

UUFCC Service – This I Believe

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Welcome (Emily Reddy)

The loose theme of services during Mark's sabbatical time is "stories." Last month you heard Manfred Keune talk about the importance of telling our stories. At that service we all got to find out what was on Art Goldschmidt's earliest surviving report card. Good stuff. If you missed that service you missed some great stories.

I deal in stories as well. I work at WPSU, the public radio station in town, as a reporter and producer. In reporting, it's a general truth that you should focus on the individuals affected by the news. For example, if there are layoffs, the story isn't, "One hundred people lost their jobs yesterday." The story is, "Jane Doe doesn't know how she's going to pay rent and feed her kids. She was one of a hundred laid off yesterday."

In addition to writing news stories, I'm the producer of a few on-going series. One of those series is This I Believe. This I Believe is a personal essay series. It was first created by Edward R. Murrow in the 1950s. It was revived by Dan Gediman in 2004.

In the sharings you'll hear today, you'll see how the stories in our lives illustrate the beliefs we each hold.

I Believe in Stepping out of your Comfort Zone (Saede Eifrig) (Originally broadcast on WPSU radio)

"Everybody needs to play catcher at least one time this season."

That's what my peewee baseball coach told the team when I was 8 years old. I had never caught in my life. I thought all you did as catcher was sit in an uncomfortable crouch and let the ball smack your hand until it throbbed. The black pads bake you in the hot sun. And your nose sits inches from a dangerous metal bat. SMACK! Stuck behind the plate, there's no chance to snag a line drive. No hanging a glove over the outfield fence until the ball drops into it, robbing a hitter of a home run. That season I did the minimum and caught exactly once.

Two years later, I started playing softball instead of baseball. New players, new coaches, new abilities. One of the assistant coaches asked me to try out catching. For several practices in a row, I caught for our new pitchers. The crouching wasn't so bad, and my hand didn't hurt because the coach taught me to catch correctly. The ball found its way into the pocket of my glove more easily every practice.

I got a bit nervous as our games were sneaking up on us. When the first game finally arrived, I was the starting catcher. Somehow I managed to keep my hands from sweating and from overthrowing the ball. On almost every pitch I got to touch the ball. Especially when there weren't many plays, it was good to be catcher, because I still got some action. I realized I really liked playing catcher.

I had to step out of my comfort zone in order to see things from this new perspective. If my coach hadn't given me the opportunity to try catching again, I would never have known that my opinion could change. And this doesn't only apply to softball. This year, I learned to be more relaxed about school, which was a big step for me.

After sports on school nights, I would NOT stop doing homework until I had everything done... and done right. I was a perfectionist. As the clock ticked toward ten, my parents would ask me to go to bed. I ignored them. If I didn't answer a question, I wouldn't get full credit.

But toward the middle of this year, my parents helped me realize I could ease up on myself and still do well in school. For example, I had been using an elaborate explanation to respond to homework questions, when a simple answer would have been fine. When I let go of absolute perfection – and stopped triple-checking my answers – I got my homework done faster. And I still got good grades.

New things can be scary at first. But if you don't try them, you may never know what you like and are good at. I believe everyone should try things they're afraid of.

I believe in stepping out of my comfort zone.

I Believe in Puns (Johnathan McVerry) (Originally broadcast on WPSU radio)

One morning, I called the local barbershop to make an appointment. Unfortunately, the barber was all booked up for the day.

"Well, this is a hairy situation," I said to my girlfriend as I hung up the phone. She replied, "They certainly left you stranded."

Call me a pundit, a glutton for punishment, or just a "pun"derful guy...I believe in puns.

You want to spice up any conversation, here's some sage advice. Have a little fun with it. That's why it's called a "play on words" after all.

The earliest punning experience I can remember started during a conversation about corn...with my Pop. We walked into the kitchen as my mom was boiling some corn on the cob. My dad started the stalk talk.

"This is going to be some great corn. Believe me, I have an ear for these things."

"That's a-maize-ing," I responded.

"OK, this is getting corny," he said.

"Aw, shucks," I replied.

"We butter stop."

"Aye Aye, colonel."

After standing in silence, eyes rolled toward the ceiling throughout our back-and-forth, my Mom finally cobbled together something to say, "Wow, you guys are a couple of corn flakes."

Some think puns are easy. They're not. Puns involve timing, creativity, wit, and guts. You're pitching a brand of joke that is almost universally lambasted and often misunderstood. Comedians talk about knowing their audience. With puns, it's a crapshoot.

I think puns get a bad rep. Some people have never grown to enjoy them—instead they just groan. They roll their eyes at such lowbrow humor. Instead of focusing on the brilliance of puns, they lash out with a sarcastic laugh or tell you to put a lid on it.

As a writer and editor, I work with words every day. With puns, ordinary words can become renowned—or reverbed. It makes me happy to inject some creativity into sentences that need a little excitement.

When someone says something that could be pun-worthy, my wheels start spinning. Sometimes they fall flat, but sometimes they go around and around until I get tired.

Recently over dinner with friends, one of them told me about her boyfriend's new job at the airport. The puns took off from there:

"How did he land that job?"

"He must really be winging it."

"Does he work for peanuts?"

"He always had an air about him."

"He must work non-stop."

"I bet he has a lot of baggage."

The puns flew in circles, until we crashed in laughter. We had red-eyes we were laughing so hard. After all, these were first-class puns. We made a grounded conversation take flight.

It's plain and simple; puns are a unique form of comedy. They're something everyone can be a part of, and they bring humor to everyday life.

In any conversation, there is always a little giggle room for them. Each snicker is sweet. Every "L" is "OL." I believe if you pun...you will...guffaw.

HOMILY: (Emily Reddy)

First, I have a confession to make: I am that corny girlfriend from Jonathan's essay. Although, I think my joke was a cut above the rest.

I've been in charge of the This I Believe series at WPSU for coming up on 3 years now. In that time, I've read a lot of essays about what people believe in. And it's amazing the number of times I've read an essay and said, "That's what I believe, too!"

For example...

I believe we are all connected.

I believe in happiness, libraries, appreciating the present, and living with flair ...

I believe in stepping outside of my comfort zone.

And I believe in puns.

Hearing a belief I agree with makes me evaluate what is important to me. Why does that particular belief resonate with me?

On the other hand, I hear beliefs I don't agree with.

Here are a couple I, personally, don't agree with...

I don't believe in the power of food. That essayist argues food is so powerful that eating the right foods can cure cancer. I don't agree with her and I think her ideas may even be dangerous.

I do NOT believe that everything happens for a reason. I think much of what happens is about the choices we make, luck, and timing. A friend of mine died in a car accident a couple of years ago. She was 21 and brilliant. Her parents certainly don't feel better when people tell them, "Everything happens for a reason."

In order to figure out what I do NOT agree with I have to evaluate my beliefs. I have to look inside myself and think about my values. What about my beliefs makes me disagree with these?

Edward R Murrow created This I Believe in the 1950s. He tagged it, "A public dialogue about belief, one essay at a time."

Why are these essays useful as a dialogue? They help us relate to each other as human beings. We get a look at what people who are different from us believe and hear the life events that brought them to these beliefs. Even if we don't come away agreeing, we come away with respect for the other person.

One thing you should definitely respect about people who write a This I Believe essay is their bravery in sharing their beliefs. They open themselves up to judgment by others...and subject themselves to an intense process of self-evaluation to decide on a belief. Thank you, Saede and Jonathan for sharing today.

Edward R. Murrow's tagline is nice, but I prefer to use Abbie Hoffman's words. "Tell me what you do, and I'll tell you what you believe in."

Sometimes I'll speak about This I Believe to classes (like Saede's) who are being assigned the essay. I usually ask the class, "Does anyone have any ideas about what they're going to write about?" If I can coax someone to share, I then ask them what specific examples from everyday life they'd use to support their belief statement. Sometimes they give very nice examples about ... playing umpire or talking about corn. But here's another example of how this conversation can go:

"What do you believe in, boy in the back row?"

"Uh, I was thinking I'd write my essay about how I believe in handwritten letters."

"Oh, do you write letters?"

"Not really, but I've been thinking about starting."

This is an actual conversation I've had. And while I applaud the boy's resolution to write letters, this is probably not a good topic for him.

The key both to writing a good This I Believe essay and to figuring out what you believe in more generally is to be honest with yourself about what you actually do in life.

If you say you believe in the value of education, do you take classes for fun? Or perhaps serve as a tutor at the local middle school?

Maybe the easiest way for me to illustrate the struggle to figure out what you believe in, is to take you through the process I use to help others understand what they believe. First, brainstorm a bit. Think about what you do every day (or often) and why. Think about what's important to you in life. Then look for examples from your life that illustrate this belief. If you can't find anything, you have two choices: change your belief, or change your actions.

I was planning to write a This I Believe essay for this service, but the events of the past week saw me either working frantically or exhausted. But I did do some brainstorming this is how it went:

Do I believe in forgiving those who have hurt me? I've gotten there for some who have hurt me, but for others I'm not quite there. It's a nice idea, but I don't fully embrace it.

I often say that I believe I'm invincible. I've maintained a lot of that teenage willfulness and belief in my own indestructibility. I traveled Europe alone at 20 and I refuse to be made afraid of the world by people who tell me about all the bad things that could happen to me. So now the questions are: Do I have good enough examples to prove I'm invincible? Do I perhaps have some unfortunate examples of when this mindset has failed me?

I actually started to write an essay about how I believe in surrounding myself with people who are different from me. And I do. But the essay seemed trite and self congratulatory. So I stopped. I challenged myself: is this what I really believe? I do believe this, but I don't think it's the most important thing in my life. There are many things I believe in. But as far as writing an essay goes, I continue the search for something that truly resonates. Beliefs are often hard won. And this belief was not.

Here's another question:

What do we do when our beliefs are shattered? Most of us are currently picking up the pieces of beliefs we held just a week ago. We might find ourselves questioning how we think of our community. We might be questioning the goodness of humanity. I considered writing a This I Believe about that. I believe in people, or in humanity. We've all seen so many examples of people being good to each other. But actions like the alleged child abuse and subsequent alleged coverups we've read far too much about this week can really make us stop and question the goodness of humanity.

How do we maintain the first of our seven principles: "The inherent worth and dignity of every person," when we learn about someone who has molested children, or in the broader world when we hear about torture or genocide.

When beliefs we've held are shattered we must reevaluate. Do we form a new belief? Or can this belief be rebuilt?

Maybe it's hard to believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all at a time like this. Or maybe we see thousands of students and local residents gathered with candles and a belief in humanity can be rekindled.

If you block the wind while I try to relight my candle, I'll do the same for you.