

Gathering for Beliefs and Self-Deception

Words of the Day

I changed my beliefs about ...

Chalice Lighting

We light this chalice to shine on our time together. In its light we celebrate the relationships and understanding we are creating in this place and time. May our sharing be deep. (*Light chalice*)

The Basket

Sharing of Joys and Concerns

Silence, holding ourselves and each other in silent support

Shared Readings

There are no facts, only interpretations. *Friedrich Nietzsche*

Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. *Paul Tillich*

Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things." "I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

We assume that politicians are without honor. We read their statements trying to crack the code. The scandals of their politics: not that men in high places lie, only that they do so with such indifference, so endlessly, still expecting to be believed. *Adrienne Rich*

It takes considerable courage and commitment to be brutally honest with oneself. But it is precisely this willingness to stop our chronic self-deception and face the truth that finally sets us free.

Stephen Diamond

Respect the delicate ecology of your delusions. *Tony Kushner, Angels in America*

Making sense of the world and the happenings within it is nothing more than our brain's individual interpretations of the signals received as we go through our days interacting with our environments ... Every spoken word we hear, every written word we read, every experience we have, absolutely everything, is the product of our brain's subjective interpretation of stimuli.

Debbie Hampton

Reality is not always probable, or likely. *Jorge Luis Borges*

Our beliefs are what create our experiences. As we change our beliefs, we alter our perception, our version of reality. *Iyania Vanzant*

Perhaps the foremost lesson which I have learned is that emotions rule the world, rather than statistics, information, or anything else. *Roger W. Babson*

Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it. *André Gide*

Deep Sharing/Deep Listening

Round 1: Share your reflections on beliefs and delusions, considering the preparation materials.

Round 2: Share additional thoughts or reflect on what others have shared.

Closing Circle

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this flame and we remember the warmth of our community, the light of our wisdom, the generosity of our sharing. We keep these in our heart until we meet again.

(Extinguish the chalice.)

Song/Chime

Announcements

The Covenant

I commit myself:

- to come to meetings when I possibly can, knowing that my presence is important to the group
- to let the facilitator know if I will be absent or need to quit
- to share with the facilitator the responsibility for good group process by watching how much time I take to speak and noticing what is going on for others
- to do the reading and thinking about the topic ahead of time
- to not gossip about what is shared in the group, and tell only my own story to others
- to honor the safety of the group by listening to what others share with an open heart
- to refrain from cross-talk, judging, giving advice, or advocating a specific view
- to share as deeply as I can when it is my turn and to stay on the “I-message.”

Preparation for Beliefs and Self-Deception

Do you have family or friends whose social or political views are very different from yours? If you've tried to hold a calm discussion with them about an issue, it may have been a frustrating experience. Even if you presented clearly reasoned arguments and strong evidence, the other person probably didn't come around to your side. They might even have gotten angry with you.

Why is it so difficult to change someone's mind? Humans typically tend to cling strongly to the beliefs that we already hold. We seek out evidence that will confirm those beliefs, and we actively avoid considering evidence that might challenge them. Psychologists call this tendency "confirmation bias" or "myside bias."

The effect of confirmation bias is so strong that we may be tempted to consider the "other side" as irrational, almost delusional in their resistance to what we see as true. After all, delusions are defined as "fixed beliefs that do not change, even when a person is presented with conflicting evidence." But beliefs that we share with others in our culture or subculture – politics, religion, strong convictions about the best music – are not delusions, even if they seem unusual to others. Instead, such beliefs are important to us because they are part of our cultural identity, an identity that we want to protect.

When our beliefs are challenged, the anger that follows may actually represent fear. Fear, a powerful motivator, has evolved to save us from mortal danger. In our physical environment, fear short-circuits rational thinking to move us swiftly away from death or injury. Similarly, our minds will lead us away from an idea if that idea imperils us. Consider people's beliefs about climate change. The threat may seem overwhelming, and suggestions about changing our consumption behavior may be threatening as well. Any idea that causes us to feel helpless is an idea we probably avoid. Hence the phrase "My mind is made up; don't confuse me with facts."

But our self-deception is not free of cost. The greatest danger of self-deception is it leaves one more easily manipulated. If powerful interests use fear to influence people's beliefs, those people may be persuaded to act against their own self-interest. Thus if we can be convinced to fear immigrants, we are unlikely to ally with them for higher wages for all workers. Who benefits? Perhaps powerful business owners. Similarly, if we can be convinced that our way of life is threatened by people who are different from us, we may be more inclined to accept authoritarian rule to "keep us safe."

Should we reject all conventional beliefs because they are culturally determined? Most of us would not want to live in a world where nothing was considered true. We need our beliefs.

We need beliefs, but we also need to be able to change them. Our experience can adapt to new beliefs if they become less threatening. Many people have found their beliefs changed at college (or another immersive experience) when they left their familiar culture for a new one. Even societies can change beliefs. For example, support for same-sex marriage in America changed dramatically from 35% in 2001 to 62% in 2017. The first step in changing beliefs is feeling less threatened. The next step is to allow a new belief to "reframe" experience, as same-sex marriage was reframed not as a threat to conventional marriage but as an issue of equality. Belief doesn't have to be maintained by fear.

To be alive ... means not being completely consistent. *David Lagercrantz*

We are not thinking machines, we are feeling machines who think. *Richard Restack, neurologist*

We have two alternatives: either we question our beliefs – or we don't. Either we accept our fixed versions of reality – or we begin to challenge them. In Buddha's opinion, to train in staying open and curious – to train in dissolving our assumptions and beliefs – is the best use of our human lives.
Pema Chodron

If your Personal Beliefs deny what's objectively true about the world, then they're more accurately called Personal Delusions. *Neil deGrasse Tyson*

Children are not born with memories of those who insulted their mother or slew their grandfather or stole their land. Those hates are bequeathed to them, taught them, breathed into them. If adults didn't tell their children of their hereditary hates, perhaps we would do better. *Robin Hobb, Assassin's Fate.*

Confirmation bias is the tendency to interpret and search for evidence to confirm your own beliefs even in the face of contradictory information. It involves a systemic error of inductive reasoning whose effect is strengthened in emotionally charged situations. People will interpret information in a biased manner to support their own conclusions. *Debbie McGauran*

Love is the spirit of this church
The quest for truth is its sacrament
Christine Robinson

The beginning of wisdom is found in doubting; by doubting we come to the question, and by seeking we may come upon the truth. *Pierre Abelard*

Questions to Ponder

1. What are your absolute certainties, your personal truths? For one or two, can you describe how you believe they are true?
2. What are some of your beliefs that may have been partly shaped by culture, family, or your experience? Consider the background of one or two of your beliefs.
3. Do you have friends or family whose beliefs are very different from yours? How do you handle discussions about those beliefs?
4. What could cause you to question your own truth?
5. Recall a time when your beliefs about something changed. How did that happen?
6. Are you considering changing your mind about anything right now? How are you approaching changing your mind?
7. When would you be willing to force your truth on others?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think about some beliefs that you might have changed. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: "I changed my beliefs about ..."