic reality. And Clair’s voice says I can.” Clair Huxtable is a strong minority woman that is family-oriented. Accordingly, Moana compares Clair Huxtable’s voice to her own mother’s voice. More specifically, Moana feels that her mother’s thick Tongan accent is rhythmically akin to Clair’s. And in rhythm she finds familiarity. The essay lends the feeling that Moana may admire Clair Huxtable for her grit more than her family values.

David from Evanston, Illinois was raised in a barbershop. His essay, “The Barbershop,” describes the barbershop as a familial environment: “The veritable church of my youth, my dad’s barbershop was the hallowed, Aqua Velva-smelling sanctuary that any man of any class or life-stage could immediately find solace, refuge, forgiveness, [and] civilization.” David’s experience with barbershops is filled with reverence towards the community built around such a basic need. In addition, he believes his relationship with his father was nurtured in the barbershop. Generally, David places his faith in community and family, and trusts that the soul needs companionship and vice versa. The following essay, by Elvia Bautista, expands upon David’s belief in community.

Elvia Bautista is a caregiver for the elderly in Santa Rosa, California. Her brother was killed due to gang violence at sixteen. Her essay, entitled “Remembering All The Boys,” talks about the thought behind her grave-site visitations to her brother: “I believe that no matter where you came from or what you believed in, when you die, you want flowers on your grave and people who visit you and remember you that way.” Elvia lives in a city riddled with gang

violence and consequently, she believes that people should never forget that there is unity in simply being a part of the human race. This was one of the few essays themed family that was truly selfless in that Elvia bases her beliefs on the needs of others.

Brotherhood & Friendship

Brotherhood and friendship is another important theme according to the “This I Believe” essays. The following essays spotlight how people use fellowship for mutual well-being.

Elizabeth from Austin, Texas, has two siblings affected by mental retardation. Her “This I Believe” essay spotlights the struggles that all humans experience. Elizabeth writes that she has learned to reserve judgment, and furthermore, to be nice to those around her because they are experiencing struggles just like her. Her siblings, Cameron and Rebekah, both show no fear when interacting with people, a quality Elizabeth strives to emulate: “I believe our hesitation to reach out to others is partly driven by our fear of looking foolish by being rejected, but I also believe we are all waiting for an opportunity to be friendly, to show our best selves.” Her brother and sister show no fear, and easily relate to those around them because they are so disarming. Elizabeth believes that if she can just realize that everyone hurts just like her, she can help them and in return feel better about her pain. The next essay follows the same train of thought.

Howard White is a former University of Maryland point guard and the Vice President of Nike. His essay, entitled “The Power of Hello,” focuses on giving everyone the time of day. As a young child, Howard and his mother ran into someone they knew while walking down the street. The mother talked to the man, Howard did not. Afterwards, his mother said, “You let that be the last time you ever walk by somebody and not open up your mouth to speak, because even a dog can wag its tail when it passes you on the street.” This comment profoundly influenced Howard,

and from then on, Howard would say hello to everyone in his path. He believes that speaking to people opens up channels of authenticity not available if you simply pass them by. Furthermore, Howard believes that everyone has worth that should be acknowledged. The next essay takes a rather wholistic approach to fellowship.

John McCain is a Vietnam veteran, a Congressman, and a former presidential candidate. His essay, entitled “The Virtues of the Quiet Hero,” covers the importance of higher causes. John McCain was a prisoner of war in Vietnam for five years. He writes that a certain guard in the camp showed him compassion several times despite the inherent risks. McCain says, “to me, that was faith: a faith that unites and never divides, a faith that bridges unbridgeable gaps in humanity.” Even in a place obviously divided by anger and death, a man from the other side finds a way to show faith in something higher. John McCain believes faith in unity of man is the key to life.

Values & Spirituality

The theme of value/spirituality is especially present in the newer series of “This I Believe” because of the significant increase of Americans that do not identify with specific religions.¹⁷ Instead, these people chose to write about an overarching belief in something beyond or an undeniable value.

Christine is from Valley Cottage, New York. She has an apple tree. Her essay, entitled “Poetry or Pie?,” contrasts the ephemeral with the eternal, and the advantages of both. Recalling an old poem about pie, Christine wonders whether it would be better to make a pie or write a poem herself. The old poem (“The Poet’s Occasional Alternative” by Grace Paley), chooses pie-

¹⁷ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*. Rep. Washington, DC, 2008.

making because the result, a pie, is enjoyed by anyone and everyone, whereas a poem may take years or decades to be appreciated. Christine says, “I may believe in poetry, but I’m beginning to believe in pie.” Although she remains vague as to what this means, I think it refers to the necessity to nourish both short-term and long-term hopes and beliefs. Christine does not specify because she feels no need to. The following essay writer would agree with Christine.

Alexis is from Basalt, Colorado. Her essay, entitled “Wonder,” is about letting beliefs passively diffuse through life. She writes about her early struggles with belief as a student of religious studies, and consequently decides to “go about my life, my belief tucked away in my pocket.” Alexis then discusses her miscarriage, the pain that comes with it, and the unexpected beauty of a certain day that followed long after it. Overall, Alexis believes that “moments of wonder will come, if only I am prepared to recognize them.” She realized that the only way to be prepared is to go about her life relatively unaware, not actively seeking something that can only seek her. The next essay chooses to go the opposite direction by setting aside time to listen.

Susan Cosio is a hospital chaplain and writer who lives in Sacramento, California. She has several children. Her essay, entitled “A Daily Walk Just to Listen,” suggests that her spirituality is best nurtured on solitary walks: “Time set apart with God is like a hike to a peak from the middle of a dense forest; it gives me perspective and some ability to see where I’ve been and where I am going.” Susan spends time alone because it helps her clear the static noise from her mind. She believes that she makes better decisions in result of these walks. The following writer, Penn Jillette, would agree that one must take time to appreciate life, but he has a different take on the outcome.

Penn Jillette, one half of Penn & Teller, spends his nights in Las Vegas performing magic shows infused with comedy. His essay, entitled “There Is No God,” cleverly skirts disbelief and

instead describes Penn's belief in no god. In doing so, Penn Jillette hopes to appreciate the real world more: "I have love, blue skies, rainbows and Hallmark cards, and that has to be enough. It has to be enough, but it's everything in the world and everything in the world is plenty for me." In consequence, Penn focuses on the tangibles of everyday life to guide himself and his actions.

Faith & Religion

The theme of faith/religion is the extenuation of the discussion of spirituality. It should be noted that many essay writers in "This I Believe" seem to identify with the Christian or Jewish faiths, but still many others remain decided on indecision when it comes to faith.

John from Cincinnati, Ohio, is a minister. His essay, entitled "The Power of Comedy," talks comedy and faith: "The comedy of faith looks at all the death and destruction in the world, and laughs at it." John discovered the power of comedy early in life. Drawing from his experience as a child trying to make his mother laugh during hard times, he would later realize the importance of comedic relief as a minister (a hospital visit to console the family of a recently deceased loved one is a cited example.) John also notes that comedy is not a solitary pursuit, that faith involves interaction between people. The following essay writer is not quite as committed to a single religion.

Carol from Baltimore, Maryland, takes many religions into consideration when forming her spirituality. Her essay, entitled "Images of Truth," details the influence that religion has on her daily life. Carol writes that her daughter was listing off her friends' denominations when she mentioned that her mother was 'nothing.' This led to Carol explaining that she has experienced many religions, including Catholicism, Judaism, Quakerism, Buddhism, and others for good measure. She does this because she believes that "everything, from the smallest stone to the

universe itself, is imbued with some manner of spirit.” Therefore, Carol does not believe in nothing, she simply believes in everything. Such a mash-up of religions is definitely a 21st century approach to faith. The next writer believes in the same type of uncertainty as Carol.

Rachel is the product of a multi-ethnic family from Berkeley, California. She is also a lesbian with two children. Her essay, entitled “Gray,” examines the advantages of uncertainty: “I believe in gray...the rich, uncharted territory between absolutes, where anything seems possible yet nothing is certain.” Rachel details the difficulties that her parents experienced (due to religious differences) and the resulting social isolation that their relationship created. She draws similarities to her own life, in which she and her partner struggle to blaze a path of their own. Rachel thrives on a gray world, and believes that her individualism has the ability to guide her through life. Unlike the other writers in this section, the following writer, Aaron, is not at ease with his uncertainty.

Aaron, from Miami Beach, Florida, is a proclaimed “Catholic-Turned-Atheist Teaching at a Yeshiva.” His “This I Believe” essay focuses on maturation of faith. Contrasting his high school experience (skipped his graduation ceremony to make a statement) with his students’ (fervent practitioners of the Torah), Aaron finds himself in awe at the discipline and sense of purpose that his students have. His remarks on his students’ graduation ceremony: “All over the room, I looked at faces that were happy. They have the light. They know the truth...And I want to know. This I now believe.” It is interesting to read the disillusioned thoughts of an atheist in that Aaron envies his students’ faith. He wonders if they will “eventually lose their idealism and turn cynical, as I have?” In the end, Aaron may just envy their innocence.

Self-Determination

The following two themes, self-determination and self-knowledge, are the only two topics in the new “This I Believe” campaign that are not covered in the old version (family was a sub-theme on many of the 1950s essays.) This increase in self-interest will be covered extensively in the post-summary.

Corwin from Cincinnati, Ohio wrote this essay as a teenager. His essay, “Everyone Should Have Their Own Mohawk,” stresses the importance of individualism. Corwin decided to wear a Mohawk to school one day because he wanted to take a chance. He takes chances because he thinks that as he gets older, he will “only be thinking of the moments that I stepped out of the norm, the times that I chose to be different not to draw attention...but as a statement to my peers and ultimately the world, that I am an individual.” Corwin stresses the metaphor, reiterating the importance of taking chances. While his chance is rather trivial, the ideal of individualism for the sake of individualism is not. The next essay writer, Muhammad Ali, was arguably the best ever in an individual sport, boxing.

Muhammad Ali, formerly known as Cassius Clay, is a former heavyweight-boxing champion of the world and Olympic gold medal winner. His essay, boldly entitled “I Am Still The Greatest,” is about having faith in oneself. As a young man, Muhammad Ali was a braggart. Even after receiving his Parkinson’s diagnosis, he felt that his “confidence and will to continue to live life as I choose won’t be compromised.” Ali writes that this still holds true today. He finishes his essay with a story about lighting the Olympic cauldron at the Olympic Games in 1996, and having tremors as he held the flame high. At that moment he says he still felt great, even at his weakest. The next writer, Craig, would agree with Muhammad’s positive outlook on life.

Craig from Aurora, Colorado, is a product of a Catholic orphanage. His essay, entitled “This I Choose,” talks about taking control of the choices in life. Craig was orphaned as a child, and grew up under the surveillance of German nuns. He sought to make the best of his situation: “I seized hope and rejected despair, that whining, self-pitying laziness that gives up on any situation that isn’t storybook perfect.” With an attitude adjusted towards happiness, Craig went on to get a graduate degree and teach English in impoverished communities. He believes in choosing to have a good outlook on life because it leads to a better life. Like Craig, the following writer, Eve Ensler, talks about getting past individual pain for the betterment of self, and in her case, others.

Eve Ensler is a playwright most famous for the show “The Vagina Monologues.” She was also a victim of sexual abuse as a child. Her essay, entitled “The Power And Mystery of Naming Things,” involves bringing taboo subjects out into the open, something Eve is used to doing. Eve talks about the relief she felt after telling her mother about the sexual abuse occurring under their own roof, and consequently believes that “one person’s declaration sparks another and then another.” By putting a name to things, Eve is sure that people can learn from each other and their experiences.

Self-Knowledge

Grace from Manchester, Missouri is a teenager. Her essay, entitled “Drive Carefully,” talks of the responsibility of foresight: “you have to know what you are getting yourself into when you do something.” Grace believes in caution because every choice in life has a consequence, such as choosing to take on a job with other obligations already in toe. She swears by awareness because she thinks, “teens are burdened by stress.” This essay was written in 2007.

It would be interesting to see if Grace still agrees with her essay post-graduation. The next essay is from a writer with a few more years under her belt.

Debi Knight Kennedy is a full-time artist from Haines, Alaska. She is also a noted puppeteer. Her essay, entitled “The Beauty of Aging,” describes the merits of getting older. Debi found an old seashell on a walk and found that months later she continued to keep it around because its worn down disposition made it more beautiful in the light. Like the weathering of the seashell, Debi believes that “there is a certain humility, a humbling that comes with the wrinkles, the graying, the thinning hair, thickening waist, and sagging breasts.” She continues, writing that love as a young woman only came from the outside. Yet as Debi aged, she discovers that there is also a love within. The next writer, Lauren, had trouble finding the love within.

Lauren from Seattle, Washington, is a young woman with a history of mental health illness. Her essay, entitled “Mine Is a Life Worth Living,” details a life struggling with illness and confusion. Lauren writes that she often went off her medicine to prove to herself that she did not need it, which ultimately led to a mental breakdown concluding with a bi-polar disorder diagnosis. Now required to take medicine, Lauren believes “in the power of psychopharmacology to improve my life; I am starting to believe that mine is a life worth improving. Worth living. Worth saving.” While her newfound belief in medicine is reasonable, the real breakthrough is Lauren’s belief in herself. While the next writer, Samantha, may not have mental health problems, she confronted the same self-worth issues as Lauren.

Samantha from Chesterfield, Missouri is a full-time nanny and a college graduate. Her essay, entitled “Right Now Matters,” follows life after formal education. Samantha takes a job as a nanny for a well-off family and quickly finds that she has doubts about her career choice. But after one of the kids she takes care of comes up to Samantha and simply expresses their

gratitude, Samantha realizes that “self worth is where you find it. I believe that just because you have a college degree doesn’t mean you need a job with a blackberry.” Samantha’s epiphany concerns the nature of contentment, that knowledge, particularly that derived from a college degree, does not necessarily have to be used in the context in which it was taught. She believes that there is no room for arrogance when searching for meaning. The last writer, Dan, appreciates people like Samantha who take their time to write “This I Believe” essays.

Dan is from Memphis, Tennessee. His “This I Believe” essay states a belief in the literary exercise itself. This essay is provided in full because it shares many of the same motives as this thesis:

I believe in “This I Believe.” In the several years that I have been listening, I have heard other people express their beliefs with clarity, insight, eloquence, humor and even forcefulness. Each of my experiences with this weekly sharing, this exercise in which a person finds the right words to state a single belief that is from their core, is equally an exercise for me. On a weekly basis, I have been privileged to look into someone else’s experience and then respond to it. Do I feel the same way? Have I had any of the same experiences, reached the same conclusions? Have I come through them with a similar outlook?

Over and over again, I have been moved by someone else’s belief. Yet I have struggled to find those beliefs that I myself hold so dear that I could summarize them and present them to my own family, much less a larger audience. I toyed with numerous ideas. I kept a list of possible topics. I have started multiple essays and discarded them, feeling that

not one was of sufficient passion to merit sharing. In the end, they were simply personal and their reach was limited.

However, when I heard that “This I Believe” was coming to an end, I saw a huge impending void and came to the realization that the revealed beliefs of so many have helped me examine and crystallize my own beliefs. It has been a weekly exercise in personal values clarification, as the values of these people were internalized and digested, then either discarded or used to shape my own views of the world. They provided me with perspective I could not possibly get from more casual day-to-day interactions. Where I typically fly at 500 feet, “This I Believe” allows me to fly at higher altitudes, however briefly. I am always better for the experience.

I disagree with Edward R. Murrow’s original comment when he stated, “Never has the need for personal philosophies of this kind been so urgent.” The need is always present and will never lessen. I believe that sharing one’s beliefs brings clarity and focus to the person sharing, but I also believe that the listener has the opportunity to sharpen his own worldview. And for that, I am grateful.

Dan references his struggles to write a “This I Believe” himself, because he does not think he can succinctly sum his ideas into one concise statement. But upon hearing of the impending end of the program, he finds that a forum to share beliefs will always be necessary. This thesis wholly agrees with Dan from Memphis, and hopes to build from his essay.

The essays above illustrate an American culture that is exceedingly different than that of the 1950s. The essayists from the 21st century seem much more self-centered than those before them. That being said, the term self-centered has an unjust negative connotation. The writers from the newer “This I Believe” may be more aware of themselves as individuals. Or they may simply not have the same subconscious motives as Americans in the 1950s.

Self-determination and self-knowledge were the only top themes in the new campaign. These themes were barely present in the 1950s “This I Believe.” Essays by Muhammad Ali and Craig from Colorado talk about being the greatest boxer in the world and making the most of one’s opportunities respectively. Lauren from Seattle, Washington, battles mental disabilities to find self-love. People whose essays fell under these two categories were enamored by the determination to be the best they could be.

Brotherhood & Friendship, a top theme from both “This I Believe” campaigns, furthers the argument that the 21st century writers focused on individualism. In the 1950s version, essayists believed in helping others because they believed in a fellowship of man. These modern writers talk about communicating with each other but it’s much more mutualistic than past essays. For example, Elizabeth from Austin and Howard White both mention putting themselves out there and gaining in return. They are obviously model citizens, but the way they describe fellowship is rather karmic. It should be noted that John McCain’s essay is similar to 1950s essays in that there is a sense of a higher purpose. Perhaps this is because he came of age in the middle of the century.

Values & Spirituality and Faith & Religion are similar themes that garner similar results. Aaron from Miami Beach and Carol from Baltimore ponder what religion means to them, and end up coming off a bit confused. Susan Cosio writes about solitary walks to listen to God and

Penn Jillette walks the same route as Susan and yet it is the absence of God that he listens for. Once again, it appears that modern writers are looking for answers for themselves while 20th century writers are looking for answers for everyone.

Family is the other theme that only emerged in the newer “This I Believe.” This theme was rather mixed in sentiment. Essays from Moana from Provo and Bela Fleck simply use the family topic as means to link their individuality to stories of loved ones. But essays from David from Evanston and Elvia Bautista use family to depict a faith in community that they believe trumps all. The latter essays would fit with the 1950s essays seamlessly.

Pertaining to style, the essays above were informal, probably due to the growing popularity in creative writing in the 21st century. Almost every essay included a life story or allegory, something the 1950s essays lacked. Again, this could be due to a modern stress on creative writing and storytelling.

It seems that the differences between the first and second “This I Believe” program results are clear-cut, the former stressing communion and the latter valuing individualism. Considering the background information, the progression in American society is perfectly mirrored in these essays. Now that we’ve looked at the form of statement that we will be using for the project and practiced some rudimentary analysis with them, let’s move on to the forum that will be used for the project: Facebook.

The Facebook Community

Facebook was chosen as the forum to execute this thesis for several reasons. Firstly, over five hundred million people, including most college students, are members of the website.¹⁸

¹⁸ Facebook. "Statistics | Facebook." *Welcome to Facebook*. Web. 19 Dec. 2010.

Facebook can be considered a community in that it brings people together. Realistically, no other social community can as easily provide a discussion group without inconveniencing and therefore alienating potential participants (because it is used so often and by so many people.) Secondly, the Facebook Fan Page application provides a simple and effective way to organize the discussion through the discussion board. It also allows for bulk invitations to the contest and a group description section that will serve as the invitation description to the “This I Believe” project. Generally, Facebook is a good forum because one can advertise through statuses.

Lastly, and most importantly, Facebook has been empirically found to provide a so-called ‘nonymous’ environment, one that “places constraints on the freedom of identity claims.”¹⁹ The Internet is a place where people can be anonymous, and therefore, people tend to express themselves fully, without fear of reprimand. But in the case of Facebook, a face and name are required to participate in the website. This leads to a nonymous environment fueled by anchored relationships, i.e. relationships that exist in the real world.²⁰ Facebook is a great example of a website that uses names and faces to ground an online community within reality.

Such anchored relationships limit the amount of misrepresentation or reinvention of self on the Internet. Nonetheless, the virtual world allows for the editing of oneself that even anchored relationships cannot prevent, resulting in so-called “hoped for possible selves.”²¹ Indeed, researchers found that “the Facebook selves appeared to be highly socially desirable identities individuals aspire to have offline but have not yet been able to embody for one reason

<<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>>.

¹⁹ Zhao, Shanyang, Sherri Grasmuck, and Jason Martin. "Identity Construction on Facebook: Digital Empowerment in Anchored Relationships." *Computers in Human Behavior* 24.5 (2008): 1816-836.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Markus, Hazel, and Paula Nurius. "Possible Selves." *American Psychologist* 41.9 (1986): 954-69.

or another.”²² Facebook users self-edit and subconsciously do not display the person they are, but the one they wish to be. Consequently, Facebook appears to be the perfect forum for a “This I Believe” exercise because “This I Believe” itself concerns the ideals of belief that are nevertheless anchored by reality.

²² Zhao, Shanyang, Sherri Grasmuck, and Jason Martin. "Identity Construction on Facebook: Digital Empowerment in Anchored Relationships." *Computers in Human Behavior* 24.5 (2008): 1816-836.

Chapter 2. Methods

The experimental procedure contained two steps: setting up the Facebook page, and inviting people/advertising to participate. Post-experimental procedure will also be discussed in this methods section. It is important to note that this thesis does not strictly adhere to the scientific method. Instead, it will take a journalistic approach in that it will seek to uncover and enlighten, and hopefully create connections before unknown.

For this project, Facebook's 'Fan Page' was used as a forum for the community. The 'Fan Page' was specifically chosen because of its ability to promote itself through "Ad's" on Facebook and because it contains a "Discussion" section where people can easily post their essays into one organized bank. Additionally, the Fan Page allows for others to view essays and comment on them. It also enables people to "suggest to friends," i.e. it can be passed along virally to other friends on Facebook. Finally, the Fan Page allows for views to be tracked. In other words, every time someone sets eyes on a certain post, Facebook keeps track. Although this is a new and spotty feature, it can possibly provide insight into how much traffic the page receives. These attributes made the 'Fan Page' the perfect forum. The project 'Fan Page' was officially called "What Do You Believe?"

Within the 'Fan Page' is also an info section that automatically pops up when someone visits the page. The info section is a good place to describe whatever the 'Fan Page' will be, and in this case, it was the perfect place to put my invitation to participate in the "This I Believe" project. What follows is the invitation in its entirety:

Welcome back, my friends. It's been almost two years since my last Facebook experiment, and it's time for another. This is an invitation to again use Facebook as it was

originally intended: to foster an Internet community focused on getting to know people and discussing beliefs.

This is an invitation to state your personal beliefs, the beliefs that have molded you into who you are, in a public forum.

This is no easy task. What I want is for you to write something personal, something that no one else can write it for you. Writing something intimate carries inherent risks, like learning something about yourself.

So what's this all about? Well, technically, it is the experiment for my senior thesis. But honestly I would be doing this regardless of that. Essentially, it's a maturation of the Facebook Status contest I did a few years back. That contest sparked creativity in people that I was proud of and resulted in a community within those that participated in it. I believe a more developed, fleshed-out experiment may do the same and more, albeit in a very different way.

I am starting this because I believe that public scholarship/sharing is rapidly declining. Now, don't get me wrong, self-expression has never been more accessible, with Twitter and Facebook dominating the past five years. Opinions are everywhere. But it has gotten to the point that everyone is yelling and no one is being heard. It has gotten to the point that people are saying things and no one is listening. Due to the barrage of statuses, tweets, etc, we have become desensitized to sharing views and beliefs.

Therefore, I want to jumpstart a discussion of belief (modeled from CBS/NPR's radio program "This I Believe".) I think that it's important for kids our age take time to philosophize every once and a while. So much of our education depends on evaluation, and yet we don't evaluate ourselves.

"This I Believe" writing guidelines at: <http://thisibelieve.org/guidelines/>

You will pour your soul into a 250-500 (or more) word statement of belief describing what you believe and how you came to believe it (by February 7th.) It should be noted that this statement of belief is not political. It should not be judgmental. It also does not necessarily concern religion, although it can if you wish. When I say belief, I simply mean to ask, what do you live by (see link above or at end of description for full guidelines.)

Then you will post it to the group discussion, and hopefully others will too. Then people will read each other's essays, and be happy, because it's at the least interesting to hear peers write in a serious manner about things they feel passionate about, and at most, it's enlightening to discuss and challenge your own beliefs. Later, I will use these statements for my thesis (see discussion section for more details on how I will use this group for my thesis.)

You're probably saying to yourself, why would I ever do this (other than that if I don't, Sam will hate me)? Here is our conversation:

You: WTF.

Me: I think everyone should put his or her beliefs down on paper occasionally.

You: But I do that everyday via my FB status, yo.

Me: Yeah, but, do you really think you can express yourself fully in 140 characters or less?

You: Hmm maybe? Justin Beiber is a BEAST!!

Me: It's sort of like this – it's nice to text your gf/bf that you love them, but come Valentine's Day, don't you want to break out quill, ink, and parchment paper (or at least a word document...) to profess just how exactly you feel in a letter?

You: Here's your damn essay. You are weird. But I do feel that I have a better understanding of what I value and what other's value. Thanks. Bye.

Let's make this clear: I did not take designing the method for this experiment lightly. It took months of research to settle on this. I do understand that not everyone enjoys creative writing. I considered drawings, photographs, and other forms of media. And yet, I always seemed to stumble back to the blueprint of "This I Believe" because writing is an extremely calculated art form. You can mince and interpret a photograph or a sentence in 100 ways; a written statement allows you to clarify and amplify.

I chose to do this on Facebook because it has been empirically shown that people tend to present themselves as ‘hoped for possible selves’ on Facebook. In other words, you may have made mistakes and have flaws, but you don’t advertise those on Facebook because that is not what you strive to be. In the same vein, beliefs are something that you may mistakenly stray from, but they are what you hope and try to follow. Your “This I Believe” statement will concern itself with not how you stray, but how you follow (Find out more about Facebook identity theory in the discussion section.)

The first time I wrote a “This I Believe” essay was for a high school class and it was awkward. But I came out of the activity knowing myself much better, and when other’s read their essays, I felt that I knew the people around me. I think it’s imperative to gain as many perspectives as possible.

A program originally broadcast on CBS in the 1950s (and most recently in 2004 via NPR), “This I Believe,” called for the American public to write about what they believe and read their essay on national radio (wew!) Basically, the program provided an outlet for public engagement and sharing during an era (1950s – Cold War – McCarthyism) when people were scared to speak their own minds. While our generation does not face an immediate threat such as nuclear fallout, we do suffer from a lack of serious discussion of belief. (If you want more information on the original “This I Believe,” consult the discussion section of this group.)

In general, we are censoring ourselves online more and more. The original Facebook was cool in that you could go to a friend's profile and their 'About Me' section was the front page, not their 'Wall'. It's cheesy, but by reading that section, you could really get a feel for what was important to that person. A majority of people, including me, have either deleted that section or toned it way down in the past few years, and for good reason; the internet is not a place you can truly be yourself anymore, at least not when your name is attached. My hope is that if an employer Googled your name, your statement would possibly pop up. My hope is that you would write a statement to be proud of, something personal that you could point to and say, "This, this is what I believe."

So, please participate! I think it would a really cool thing if everything works out. The guidelines are attached in the link below, and they are really easy: name your belief, tell a story, be brief, be yourself, and be positive. Please consult the discussion section for example essays and how to post your essay on the FB group!

Guidelines: <http://thisibelieve.org/guidelines/>

Also, submit your statements to Thisibelieve.org if you want to read it on the radio!

(completely optional)

P.S. We are Penn St.

Thanks, Sam Raasch

In summary, this invitation provided possible participants with the necessary information to contribute to the project. Links to the official “This I Believe” website and instructions were included. It was written informally so as not to intimidate.

Within this invitation, there are several allusions to visiting the “Discussion Section” if someone wished to learn more about the project. Specifically, there were three posts in the discussion section, entitled “Sam Raasch's Thesis”, “Reasons to Use Facebook/ FB Identity Theory”, “History of “This I Believe.”” The titles refer to the relative topic that they covered, and text from each post was directly taken from parts of this thesis. Additionally, there was a sample post so participants could see how to post their statement themselves.

Each ‘Fan Page’ also has a “Wall,” a public page where administrators (such as me) or participants can post links, videos, or write something small. This “Wall” is typical of a normal Facebook page, and has character limits, just like “Statuses.”

The “What Do You Believe” page was set up and launched on December 22, 2010 (find it here: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/What-Do-You-Believe/182333875125845>.) Using the “create an event” option, over 400 friends of mine were invited to the page, hopefully to participate. When people are invited to events on Facebook, several notifications pop up on their homepages, and they are sent to the ‘Fan Page’ if they choose to click on said notifications. This event invitation specified that the project would conclude on February 7, 2011.

In addition to the event invitation, the project was advertised daily through my personal Facebook account. Using the “status” feature, I consistently posted the link to the project page as well as kept people up to date on who was participating, how much time was left to participate, and other facts.

Also, the 'Fan Page' allows for people to "like" the site, so that they may easily return to it. If people chose to like the page, they are kept up to date on anything posted on the "Wall." Many more advertisements were posted through the page's "Wall." Several videos were posted on said "Wall" as well. These videos were filmed by me, and were aimed at enticing people to participate.

The post-project analysis mirrored the descriptions that of the essays from the introduction section. If a sufficient number of essays were received, then trends and analysis of said trends will follow. As noted in the introduction, this thesis is especially interested in finding any trophic model of dependency between beliefs. If too few essays were received to draw broad trends from, then the discussion will revert to an exploration of why this was so and how to improve upon it. There will also be a final discussion to sum any findings up with personal commentary.

Chapter 3. Results

Twenty-seven people “liked” the ‘Fan Page’ on Facebook, and all in all, twelve “This I Believe” essays were turned in before the deadline. This turnout was much lower than expected. Here follows a short description of each essay and its author (in the order in which they were submitted.) You can find these essays in their entirety in the Appendix section.

Meghan Walsh is a Penn State postgrad from Holland, Pennsylvania, and now works at a nonprofit for abused women. Her essay, entitled “I Believe in Laughter,” notes the uniqueness of laughter. A trait that only humans possess, Meghan thinks that laughter begets humanity: “I believe that without humor, or without us finding humor in little places of our life, we would be void of all humanity. Laughter brings kindness and kindness brings peace.” Therefore, making someone laugh is simply being humane. The next writer, Julie Roth, would go as far to say that you must be able to make yourself laugh.

Julie Roth is a Penn State senior from Doylestown, Pennsylvania, who hopes to work in public relations in the future. Her essay, entitled “I Believe in the Appreciation of Self,” talks about the importance of loving self before others: “I believe this happiness comes from appreciation and liking of yourself and is at the core of being able to have healthy relationships and a fulfilling life.” Julie believes that you must be truly comfortable with who you are before you can let others in. Until then, you are trying to fill an endless void. The next author, Susan Martins, believes that you have to take control of yourself and your life, much like Julie believes.

Susan Martins is a Penn State sophomore from Phoenix, Arizona, and is a gymnast on the women’s varsity team. Her essay, entitled “I Believe that We Have Control,” preaches the ability to take control of life: “We should try and make the most out of whatever it is that we have...It’s deciding that you are going to be happy that will make life more enjoyable.” Susan describes a

couple that has been married for more than seven years, and are still insanely in love. She believes that they still go strong because they actively decide to be happy with each other. The next writer, Will Raasch, agrees that life is what you make of it.

Will Raasch is a Stanford grad, a manager at Baxter Medical, and my brother. His essay, entitled “I Believe in Risk,” touts the advantages of taking risks. Risks, he says, takes us out of our comfort zone: “such actions, I believe, are required in order to test your limits, develop yourself, and move up to the next level of your education, career, or life.” Whether it be a career decision or debating whether or not to ask out a girl out of his league, Will thinks that taking a risk is better than staying in the comfort zone. The next writer, Kathleen Kowalski, agrees that risk is necessary.

Kathleen Kowalski is a recent Penn State graduate, and currently works at a daycare facility in New Jersey. Her essay, entitled “I Believe in the Little Things,” says that the little things make up the big picture, and thusly, should be taken seriously: “I Believe in having a good pillow and wonderful sheets...I believe in laughing...I believe in traveling. I will risk almost anything to travel the world.” Kathleen thinks that you must enjoy life, and soak in the little things, be it sleeping, traveling, or eating a lot of food and not feeling bad about it. The next author, Roland Jeon, thinks that Kathleen’s beliefs are just that; her beliefs.

Roland Jeon is a recent Penn State grad from Seoul, Korea, and currently works for Citibank in New York. His essay, entitled “I Believe that there is no Truth,” argues that there is no absolute truth; instead, there is only relative truth: “Live your life, find your "truth", live by your "truth", and learn to embrace others' "truth" - when you do, all the happiness you seek in the world will be yours, because being truly happy can only come from within.” Like previous essays, Roland agrees that happiness comes from self-love, but he goes further to say that

embracing other people's truths can be valuable as well. The next author, Jessica Veffer, also believes in respecting others' beliefs.

Jessica Veffer is a recent Stanford graduate. Her essay, entitled "I Believe in Respect," talks about how respect guides her life: "the blossoming of respect can completely alter your preconceived notions or first impressions of nearly anyone." Jessica continues by saying that respect governs the way she picks friends, how she conducts herself in social situations, and how she chooses to be perceived. Indeed, respect for herself and others has steered her in the right direction in life. The next author, John Rinaldi, believes that we should have more respect for teachers.

John Rinaldi is a Penn State senior from Poughkeepsie, New York, who wants to one day be a doctor. His essay, entitled "I Believe in Teachers," recognizes the importance of rewarding teachers for their hard work: "I believe that maximizing our human potential can only be reached by consistently rewarding the aspects of life that support this goal, beginning with teachers." John thinks that teaching is quite a sacrifice in today's society because these people are voluntarily taking a pay-cut. Teachers touch thousands of future citizens, and thusly, John believes that they should be paid for their dedicated service. The next writer, Pat Buckley, thinks that people need to relax.

Pat Buckley is a recent Penn State graduate from Reading, Pennsylvania, and he will be working for IBM in the fall. His essay, "I Believe in Saunas," recommends that everyone should take a steam regularly: "Sweating, nudity, and relaxing. These are three things I think everyone could use a little more of in their lives." Pat thinks that the sauna frees humans from the material world; mainly, clothes and technology. He stipulates that being naked in a sauna reminds us of

our humanity. The next writer, Sam Raasch (the writer of this thesis), agrees that we need to relax.

Sam Raasch is a Penn State senior from Alexandria, Virginia, and he will be trekking jungles in the near future. His essay, entitled “I Believe We Are All Cars Driving in the Night,” says that we must have faith in those that share the road with us: “I believe we all possess a light capable of guiding us towards the future...[when] we turn our high beams on, those around us can see just how bright we are.” Sam uses a traffic analogy in this essay and thinks that we must notice the talents that have been bestowed upon us more often. But more on this later. The next author, Tom Carpenter, commented on Sam’s essay, and slightly disagrees with Sam’s analogy. [The author decided to include himself in the results because he submitted an essay to the project. Furthermore, the following essay, by Tom Carpenter, comments on the author’s essay, and therefore, it was deemed necessary to include both.]

Tom Carpenter is a recent Penn State graduate from Glenside, Pennsylvania. His untitled essay shows little faith in humanity when clustered in close proximity (such as traffic): “I’m just saying the smelly, disorganized and stupid herd of people out there [traffic] don’t entirely hide my true personality but instead allows me to see who I am by seeing how I’m different than them.” While Sam argued that traffic brings out the opposite of what he is, Tom believes that traffic helps him discover himself. In traffic, Tom’s true personality comes out. The next writer, Matt Estrada, believes in self-improvement, and probably does not like to sit in traffic.

Matt Estrada is a recent Stanford graduate. His essay, entitled “I Believe in Balance,” talks about the importance of being well-rounded: “I believe in balance because it allows me to focus on my goals without losing site of the big picture... because it reminds me to never stop

learning from new experiences.” Like many of the previous essay, Matt stresses taking risks, whether it be big choices like career paths or small ones like trying new sports.

Chapter 4. Discussion

The study did not produce the number of belief statements that I hoped for, nor enough to make any broad, overarching claims as to where my generation stands. I will say that each essay submitted was interesting and thought-provoking. Most would fit right in with any of the submissions from the 2005 “This I Believe” program, due to their exploration of self (compared to the 1950’s program essays that seemed to be much more selfless.)

Nonetheless, I think that the lack of participation in this project says more about my generation than anything else. Out of over four hundred people invited, only twelve participated. Although only a rough estimate, that is less than a five percent participation rate. This is not a successful rate. Furthermore, this sample was intentionally skewed towards individuals that I am personally friends with so that there would be more participation. And yet, most of my dearest friends refrained from participating despite knowing how important the project was to me. I would like to think that this has more to do with a general problem that my generation struggles with, and not a reflection of how strong (or weak) my bonds are to my friends.

In consequence, the rest of this discussion will not focus on specific belief trends within my generation. Instead, it will explore the possible reasons why people my age have a hard time expressing themselves seriously and thoroughly. Then, we will discuss possible ways to improve upon this project for future use, and finally, we will have a general discussion as to what I believe is the state of public expression and public scholarship relative to my generation today.

Reasons for Lack of Participation

After the project ended, informal interviews were conducted. A handful of people that participated and that did not participate were asked questions about the project, and potential

trends were considered. Ultimately, I found that there were three excuses as to why people did not participate: They “could not find the time”, they “did not know what to say,” and they thought that, “Facebook was the wrong forum.” The following pages of research propose potential reasons why each of these excuses occurred.

1. “Could not find the time”

Among the informal interviews conducted, this was the dominant answer for those who did not participate in the project. Even with a two-month time frame, people could not find the time to write a one-page, double-spaced statement. On the surface, this may seem a bit ridiculous, but upon further dissection, there may be some very real truths underlying this procrastination. Let’s explore the two main reasons someone would not have the time to do something: poor time management or actual lack of time.

Poor time management seems to be a symptom that many kids of Generation Y exhibit. Since this specific generation grew up in the information age, let us look at how technology has influenced time management.

Nielsen Media Industry Fact Sheet (2010) tells the basics: more than 223 million Americans have cell phones, over 195 million American citizens are active Internet users, and the average American worker spends more than 5 hours a week on social networking websites.²³ It is safe to say that typical United States citizens constantly surround themselves with technology. In consequence, many studies have found that said technology has led to increases in attention deficits due to the rise of multitasking.

²³ Entner, Roger, "Smartphones to Overtake Feature Phones in US by 2011." nielsen wire. <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/consumer/smartphones-to-overtake-feature-phones-in-u-s-by-2011/> (accessed February 25, 2011).

In the study “No Task Left Behind? Examining the Nature of Fragmented Work,” researchers from the University of California, Irvine found that American workers were interrupted by technology on average every 11 minutes, and it typically took 25 minutes for the worker to return to the prior task at hand.²⁴ This fragmentation led to less productivity and poor work in general. In the article “Cognitive control in media multitaskers,” Dr. Eyal Ophir found that heavy media multitaskers performed worse on tests measuring task-switching ability.²⁵ Therefore, heavy multitaskers (much of Generation Y) have a problem consistently processing information and concentrating on the task at hand. This can lead to severe procrastination.

Dr. Edward Hallowell of the Harvard Business Review dubbed this generational procrastination as attention deficit trait (ADT).²⁶ Noting the trending increase in patients claiming to have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Dr. Hallowell found that many of his patients did not possess the neurological deformity necessary for the condition, and instead, these people were simply overloading the frontal lobe of the brain with too much information, to the point of exhaustion. Subsequently, these patients showed the same symptoms as those with ADHD, such as procrastination, disorganization, and inconsistency. Indeed, ADT is a condition nurtured by the victim, the product of an environment bombarded by endless technological inputs. This could easily be a major cause of procrastination in Generation Y.

As for availability of time, our generation does not seem to lack it. On the contrary, the “Employment and Unemployment Among Youth Summary” by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the summer of 2010 found that youth (ages 16-24) labor force participation rates, youth that are

²⁴ Mark, Gloria, Victor Gonzalez, and Justin Harris. "No Task Left Behind? Examining the Nature of Fragmented Work," *Proceedings of ACM CHI 2005* (2005): 321-330.

²⁵ Ophir, Eyal, Clifford Nass, and Anthony Wagner. “Cognitive control in media multitaskers,” *PNAS* 106 (2009): 15583

²⁶ Hallowell, Edward. "Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform." *Harvard Business Review* January (2005): 55.

working or actively looking for jobs, was at an all-time low of 62.7%.²⁷ While this statistic may suggest that youth, especially those coming out of college, have more time on their hands than ever, it should be noted that unemployment takes a toll on the mind and body. As many studies can attest to, unemployment can lead to hopelessness and lack of satisfaction in life.²⁸

In consequence, the ‘haven’t got the time’ argument presents the problem of lack of concentration. This disparity in drive and focus must be overcome if a sustainable community of belief sharing is to be created.

2. “Did not know what to say”

Another popular comment during the informal interviews was that people just didn’t know what to write about. I myself struggled to find what I wanted to write my statement on. Nonetheless, this reaction shows that people remain unfocused and relatively blind to what they believe in. One could argue that the people who did not participate simply did not have an interest in the project, and yet every single person informally interviewed, participant or not, said that they actively read most of the essays that were submitted. Therefore, I do not believe that the basis of the project was a failure, for people were interested in what was said. There are two reasons that I think contributed to this “I didn’t know what to write” phenomenon: a general apathy that is ever-present in our generation, and the forum in which the project took place, Facebook. The former will be covered now, and the latter in the next section.

Generation Y has not had to confront dire problems, and certainly not on the home front. This is unfortunate in that there has been no common uniting factor that has fostered urgency in

²⁷ United States. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *College Enrollment and Work Activity of High School Graduates News Release*. 2010

²⁸ Hammarstrom, A. "Health Consequences of Youth Unemployment." *Public Health* 108.6 (1994): 403-12.

youth to speak their minds. Situations where such events occurred have resulted in a more politically and civically active youth.²⁹ In the book *Democracies in Flux*, Dr. Robert Putnam debates the apathetic nature of Generation Y: “By the late 1960s, civic-mindedness was already being transformed into self-interestedness... a generation came of age with little else to think about besides television, themselves, and their personal ambitions.”³⁰ Although he argues that these views are only partially correct, he does concede that a generation of baby-boomers essentially coddled their children, if only because it became easy to do so.

Research on political-mindedness supports the apathy theory. According to “The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2009,” a survey collected every year by UCLA, only 36% of freshmen find it very important to keep up to date on current events.³¹ This is an astounding number, not only because it is the lowest in many generations, but more so because this survey encompasses the views of the most intelligent and privileged of the United States. Less than half of student academics find it important to know what’s going on around them. It should be noted that there was a rise in volunteering, so it is possible that civic engagement in youth is shifting towards community service. It is also possible that this shift is due to increasing requirements mandated by graduate schools and undergraduate classes.

Even if we recognize that volunteering may be replacing public discourse and belief sharing, it must be explored: why don’t people who volunteer in the community commonly express their beliefs? They obviously care about community dynamics and the problems close to

²⁹ Youniss, James, Susan Bales, Verona Christmas-Best, Marcelo Diversi, Milbrey McLaughlin, and Rainer Silbereisen. "Youth Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 12.1 (2002): 121-48

³⁰ Wuthnow, Robert. “The United States: Bridging the Privileged and the Marginalized?,” in *Democracies in flux: the evolution of social capital in contemporary society*, ed. Robert Putnam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

³¹ CIRP, "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2009," *Higher Education Research Institute* January (2010), accessed February 25, 2011.

home, so why the lack of public discussion? These people cannot truly be apathetic. The key, outlined in the article “ “Close to home”: The work of avoiding politics,” by Dr. Nina Eliasoph, is the proximity to problems.³² Dr. Eliasoph argues that there are three implicit factors dependent on each other that contribute to a lack of discourse within individuals that volunteer.

The first factor is “the implicit knowledge about their [the volunteers] own structural power.”³³ Dr. Eliasoph found that volunteers subconsciously calculated their time investments, and usually settled for tasks ‘closer to home,’ things that directly affected them. Furthermore, they figured that they had little power to change problems concerning the higher reaches of society and government. In consequence, volunteers tended to go about their business through action to gain a sense of empowerment. In comparison, activists, who constantly utilize public discourse, tend to think oppositely in that they believe in going after higher powers in hopes to create a trickle down effect.³⁴

The second factor is “an implicit agreement about what kinds of feelings citizens should have.”³⁵ In other words, each individual has an internal opinion on any idea or problem. These opinions are reflected on those around them. Consequently, if a government is not mimicking these opinions, volunteers perform a kind of “psychic numbing,” as Dr. Eliasoph calls it.³⁶ They actively take feelings of powerlessness and use them to convince themselves of what they want

³² Eliasoph, Nina. ““Close to Home”: The Work of Avoiding Politics.” *Theory and Society* 26 (1997): 605-47.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Slovic, Paul. “If I Look at the Mass I Will Never Act: Psychic Numbing and Genocide.” *The International Library of Ethics, Law and Technology* 5 (2010): 37-59.

to feel, instead of what they actually feel. This leads to “psychic numbing,” the diversion from the uncontrollable to that which can be controlled.³⁷

The third factor is an “implicit agreement about what the very act of speaking about politics in public means.” Dr. Eliasoph theorizes that volunteers rarely talk about big issues in meetings because there is etiquette of talking politics in public. She says, “volunteers assumed that citizens’ talk itself would change neither individuals’ opinions nor the political world.”³⁸ These people felt that there was no point to putting themselves out there. In addition, Dr. Eliasoph believes that the human tendency to avoid conflict and argument discourages people from expressing their beliefs. Thus, a seemingly public forum leads to little valuable discourse.

I spend time reviewing this specific article because I think it strikes at the heart of apathy within my generation. We try hard to stay disengaged, whether it be by convincing ourselves that we have no say in the current events of today, or by volunteering and consequently busying ourselves with tasks that we deem accomplishable. We do not have anything to write about because we have spent precious energy to avoid such confrontations of the mind. People may be afraid of what they find.

Therefore, concerning the creation of a community of belief sharing amongst the apathetic, specifically that of Generation Y, the main problem to overcome is a culture of forced naivety.

³⁷ Eliasoph, Nina. ““Close to Home”: The Work of Avoiding Politics.” *Theory and Society* 26 (1997): 605-47.

³⁸ Ibid.

3. "Facebook was the wrong forum"

A few people who did not participate in the project said that Facebook was simply the wrong forum. When asked to elaborate, one person proclaimed that it was too public, while the others could not quite put their fingers on it.

While I do believe that Facebook is sometimes an overly public forum, this was also the exact reason I picked it for the project. This may have inherently alienated a discrete number of people who wished to maintain a distinct level of privacy, but on the whole, most people put themselves completely out there on Facebook, and have no misgivings in doing so. With this in mind, let us consider what motivates someone to share in the first place and the nature of knowledge sharing on the Internet.

Many forces motivate sharing. There is ample research on the perils of sharing knowledge on electronic work networks, employers hoping to maximize sharing amongst employees. Research on job-sharing is a good model for community sharing because both struggle with the same problem: participation.

Two trains of thought exist on the ecology of sharing: the knowledge market and the knowledge community.³⁹ The knowledge market implies an exchange of knowledge that follows the fundamentals of economic exchange theory, which indicates a network relying on self-interest.^{40,41} According to "Breaking The Myths of Rewards: An Exploratory Study of Attitude About Knowledge Sharing," expected rewards, such as monetary rewards, negatively effected

³⁹ Chua, Alton. "Knowledge Sharing: a Game People Play." *Aslib Proceedings* 55.3 (2003): 117-29.

⁴⁰ Bock, Gee W., and Young Gulkim. "Breaking the Myths of Rewards: An Exploratory Study of Attitudes about Knowledge Sharing." *Information Resources Management Journal* 15.2 (2000): 14-21

⁴¹ Davenport, Thomas H., and Laurence Prusak. *Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School, 1998.

knowledge sharing.⁴² Thusly, monetary incentives are not a good idea when trying to foster sharing, at least in the long run (it was found that incentives could at least momentarily spark sharing.) Instead, reciprocity most likely fosters the knowledge market.⁴³

The knowledge community implies a community fueled by personal relationships, loosely following social exchange theory.⁴⁴ This community functions for shared success, if not the greater good. Although the theory is ideally altruistic, there still tends to be self-serving motive involved. According to a research paper by Constant et al (1994), workers considered expertise sharing different than that of information provided by their employer.⁴⁵ In other words, people tend to share 'expertise' information (information obtained through experience) as an expression of self, not as a tool gleaned from their employer. Even in a community focused on shared success, such as a common workplace, sharing is considered a commodity that must be earned.

Consequently, two problems must be overcome to create a community of sharing: people must have expertise to share, and they must be inclined to do so. As mentioned in the previous section, people may not believe they have expertise to share. And if they do, they must still be convinced that sharing such knowledge is worth it.

⁴² Bock, Gee W., and Young Gulkim. "Breaking the Myths of Rewards: An Exploratory Study of Attitudes about Knowledge Sharing." *Information Resources Management Journal* 15.2 (2000): 14-21

⁴³ He, Wei, and Kwok-Kee Wei. "What Drives Continued Knowledge Sharing? An Investigation of Knowledge-contribution and -seeking Beliefs." *Decision Support Systems* 46.4 (2009): 826-38.

⁴⁴ Chua, Alton. "Knowledge Sharing: a Game People Play." *Aslib Proceedings* 55.3 (2003): 117-29.

⁴⁵ Constant, David, Sara Kiesler, and Lee Sproull. "What's Mine Is Ours, or Is It? A Study of Attitudes about Information Sharing." *Information Systems Research* 5.4 (1994): 400-21.

How Can This Project Be Improved?

This is a question that cannot easily be answered. Considerable time and research were put into the project prior to its start, to hopefully craft a functional community of belief sharing. Despite this preliminary effort, the community failed to take off or garner the level of sharing that was expected. As explained above, much of this failure may be a product of environmental factors that are beyond my control. Two of the three excuses (“Could not find the time” and “Did not know what to say”) seem to be extremely difficult to remedy at a personal level. Nonetheless, it is not the direct purpose of this thesis to stipulate how to help society recover from the dregs of apathy (although the final section of this discussion may try.) The purpose of this thesis is to find a way to reach people and inspire them to share, even if it means doing so in an unconventional manner that should not be necessary. In times of great adversity, we must not fall back on notions of helplessness, but must forge forward with the resolve to sift through the problems to find a solution. With this in mind, here are a few ways to improve upon the project:

Offer initial incentives to participate in sharing projects. Although this goes against my fundamental hope that people would want to share beliefs for free, previous research has found that a material incentive can spark participation.⁴⁶ However, said incentive only provided motivation for a brief time at the beginning of any project, and waned quickly. It was found that incentives were best used to foster a “critical mass” of participants.⁴⁷ Once critical mass is reached, collective action ensues and it becomes less intimidating and more profitable for an

⁴⁶ Bock, Gee W., and Young Gulkim. "Breaking the Myths of Rewards: An Exploratory Study of Attitudes about Knowledge Sharing." *Information Resources Management Journal* 15.2 (2000): 14-21

⁴⁷ Marwell, Gerald, and Pamela Oliver. *The Critical Mass in Collective Action: a Micro-social Theory*. Cambridge [England: Cambridge UP], 1993.

individual to participate.⁴⁸ Might this be the reason why my first foray into belief sharing on Facebook was so much more successful than my second? Material incentive may be a necessary evil.

Make it cool to share. Needless to say, this is an aspect that this project failed to deliver on. I believe that I overestimated my influence on my peers. Any ethos gained by my first Facebook contest was probably severely diluted with time. By last December, it was a distant memory in most minds. Therefore, I believe it would be fruitful to further appeal to the herd mentality that people suffer from. If funds do not exist to offer incentive to reach critical mass, securing influential participants may help. One way to do this is to get an influential sponsor that participates, and then tells his or her followers to do the same. This is most easily done through people that are involved in social media and can spread ideas and thoughts virally. Another way to do this is to collect influential participants, and then advertise their contributions. This is common in the “This I Believe” series, and shows that people will happily participate in projects if someone they admire has already done so. Consequently, by participating, they feel closer to someone that may otherwise be unattainable to interact with.

This thesis has brought to light need for further research. One problem within my realm of influence that I currently struggle to find a solution for is the complaint that Facebook is not the right forum for such a community. I expressed this doubt in the introduction, and it was not alleviated by this project. Are people really that afraid to do this kind of belief sharing on Facebook? Those that displayed this hesitation about sharing on Facebook during the informal interviews had no problem sharing intimate things about themselves on the very same website, as long as it was not via direct descriptive belief statements. Why does Facebook foster an aversion

⁴⁸ Chua, Alton. "Knowledge Sharing: a Game People Play." *Aslib Proceedings* 55.3 (2003): 117-29.

to certain belief sharing? Typically, such a bottleneck is not distressing because people find other outlets to disperse objects filtered out by the primary source. For example, the downfall of printed newspaper use is discouraging until you take into consideration the rising use of Internet news services. This sharing situation is particularly concerning because the majority of people that use Facebook do not share beliefs elsewhere. There is no relative alternative outlet for belief sharing that reaches people today like the radio did before television, or books did before digital communications.

My Opinion on the State of Belief

It's hard not to be disenchanted by the results of this thesis. Every turn reveals a different problem, a different disappointment. We are too selfish, we are too apathetic, and we cannot focus. Our minds are constantly in sensory-overload, and it has become impossible to truly detach ourselves from an increasingly fast-paced world. Or maybe it's that with globalization has come a sense of overwhelming smallness; how can anyone concentrate on one problem when we are presented with hundreds a day? At any one moment, tsunamis ravage a country with strong ties to the United States, a revolution occurs in the Middle East, and oil gushes into the blue expanse. How can we be expected to express ourselves when the complexities of the world have never been more apparent? It is probable that expressing ourselves has never been more difficult.

I do not claim to be an expert in public expression. I rarely do it myself. But I do possess an acute awareness of this problem that I think few of my information-age colleagues' have. We are an indifferent generation, and we should be. We lack common unity. Our parents struggled through wars and oppression, and we have benefited from the security that they have

consequently provided. It is unfair to call this current generation lazy; we are distracted. It is unfair to call this generation dumb; we have been misguided.

And so we self-medicate. We spend hours a day on Facebook, whilst blaring music, whilst watching videos on Youtube.com. Then, we go out at night, and confess our love for each other only under the cloaked guise of drunken confessions. As mentioned beforehand, we have opted to numb ourselves, and it has resulted in a suppression of belief sharing, and, dare I say, contemplation of belief altogether.

When we do share, positives are present. I was disappointed with the turn out for this thesis project, but I could not have been prouder or happier with those that did participate. Each statement was pure and glaringly open. I received sincere thanks from many who participated, most noting that they had never really taken the time to focus on belief. I remember telling Dr. Cohen two years ago that I would view this thesis a success if I could get just one more person to learn something about themselves, and I still readily agree with this statement. This thesis brought a dozen people closer to themselves; this is the most an undergraduate thesis can hope to do.

The question becomes: is this a problem? Does belief sharing even matter? This question can only be answered qualitatively. In Dan from Tennessee's "This I Believe" (mentioned in the introduction), Dan says:

I disagree with Edward R. Murrow's original comment when he stated, "Never has the need for personal philosophies of this kind been so urgent." The need is always present and will never lessen. I believe that sharing one's beliefs brings clarity and focus to the person sharing, but I also believe that the listener has the opportunity to sharpen his own world view. And for that, I am grateful.

Again, I agree with Dan's statement. A lack of public belief sharing is a problem, because belief sharing helps people hone their beliefs into well-crafted parachutes. These parachutes may not be needed daily, but to be able to reach back and pull the parachute chord in times of emergency or crisis is invaluable. As shown by my project, my generation shies from contemplating beliefs, and consequently, there will come a day when this has its consequences. Maybe this is why the sense of community is so palpable in the 1950s "This I Believe," because these citizens were forced to face the realities of such consequences. In the future, there may be a nuclear plant meltdown, or the death of a loved one, or simply a career decision. No matter the circumstance, we all have the responsibility to know how to deal with such things in a timely manner. A beliefs system is an invaluable asset.

Another question: is public expression and belief sharing in constant, irreversible decline? As technology continues to immerse itself into our daily lives, the quick answer is yes, if you wish to follow the trending logic. But I reserve the right to argue against this logic. As research indicates from the earlier discussion section, technology has led to decreased ability to concentrate, and people tend to focus on problems "close to home." I contend that if something "close to home" were to occur at the national level, a la the Cold War, belief sharing would again increase, with technology at the forefront of such movements. The most recent example of this occurred in Egypt only a few months ago, using Facebook as a sparkplug for a public up rise.⁴⁹

In consequence, the final question becomes: is there a clear resolution to this problem? How do we foster belief sharing in a country where "close to home" is vastly different from county to county, and in result, its citizens play dumb so that they do not have to deal with problems greater than themselves? While there are ways to alleviate this problem via education,

⁴⁹ Preston, Jennifer. "Movement Began With Outrage and a Facebook Page That Gave It an Outlet." *New York Times* [New York] 05 Feb. 2011: A10.

no less than a total shift in societal thinking will aptly solve it. The strangest facet of this problem is that it is not an upper class-lower class divide, unlike many of the societal problems that exist today in the United States. As found in this thesis, the educated and (mostly) privileged declined to participate in belief sharing. It is rare that the educated are so blind to a worthy and necessary academic pursuit.

In terms of direct, physical evidence, it may seem that little has been lost by a lack of belief sharing thus far. Maybe this is why the problem exists. There is a lack of awareness that is furthered because belief sharing is intangible at its core. Unlike most classic problems that plague a society, a lack of belief sharing does not leave millions starving or compromise someone's physical safety. Nonetheless, this same lack of sharing can cause all of the above problems indirectly. Belief motivates. Therefore, a muddled and uninformed belief system can be the trigger for something much more dangerous. It is the unforeseen consequences that a lack of well thought out belief creates that make this problem hard to solve.

Most likely, the current youth generation will continue to shun belief exploration in favor of self-medication through technology and apathy, unless someone figures out how to easily reach people through these same facets. Only when it becomes discernibly necessary will most embrace belief sharing, much like during the Cold War, or after 9/11. Ultimately, we can only keep trying to encourage belief sharing in the hopes that people know who they are when it matters most.

Appendix

I Believe in Laughter by Meghan Walsh

I believe laughter is what gives us our humanity. Comedies should be the Oscar-winning movies, not sad, sappy stories about a fictional woman who survived the Holocaust. Not that those movies are bad in any way, but lots of other species endure hardship and death. Humor is what makes us unique as human beings.

I believe that a simple smile or an amazing joke can change a person's day. In fact, today was a pretty crappy day at work, and I watched an episode of Modern Family. While it didn't change the previous 12 hours, it did make me feel better, even if it was just for those 20 minutes.

There are many awful events that occur in our world each day. But, as humans, we conquer those tears with laughter. I believe, or at least wish, that we all have those friends who brighten even the darkest of our days. How do they do it? By making us laugh.

Working for a conservation organization, I've learned a great deal about other species on our planet. Some who supposedly "laugh" (i.e. the hyena) aren't really laughing. Their laugh is just another form of vocalization. I may not know all the billions of animals on earth, but I can almost guarantee that none find as much humor in watching humans as we do in watching a hamster play a piano on YouTube.

Laughter is what keeps us going each day, whether we think of it or not. Could we even imagine a world where we wake up and no one smiles or makes us smile?

I believe that without humor, or without us finding humor in little places of our life, we would be void of all humanity. Laughter brings kindness and kindness brings peace. The world may have many bad things, but it also has many good things. Thanks to laughter. Laughter is our glue, our lifeline, our reason to get up each morning. Laughter is also the reason we have The Hangover 2.

I Believe in the Appreciation of Self by Julie Roth

I believe it is important to love yourself and appreciate your own company. In life, there are enough things and people that will hurt you and bring you down, so why bring yourself down as well? I believe many people my age, myself included, are extremely critical of themselves. It is easy to think that if you could change certain things about yourself, your problems would go away and life would be perfect. We have to let go of this notion and enjoy the people we are.

People who come into our lives are worth our time and love if they appreciate everything about us, including the qualities that aren't necessarily "desirable". I have always been very chatty and I'm sure this is annoying to some. When I was younger I wanted to be just like my one friend, who is calm, quiet and sweet. I quickly learned that trying to be anything but who you are not only isn't fun but next to impossible. Although I do believe you can work to make improvements to become a better person, I don't think you can change the essence of who you are. Now I have come to like this loquacious quality about myself and only want to surround myself with people who feel the same.

I believe learning to like yourself for who you are means enjoying your own company. People are going to come and go through life which is why I believe it is so wonderful and important to be able to give yourself a happy life before letting anyone else try to provide that for you. When you meet someone or make a new friend, they only add to the happiness in your life, not define your happiness. I believe this happiness comes from appreciation and liking of yourself and is at the core of being able to have healthy relationships and a fulfilling life.

I Believe that We Have Control by Susan Martins

I recently had a friend tell me a story about a show she had watched about love and relationships. During this show, a woman was at the airport with her son waiting for her husband to return from a business trip. When they had finally met up with each other, they were so happy to see each other that it had appeared as though they were newlyweds. When someone had seen this they had asked if they were returning from their honeymoon and they had said no he [the husband] has been away for work. The lady that had asked them asked if he had been gone for a year or at least a few months and they replied only for about four days. They were so happy to be with each other it took her by surprise and she had to ask how long they had been married and their reply was a shocking seven years and still crazy in love with each other. The man had told her you cannot hope for a relationship where you want to be happily, crazy in love with your partner; you have to decide that you are going to be that happy with your partner. This may be extremely cheesy or whatever, but here is what I believe. After hearing about this relationship it kind of made me realize that when dealing with relationships or even work, school, or whatever it is that you have to decide for yourself how you are going to feel about it and make that happen. If you go into a job or anything with the attitude of just hoping and wanting something better you are never going to be happy with what you have. Instead, we should try and make the most out of whatever it is that we have. I'm not saying that this is going to fix every problem we have because there are going to be bad days and there are going to be even worse days. It's deciding that you are going to be happy that will make life more enjoyable. I believe that changing something as simple as our attitude about things in life that we will be happier people and appreciate what we have. We can all have that relationship where we are "head over heels" in love with our partner even after seven years if we just decide that we have that relationship rather than waiting around for it.

I Believe in Risk by Will Raasch

I believe in risk. If you know that you are going to win a game, why play it? I believe that, in order to reach your full potential, it is necessary to take actions that carry risks for failure -- actions that take you out of your comfort zone and challenge your abilities. Such actions, I believe, are required in order to test your limits, develop yourself, and move up to the next level of your education, career, or life. Moreover, with each failure that you experience as a result of these actions, I believe that you come out more experienced, hardened, and ready to take on the next challenge.

When faced with choices in life, one option often carries more risk than the other. This is the option that I fear more than the others, the option that seems to fit my experience the least, the one that takes me out of my comfort zone. While it is tempting to choose the easy route, it won't lead to the great experiences and potential successes of the rougher path and cannot teach the lessons that come with failure in a great challenge. I relish, or at least try to relish, choosing the frightening choice.

One way to test whether I have been living life with the appropriate amount of risk, is to look at whether I have failed lately. I look at whether I have found myself in over my head in a class, job, or activity, or whether things just didn't work out for me recently. If I find that these failures or feelings of imminent failure have been absent, I know that I am walking the easy road -- and that is time to change. I believe that this applies to everybody. If I hear somebody tell me that they are dominating their job or some aspect of their life, that's great, but are they challenging themselves enough? I believe that, unless there is at least some form of discomfort or risk in what you do, that you are not being challenged enough.

Of course, talk is cheap, and I don't claim to always take the hard choice over the safe bet. But I do try. I believe that taking the job that I am underqualified for, playing the sport that I am not good at, and talking to the girl that is out of my league will often lead to failure, but that opting against these choices will never lead to the same level of success that taking such risks can bring.

I Believe in the Little Things by Kathleen Kowalski

What do I believe? A seemingly simple question that probes your inner core. A quick response may lead to straightforward answers such as, “Well I believe in world peace, of course! Or, I believe in liberty, equality, and justice.” While these things are all true and admirable, I need to think of what I really believe in and it usually comes down to the little things.

I believe in wearing clothes that make me feel good. When I look good, I feel good. Its not for you, its for me. I believe in binge eating. Limiting what I eat day in and day out and is not living. On the seventh day man shall eat that whole pie of pizza and not feel bad about it. Indulgence can be good. I believe in having a good pillow and wonderful sheets. My bed is a cocoon of comfort that makes each night better and as a result makes my mornings brighter. I believe in laughing. I will go out of my way to try to make you smile, sometimes at my expense, and sometimes at yours, but if we can laugh at ourselves and with others our world will be a happier place. I believe in traveling. I will risk almost anything to travel the world. I know this because I almost jeopardized my college career for a trip to Paris and I ended a relationship after a three week European getaway. If I had to do it again, I wouldn't change a thing. Traveling opens your eyes to things you can only dream of and gives you a dose of humility. No, everyone does not speak English, nor should they, and people are immensely kind and will go out of their way to help a stranger. Remember that you are but a speck in this infinite universe. I believe in family. At the end of the day I will always have my family to fall back on. They are loud, and generous, and the most important thing in my life. Family first and everything else will follow.

I believe in the little things in life, which ends up being a lot of things. When I don't know what I believe in at least I know that I have a good outfit on, I'm probably full, and I have a wonderful family behind me to show me the way.

I Believe that there is No Truth by Roland Jeon

I believe that there is no Truth with a capital "T". In high school, and even in early college years, I was a vocal preacher of my beliefs, determined to seek out people who disagreed with me politically, socially, and religiously, and prove them wrong. I realize now the immaturity of such actions and how stupid I was. What I learned too late, and what I ardently believe now, is that there is no right and wrong in anything, for two reasons. First, this world we live in - this universe - is full of uncertainties that we have barely scratched the surface of any knowledge to be had. How can we possibly argue about right and wrong with such limited knowledge? Second, every human being is a product of their own experiences and upbringing. What is relevant to me is not necessarily relevant to you, and I have no reason to force that relevance on you. We each have our own individual "truths," and it's important to live by them because they form the basis of our principles - which is what separates us from animals. However, it is fruitless to impose our "truths" on others who cannot possibly have had the exact same life as you had, because to do so exposes the fundamental human ignorance and arrogance. All the ugliness among humans in the world seems to be the result of this - humans trying to impose one group's "Truths" upon others. Live your life, find your "truth", live by your "truth", and learn to embrace others' "truth" - when you do, all the happiness you seek in the world will be yours, because being truly happy can only come from within. This I believe.

I Believe in Respect by Jessica Veffer

I have put nearly a week's worth of time into exploring my beliefs, attempting to consolidate or kill a few birds with one stone and while this is near-impossible, I was able to unify a sizable chunk of my beliefs under the umbrella of respect.

I believe that most interactions in life are governed by respect as are my perceptions of those around me. Respect acts as an antecedent of trust, admiration, kindness, relationships, gratitude, debate, intellect...etc. Mutual respect can soothe the most formidable of enemies; lack of respect can incite horrendous acts of violence or insurgence; the blossoming of respect can completely alter your preconceived notions or first impressions of nearly anyone.

I personally employ respect as a facet of how I choose my friends and confidantes, how I get a sense of social situations and statuses around me, how I communicate information to individuals with diverse roles in my life, how I argue, how I care for someone, and lastly how I choose to be perceived. In some cases respect is a light switch you can turn on or off. In some it's an honor to be earned. We often seek the respect of individuals who are regarded with esteem for their intellect, talent or wisdom. The manner in which you utilize respect can be reciprocated in how you are treated by others. Additionally, reverence, homage and even prayer can manifest out of respect for an ideology, culture or the observance of a religion.

While I have demonstrated that respect is a widely applicable concept, it can be difficult to remember in practice. I deeply believe in Respect, but I sometimes falter in being respectful of others, especially in times of stress or frustration. In sharing my belief, I am also reminding myself to harness it more frequently.

I Believe that Teachers are Underpaid by John Rinaldi

I believe that teachers are underpaid. They are the backbone of society, propagating knowledge from generation to generation. Without the education they provide, life as we know it would be completely different. Academic training, vocational preparation, and technological advances would all be non-existent if these generous human beings never existed.

I use the word generous because of the work they do voluntarily. The general public and government should more fully recognize the long hours, stressful days, and high responsibilities that educators face on a daily basis. You would think that the person with the eventual task of educating our children would be living comfortably. With an average salary of just over forty thousand dollars per year, these charity-workers are fueled not financially, but by their own personal gratification of watching their student's success.

Compare the average teacher's salary to that of a professional athlete, which is about 3-5 million dollars per year. Although it should be noted that these athletes have worked tremendously hard for their achievements, I believe that, from an evolutionary perspective, it would be more logical to reward education over entertainment. The fate of the Super Bowl or how many points Kobe Bryant scored last week does not change our daily routine or impact society in any meaningful way. Watching sporting events may provide entertainment for a few hours or serve as a topic of conversation, but in all other regards, I believe that they are overpaid and receive excessive attention for the minimal contributions they have on mankind.

Nobody begins to play a sport for money. I bet that 95% of the NFL would do what they do for half of the money they currently "earn" and would still be able to live more comfortably than a teacher. My logic for diverting money from athletics to education: increasing salary for teachers would place a higher value on education, amplify the number of aspiring future teachers, and strengthen the power of knowledge. Above all, holding the role as a teacher would become increasingly competitive, which would result in unsurpassed levels of academic excellence at all grade levels for future generations.

With salary as evidence, the society in which we live rewards those who possess athletic ability. This would be tremendously valuable from a biological aspect... if we were still cavemen. What we need is a society that is driven towards productivity and technological advances, so that we can ultimately make the world a better place to live. I believe that maximizing our human potential can only be reached by consistently rewarding the aspects of life that support this goal, beginning with teachers.

I Believe in Saunas by Pat Buckley

I believe in saunas. My fascination with the Scandanavian hot box began ten years ago in a hotel gym on a family vacation to Canada. Since that fateful day I have been lucky enough to sweat it out everywhere from Myrtle Beach to Munich. It's no secret why I love saunas so much; they combine three things I excel at: sweating, nudity, and relaxing.

Let's start with sweating. Many people find profuse sweating to be an undesirable experience, mainly because of its associations with nervous flop sweat or the public shame of pit stains. Within the sauna, however, the stigma of perspiration is stripped away and sweating becomes a pleasurable experience. While I have never subscribed to the concept of "sweating out the toxins" (this is what we have a liver for), I still find heavy sweating cathartic and invigorating.

The only thing better than sweating is sweating while completely naked. Unfortunately, I have found that this is the biggest barrier to entry for most potential sauna enthusiasts. There is no need to fear. Sauna nudity is not only practical, it's also a reminder of our common humanity; everyone has approximately the same parts and is more or less equally disgusting in a sauna.

Finally, saunas are relaxing. There is nothing like heat to unwind your muscles and there is nothing like silence to clear your mind. I do some of my best thinking in the sauna. After all, often do you get (or take) the opportunity to sit in complete and unbroken silence without the distraction of music, TV, a computer, or a magazine? It's amazing to see what thoughts are bouncing around in your head if you give them the time to develop.

Sweating, nudity, and relaxing. These are three things I think everyone could use a little more of in their lives. Look at Finland. They love saunas there and have some of the happiest, healthiest, and best-educated people in the world. I'm no expert in the difference between correlation and causation, but that evidence seems irrefutable to be. A better life through saunas. That's a hot idea (boom!) I believe in.

I Believe We Are All Cars Driving in the Night by Sam Raasch

Despite the constant appeals from my parents, I always drive back to Penn State in the dark. I don't particularly take pleasure in worrying them, but sometimes I need a good drive. Furthermore, I think everyone needs a good drive every once and a while. I believe that we are all cars driving in the night because we are our true selves on the road.

DC traffic is awful, so I wait until 8pm to avoid it. And yet, I don't avoid traffic to get to my destination faster; I do it because traffic feels soulless. There are so many people on the road, so many different agendas, and none of them are working together. Some cars switch lanes every ten seconds, and others bumble by fifteen miles an hour below the speed limit. This urks me because I like to think that only good can come from such a large congregation of humans.

No, I like my traffic sparse and my roads wide open. In these conditions, each individual car has a personality that can be taken in and digested. That beat up Wrangler is no longer that reckless piece of junk standing in the way of you and dinner. Instead, it's a fellow journeyman trying to find his way. I often find that I'll set the cruise control, and another car, maybe the Wrangler, will decide to follow behind me instead of pass. And there you go: two cars venture forth into the paved unknown together without actually knowing the entities that lie within. I choose to think this happens all the time outside of the car world too.

I also find the obligatory 'flash of the lights when a cop is up ahead' to be something I admire. This is an anonymous gesture of faith rarely seen outside of cars. It implies a faith in humanity, a certain, "hey, you're a person just trying to get by" type of outlook that I aspire to display more in my everyday life.

Finally, and most importantly, I believe that we are all cars driving in the night because I believe we all possess a light capable of guiding us towards the future. In the daytime, we tend to keep our lights off and our talents are hidden in a river of bustling traffic. But when we take the time to be ourselves, we turn our high beams on and those around us can see just how bright we are. Is there a better feeling than being the head of a midnight caravan of cars, your high beams leading the way for all? Probably, but I still like it. And if we're lucky, we can find that car that goes the exact same speed on the highway (80 on I-80), and doesn't mind silently sharing the furthest right lane of the road.

I Believe in Balance by Matt Estrada

I believe that striving for a balanced lifestyle is important because it allows me to work productively toward my goals, maintain a healthy variety of experiences, and continue learning new things. Conversely, a lack of balance might serve to threaten my success in pursuit of these personal challenges.

Staying focused on goals and working hard to achieve them are challenges faced often in an ongoing effort toward self improvement. At the same time, it's important to remember that the journey itself can be as valuable as the end result. In fact, I've found that on occasion, paying attention to the journey along the way changes my destination for the better. I believe in maintaining a healthy, balanced lifestyle because it means constantly striving to strike a balance between maintaining focus and keeping track of the big picture. Otherwise, as the adage goes, I might lose the forest for the trees, and that can make success very difficult to achieve.

Perhaps more practically, balance is simply fun. In an everyday sense, it leads to variety of experiences that I find enjoyable. Sure, like everyone, I have my favorite foods, books, movies, sports... the list goes on. But I also like trying new things and continuing to add layers of perspective to my experiences. On countless occasions, I have found a new food, book, movie, or sport that replaces a previous favorite. Not only that, but I tend to find myself making these smaller decisions on a regular basis; more difficult (and perhaps more important) decisions, on the other hand, tend to be fewer and further between. So I think that maintaining balance is important in the toughest of life's endeavors, but also in the more trivial decisions made on a daily basis.

A lack of balance can be dangerous. Integrity and decisiveness are both important characteristics, but if taken too far can lead to single-mindedness and poor decision-making. Both confidence and humility are critical factors in the learning process, and anyone refusing to learn new things is in jeopardy of continually making the wrong choices. So balance, in this sense, is really the ability to remain confident in new challenges but humble enough to learn from other people or from unexpected outcomes.

I believe in balance because it allows me to focus on my goals without losing sight of the big picture, because it ensures me that smaller choices don't become boring decisions, and finally because it reminds me to never stop learning from new experiences.

Tom Carp

I agree somewhat. I like to drive to and from PSU at night, turn on the tunes and get in a groove of owning the road and doing things at my own speed. But I like to go fast enough that I don't see anybody's lights before or behind me.

I also like driving on the highway back during the day because I go faster and get aggressive. (If you know me I'm either distinctly aggressive or not). With other people on the road a different side of my personality comes out. Sure my "true" self is relaxed and more interested in enjoying the ride. But my day self enjoys the highway, he also enjoys driving faster and better than everyone around him and knowing it.

And no, I believe no large group of people accomplish anything good for others. Most people are jerks to the weak and bitches to the strong. I don't cut people off, but if someone is being rude I like being the only one person on the road to not give them their way; I like to not let that guy merge left after speeding down a closing lane or go slower when the high-beams come on from the truck behind me. And when there's a little old lady trying to merge right I also like to be the only person on the road to give her what she deserves.

I'm just saying the smelly, disorganized and stupid herd of people out there don't entirely hide my true personality but instead allows me to see who I am by seeing how I'm different than them.

ACADEMIC VITA of Samuel Rowe Johnson Raasch

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