

Assignment: There was a well-known radio show in the 1950's where people would read short essays entitled "This I Believe". The show has been started up again, and of course all the essays are on the web, too. I am assigning you the task of writing a This I Believe essay that describes your beliefs about sustainability. The purpose of the assignment is to give you a chance (by requiring you) to assimilate the key tenets of sustainability theory and report back how it has (or has not) become incorporated into your belief system. That is, what do you believe about the state of our natural systems; humans' role in creating problems? In creating solutions? Engineers' roles in creating problems? Solutions? Humans place in natural systems? Our responsibilities to natural systems? To future generations? The essay should be 350-500 words. There are some guidelines at the end of this assignment sheet. Clearly you can't talk about all of this...these are just ideas to help you get started.

Below I've excerpted three of them from the website to provide you with examples. These are not on the same topic I've asked you to address, although the first two are somewhat related. The third one not at all...I just liked it. [However, it is not a hint that I think it would be okay for you to fail at this assignment!] You can read (but not plagiarize from) hundreds more on the website: <http://thisibelieve.org/index.php>

Please submit this with your name on the BACK of the page, so that if we want to, we can read some aloud. I will write one too. Let's see what we come up with.

Example 1: This I Believe ---- Compost and Prayer

I believe in compost. You can build a pile of garbage and it turns into rich topsoil. This is the distilled essence of life for me. It does not depend on my actions, logic or planning. Compost just happens. Earthworms are the littlest angels.

I learned to make compost from my dad. Layering the kitchen garbage with soil, weeds and leaves from the garden, I learned to enjoy the camaraderie of work. Turning the steaming pile with a shovel was mesmerizing. What did a half decayed banana peel look like? What was that slimy smelly something? And at the end of the cycle, a wheelbarrow of sifted sweet smelling humus was tangible and satisfying. It has been one of the most enduring actions in my life.

I believe in prayer. Every day I am drawn to find something to be thankful for. I can be still and whisper my problems. All I have to do is stop and ask. My deepest desires and confusion can be understood and shared with the universe just by asking. I have experienced this quality of receptivity through my own soul's window. I believe that praying keeps me sane.

I came to this belief through trial and error. Though this may seem strange, psychedelic drugs and crushing life disappointments have taught me the same thing. It is more than beautiful images, ecstatic feelings and troughs of deep blue sorrow. The spirit world is just so close.

Was there a transformative moment? Yes, there were several. The low point was being left with 2 children by a woman, for another woman. I invested time to heal from the anguish of such a core personal disillusionment. The first hint of relief was but a few minutes at a time. And it came from saying a simple prayer. "Please, give me 5 minutes peace from this pain." It was so simple and yet so profound. And it worked, without planning, logic or effort.

For me, it is a process of letting the layers fall away to get at what is holy and true. Like compost, prayer allows the desires of life to be fermented and refined. Pile them up and send them out into the universe, to heaven. Let go of them and they will become transformed. The confusion and chaos, the garbage of my life are the fuel of my prayers.

I believe that wisdom creeps up on us. I believe in showing up and paying attention. I believe that we are all connected. I believe in life's magic. I believe in things I can not understand. When I need help from the universe, I pray. While I am waiting for my prayers to be answered, I make compost.

Example 2: A Reverence for All Life

I believe in upholding reverence for all life. I believe that humanity has a responsibility to the earth and to the life that we share our experience with.

As a child, I found joy digging in the dirt, examining the miracle of life. Everything creepy-crawly was fascinating to me, and I spent countless hours in my backyard exploring what wonders lay beneath. Although some people might be repulsed by this notion, these creatures did not represent slimy pests to me. Rather, such experiences in the natural world taught me about the diversity of life that could be found in any microcosm. I felt attuned with the cycles of life, my favorite being the spring.

During these budding months, I could watch the egg sacs of praying mantises as they opened or collect robin-blue egg shells that had fallen from the nests. This was where I felt a strong connection to the natural cycles of creation. This connection has inspired awe in me that I feel strongly to this day. It is a feeling deep within me that has inspired my passions and pursuits as an environmentalist.

As I grew older, I discovered that this reverence for life was not shared by all of humanity. Rather than respecting the natural world as a community of life, the environment has been valued in terms of the resources that could be exploited. Industrialization has turned life into an industry, and systematically destroys the essential diversity that provides richness to the human experience. Our self-inflicted ecological crisis has reached such a point that we no longer endanger isolated bioregions. So many toxins have been spewed into the atmosphere as a result of our industrial greed that the climate of our planet is changing at an alarming rate. Climate change threatens all life forms by altering fundamental natural cycles, giving little time for evolutionary responses.

These detrimental impacts are visible today as polar bears lose their habitat of sea ice, the sex of

sea turtle eggs is skewed, whales have less krill to feed on, and coral reefs are bleached, to cite just a few examples. Climate change also has a detrimental impact on cultures and humanity's well-being as more people are becoming environmental refugees. Little is being done to curb this crisis and, within our lifetime the ecological functioning of planet earth will be forever altered.

I believe that my connection to all life forms prevents me from sitting back and watching this catastrophe. I believe that we should understand our place in our regional ecosystems and communities, as well as pledge our allegiance to the earth as a whole. I believe that all creatures, whether they are found in my backyard or halfway around the globe, should not suffer as a result of human greed. The reality of climate change is here and now; it is the environmental battle of our generation and generations to come. In honor of all life, I am dedicating myself to preventing this worldwide ecological crisis.

Michelle Gardner-Quinn wrote this essay for her environmental studies class at the University of Vermont. Two days after completing her assignment in October 2006, she was abducted and murdered.

Example 3: Failure Is a Good Thing

Last week, my granddaughter started kindergarten, and, as is conventional, I wished her success. I was lying. What I actually wish for her is failure. I believe in the power of failure.

Success is boring. Success is proving that you can do something that you already know you can do, or doing something correctly the first time, which can often be a problematical victory. First-time success is usually a fluke. First-time failure, by contrast, is expected; it is the natural order of things.

Failure is how we learn. I have been told of an African phrase describing a good cook as "she who has broken many pots." If you've spent enough time in the kitchen to have broken a lot of pots, probably you know a fair amount about cooking. I once had a late dinner with a group of chefs, and they spent time comparing knife wounds and burn scars. They knew how much credibility their failures gave them.

I earn my living by writing a daily newspaper column. Each week I am aware that one column is going to be the worst column of the week. I don't set out to write it; I try my best every day. Still, every week, one column is inferior to the others, sometimes spectacularly so.

I have learned to cherish that column. A successful column usually means that I am treading on familiar ground, going with the tricks that work, preaching to the choir or dressing up popular sentiments in fancy words. Often in my inferior columns, I am trying to pull off something I've never done before, something I'm not even sure can be done.

My younger daughter is a trapeze artist. She spent three years putting together an act. She did it successfully for years with the Cirque du Soleil. There was no reason for her to change the act—

but she did anyway. She said she was no longer learning anything new and she was bored; and if she was bored, there was no point in subjecting her body to all that stress. So she changed the act. She risked failure and profound public embarrassment in order to feed her soul. And if she can do that 15 feet in the air, we all should be able to do it.

My granddaughter is a perfectionist, probably too much of one. She will feel her failures, and I will want to comfort her. But I will also, I hope, remind her of what she learned, and how she can do whatever it is better next time. I probably won't tell her that failure is a good thing, because that's not a lesson you can learn when you're five. I hope I can tell her, though, that it's not the end of the world. Indeed, with luck, it is the beginning

Writing Instructions for *This I Believe* Essay-

Tell a story: Be specific. Take your belief out of the ether and ground it in the events of your life. Consider moments when belief was formed or tested or changed. Think of your own experience, work, and family, and tell of the things you know that no one else does. Your story need not be heart-warming or gut-wrenching—it can even be funny—but it should be *real*. Make sure your story ties to the essence of your daily life philosophy and the shaping of your beliefs.

Be brief: Your statement should be between 350 and 500 words. That's about three minutes when read aloud at your natural pace.

Name your belief: If you can't name it in a sentence or two, your essay might not be about belief. Also, rather than writing a list, consider focusing on one core belief, because three minutes is a very short time.

Be positive: Please avoid preaching or editorializing. Tell us what you do believe, not what you don't believe. Avoid speaking in the editorial "we." Make your essay about you; speak in the first person.

Be personal: Write in words and phrases that are comfortable for you to speak. We recommend you read your essay aloud to yourself several times, and each time edit it and simplify it until you find the words, tone, and story that truly echo your belief and the way you speak.

In introducing the original series, host Edward R. Murrow said, "Never has the need for personal philosophies of this kind been so urgent." We would argue that the need is as great now as it was 50 years ago. We are eager for your contribution.