

UNST 124g fall 2011

this I believe

1 introduction

On the first day of the term you were asked to state, briefly, something in which you believe. Thinking about how to articulate our beliefs, either to ourselves or to others, can be a valuable tool for making sense of our actions, interests, and goals. The process of reflection is an important component of the University Studies program.

The radio series *This I Believe* began in 1951 as a five minute program hosted by journalist Edward R. Murrow on the CBS radio network. The series invited people, famous and not, to write and read short essays on their personal philosophies. In the inaugural broadcast, Murrow (1951) explained the motivation for the series:

It has become more difficult than ever to distinguish black from white, good from evil, right from wrong. What truths can a human being afford to furnish the cluttered nervous room of his mind with when he has no real idea how long a lease he has on the future. It is to try to meet the challenge of such questions that we have prepared these broadcasts. It has been a difficult task and a delicate one. Except for those who think in terms of pious platitudes or dogma or narrow prejudice—and those thoughts we aren't interested in—people don't speak their beliefs easily or publicly.

The project ran until 1955. It was revisited by National Public Radio from 2005 to 2009, after which it continued as a production of Public Radio International. An archive of the broadcasts and essays from 1951 onward can be found at the website <http://thisibelieve.org/>.

We will listen to and analyze two *This I Believe* essays in class. The first, *A Sacred Connection to the Sun* was written and read by poet and musician Joy Harjo, a member of the Mvskoke-Creek Nation. The reading aired on NPR's *Weekend Edition*, in 2007. The second essay, *A New Control of Destiny* by Margaret Mead, was part of the original series and aired in 1953. Mead (1901 to 1978) was a cultural anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History who worked primarily in Samoa, New Guinea, and Bali. Her work was centered on the ways in which cultural context shapes children's development.

2 essay structure

An essay is a relatively short composition in which the writer examines an idea or set of closely related ideas. Essays are written for a variety of purposes, for example, to inform the reader on a particular point of interest, to persuade the reader to adopt the writer's judgement on an issue, or to describe something, either from a neutral or personal point of view. The essays written for *This I Believe* present an idea—a belief or set of related beliefs—without trying to persuade. While personal experiences are often used to illustrate the idea, these are not personal narrative essays. The essays are centered on a core value or belief rather than on the individuals themselves.

Essays share a common underlying structure: introduction, body, and conclusion. In most cases, the introduction contains a clearly defined thesis and an explanation of why the thesis is important. Material presented in the body of the essay adds detail to the simply stated thesis of the introduction, to argue in favor of the thesis, or to oppose arguments against the thesis. It is important for each paragraph to contain only one general idea. A good way to avoid the common problem of writing about too many ideas in each paragraph is to create a hierarchical outline of the thesis and arguments before writing anything else. The essay closes by returning to the thesis stated at the outset, readdressing it in light of the new information presented in the preceding paragraphs.

The **thesis** is the claim made and discussed in the essay. It is a statement, not a question, and can be about observations, interpretations, or (value) judgements. When the author offers his or her own interpretation or judgement on an issue, it is important to present the best possible evidence to support that interpretation. It is sometimes important to include contrary interpretations, in which case arguments to refute those should also be made. The thesis should be understandable and relate clearly to the points you make in the body of the essay. A good thesis should be interesting, that is, it should warrant discussion.

The Purdue Online Writing Lab sections on essay writing are a good place to look for details and guidance beyond these brief notes.

3 assignment

In her essay for *This I Believe*, Margaret Mead makes the case that every child has the same intrinsic capability but the way in which the child's "innate potentialities" are expressed depends on the culture in which he or she is born and raised. How does the cultural environment—the community—in which you grew up affect your view of "the environment" today? Please write a short literary (that is, not a personal narrative) essay to answer this question. Please limit your essay to 5 or 6 paragraphs. Please also follow the written assignment guidelines in the syllabus.

4 This I Believe

4.1 Joy Harjo: A Sacred Connection to the Sun

As heard on NPR's Weekend Edition, July 8, 2007 <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/31008/>

I believe in the sun. In the tangle of human failures of greed, fear, and forgetfulness, the sun gives me clarity. When explorers first encountered my people, they called us heathens, sun worshippers. They didn't understand that the sun is a relative and illuminates our path on this earth.

Many of us continue ceremonies that ensure a connection with the sun. After dancing all night in a circle we realize that we are a part of a larger sense of stars and planets dancing with us overhead. When the sun rises at the apex of the ceremony, we are renewed. There is no mistaking this connection, though Wal-Mart might be just down the road. Humans are vulnerable and rely on the kindnesses of the earth and the sun; we exist together in a sacred field of meaning.

A few weeks ago I visited some friends at a pueblo for a feast day celebration. The runners were up at dawn and completed a ceremonial race that ensures that the sun will continue to return. It is a humble and necessary act of respect. And because the celebration continues, the sun, the earth and these humans are still together in a harmonious relationship.

Our earth is shifting. We can all see it. I hear from my Inuit and Yupik relatives up north that everything has changed. It's so hot; there is not enough winter. Animals are confused. Ice is melting.

The quantum physicists have it right; they are beginning to think like Indians: Everything is connected dynamically at an intimate level. When you remember this, then the current wobble of the earth makes sense. How much more oil can be drained without replacement, without reciprocity?

One day, recently I walked out of a hotel room just off Times Square at dawn to find the sun. It was the fourth morning since the birth of my fourth granddaughter. This was the morning I was to present her to the sun, as a relative, as one of us. It was still dark, overcast as I walked through Times Square. I stood beneath a 21st century totem pole of symbols of multinational corporations, made of flash and neon.

The sun rose up over the city, but I couldn't see it amidst the rain. Though I was not at home, bundling up the baby to carry her outside, I carried this newborn girl within the cradleboard of my heart. I held her up and presented her to the sun, so she would be recognized as a relative, so that she won't forget this connection, this promise, so that we all remember the sacredness of life.

4.2 Margaret Mead: A New Control of Destiny

As heard on the CBS Radio Network, 1953 <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/16809/>

Children used to play a game of pointing at someone, suddenly saying, “What are you?” Some people answered by saying, “I am a human being,” or by nationality, or by religion. When this question was put to me by a new generation of children, I answered, “an anthropologist.” Anthropology is the study of whole ways of life, to which one must be completely committed, all the time. So that when I speak of what I believe as a person, I cannot separate this from what I believe as an anthropologist.

I believe that to understand human beings it is necessary to think of them as part of the whole living world. Our essential humanity depends not only on the complex biological structure which has been developed through the ages from very simple beginnings, but also upon the great social inventions which have been made by human beings, perpetuated by human beings, and in turn give human beings their stature as builders, thinkers, statesmen, artists, seers, and prophets.

I believe that each of these great inventions—language, the family, the use of tools, government, science, art, and philosophy—has the quality of so combining the potentialities of every human temperament, that each can be learned and perpetuated by any group of human beings, regardless of race, and regardless of the type of civilization within which their progenitors lived; so that a newborn infant from the most primitive tribe in New Guinea is as intrinsically capable of graduation from Harvard, or writing a sonnet, or inventing a new form of radar as an infant born on Beacon Hill.

But I believe, also, that once a child has been reared in New Guinea or Boston or Leningrad or Tibet, he embodies the culture within which he is reared, and differs from those who are reared elsewhere so deeply, that only by understanding these differences can we reach an awareness which will give us a new control over our human destiny.

I believe that human nature is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically evil, but individuals are born with different combinations of innate potentialities, and that it will depend upon how they are reared—to trust and love and experiment and create, or to fear and hate and conform—what kind of human beings they can become. I believe that we have not even begun to tap human potentialities, and that by continuing humble but persistent study of human behavior, we can learn consciously to create civilizations within which an increasing proportion of human beings will realize more of what they have it in them to be.

I believe that human life is given meaning through the relationship which the individual’s conscious goals have to the civilization, period, and country within which one lives. At times, the task may be to fence a wilderness, to bridge a river, or rear sons to perpetuate a young colony. Today, it means taking upon ourselves the task of creating one world in such a way that we both keep the future safe and leave the future free.

5 references

Murrow, E. R., (1951). *This I Believe*. Retrieved from <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/16844/>.