

**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**  
**Sunday, November 22, 2020**

**THIS I BELIEVE**

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**THIS I BELIEVE: RUSSEL ROGERS**

I'm grateful for your time and attention. It's a gift for you to hear part of my story and hold my beliefs as valuable. I'll focus today on the power of attention and the gift of feeling seen. Attention to small details has played a key role in helping me believe in the inherent worth of each person, including myself. The idea of inherent worth has conflicted for years with baggage from abuse and depression. (I will briefly discuss childhood abuse without detail in a minute, and those triggered by the topic might want to tune out that part.) The abuse-related beliefs I've worked to replace include, "I'm damaged goods, and I'm not good enough." They're beliefs rooted in fear and shame. This talk is about moving from the old beliefs to healthy new ones.

I'll begin and end with my daughter's simple story about when she was leading a children's activity, helping kids at a table. She looked up to notice a little girl off by herself on the edge of the room, uneasy and unsure where she fit. My daughter held her gaze for a second and smiled, then had to go back to her task. A minute later, the girl appeared by her side and said, "I saw you see me, so I came to you."

A sign that she was seen mattered to the girl, and it told her that she might matter to my daughter.

Small details like that played a key role in my zig-zag path toward a belief that I matter. Passing facial expressions and brief exchanges formed the roots of both my flawed beliefs and highest aspirations. I'll give two negative examples, and I'll end with a positive one.

The first negative example is when someone I trusted abused me as a child, and that brief period shaped my life for decades. The tiny details did the most damage. What I remember most vividly are not the acts themselves or the pain, but the facial expression of the abuser.

Just like Dr. Blasey-Ford had Brett Kavanaugh's laughter etched in her memory, I can't forget the amused smirks. What sticks in my mind was my abuser calmly grinning at my pain, wondering what I might do next and how he could use it against me. It was a game for him. In moments when I was crying and bewildered about what he'd done, with my world in chaos, I would look at his face. I found him staring at me intently with a skewed grin of curiosity. He was searching my eyes with amusement in his, examining me like a specimen to dissect. He took pleasure in my pain, treating me as an object for his amusement. If he saw me clearly, he didn't value me.

Those smirks communicated clearer than words—even clearer than the abuse itself—to my 10-year-old brain that I was sub-human, somehow not good enough to deserve care or strong enough to defend myself. The expression communicated the meaning I took from the experience. Small details mattered and rippled through my life, reinforcing unhealthy beliefs.

The second example of attention to small details having a big impact is my upbringing in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or Mormons. Although their doctrine fosters a belief in inherent worth for some, my parents' practices taught me something else. The doctrine is that we're all children of loving Heavenly Parents. The truly noble and great souls were meant to come to earth in these last days.

That teaching got twisted to become toxic to my belief in personal worth. Nothing seemed to matter in our home except being noble and great in building Zion. My parents only paid attention if I did something spectacular. My mom told me that the doctor had recommended ending my pregnancy because she had almost died giving birth to my older brother, but she had received an answer to prayer: I was a spirit with a special mission, and she should bring me to earth. Affection hinged on fulfilling my glorious potential. I felt like I mattered mostly because of that destiny. Teary hugs and whispers of love were reserved for special events like baptism, a 2-year mission to Switzerland, and eternal marriage in the LDS temple.

In contrast, my parents paid little attention to my non-church life. My dad would sometimes stretch his leg out from his recliner during TV commercials to briefly pat my back with his big toe, and I thought of that as normal affection. If I brought up sports, friends, or school, they met me with blank stares at best, and impatient shushing or anger at times as they got back to more important work. I learned to stick to approved topics. I faced anger if I strayed from building Zion, I got attention if I showed faith, and I otherwise felt irrelevant.

I learned to carefully show the parts of myself that mattered to my family and hide the rest. I showed conviction and hid doubts. (I should also say that I sincerely felt deep conviction for extended periods. The LDS church was a lifeline to me in hard times.) Through the ups and downs, I learned to hide who I was. I never dreamed of disclosing any abuse.

My parents didn't see who I was, but this burden is low on the scale of human suffering. I only use it to show the power of attention to details in twisting my beliefs about inherent worth. My family tried to teach my divine worth as a child of God, but instead their attention patterns taught me performance-based acceptance. From where my family paid attention, I learned perfectionism, that people only earn love with spectacular results while hiding everything else.

Growing up Mormon didn't twist my belief about worth by itself; it was the daily details. My wife also grew up in the LDS church, served a mission, and married in the temple, and she understands inherent worth better than anyone I know. She has not wavered from her faith, struggled with perfectionism, or failed to find good in others. Her family

had different practices, they saw her as lovable for who she was, and she focused on positive things. Attention to small things shapes the impact of big things.

My third example includes the positive impact of my wife's attention to good things as I struggled with depression, finally bringing me to believe in inherent worth. My wife's email address starts with "noticehappythings," and she lives by that. She found good in me when I could not. She's done huge things, like move across the country and support a series of head-spinning career changes. However, I think the small things have mattered more to build my belief in inherent worth. She instinctively defends people who I badmouth. She reflects with me on three good things at bedtime each night. She respects our religious differences and values my opinion.

The most important small thing is that she has embraced the big things cheerfully, without condemnation. I once proposed uprooting our family—yet again—with fear and trembling. I expected at least weariness and exasperation, if not rage, that I could possibly expect one more ounce of her sacrifice. Instead, I saw kindness and determination on her face, as if my needs mattered more than anything in her life, as if it's normal to face challenges together and support somebody you love.

Her attention to small good things helped me learn the same practice. I've had passing encounters with co-workers or strangers, even at a former church, that have saved my day, if not my life. Struggling with depression years ago, I would show up suicidal, looking for any reason to stay alive or be done. On one such day, a woman I had met only a couple times struck up a conversation about thoughts that an earlier chat had inspired. She touched my arm and said something kind as she walked away, and I got teary as I walked to my car. I don't know that she saved my life, but she rekindled hope. The simple fact that she remembered, noticed, and valued me made a huge difference that day.

Although small things matter, what counts as small depends on perspective. For most people, staying alive isn't much to brag about, and settling for survival is a shameful surrender. For me, staying alive when depression made me want to die is what I'm most proud of in my entire life. For many years, I deliberately chose to endure suffering for the sake of others. I consider merely surviving my greatest gift and most noble choice. From this small cause have come big effects. I raised three kids, spoke at weddings, helped save lives and marriages as a counselor, had my grandson named after me, and loved racquetball. Just showing up paid off. Survival is never enough, except when it is. Believing that survival is enough saved my life, becoming a more comforting focus of attention than the twisted comfort of thinking about the escape of suicide.

I've learned that where we focus our attention physically changes our brain. Neurons that fire together, wire together. Repeatedly firing neurons with rumination or reflection strengthens connections, making them more likely to fire together again. Attention strengthens neural circuits, similar to how deer traveling the same path in a forest create a deeper and deeper trail. What we repeatedly hold in attention shapes our brain

to improve processing of related information. Our attention builds information super-highways in our head.

Trouble is, that's a 2-edged sword. Those well-practiced circuits can be superhighways for my healthy or unhealthy beliefs. My years of ruminating on trauma and suicide were like running laps in hell, creating ruts in my brain and a highway of hopelessness. I became highly efficient at processing triggers for despair and self-loathing.

However, I have hope for change. As in the formation of my unhealthy beliefs, attention to small things can build healthy new patterns. For example, people meditating daily on loving kindness physically changed their brains in multiple studies, creating denser tissue in an area linked to feeling love and positive emotions. I now do loving kindness meditation daily.

A small thing like focused attention changes my brain and my mood. It follows, then, why my keys to managing depression have not been big things—not earth-shaking breakthroughs or a long list of medications. What saved my life was disciplined practice of tiny acts of attention to grow the good in my life. The secret has been things like mindfulness, gratitude, sleep, and exercise. Those small daily acts have become habits that install the good. I'm firing neurons that I want to wire together, reinforcing circuits that register and savor good things in my life.

You might say that those changes are just a drop in the bucket compared to the decades of suicidal rumination, but that very phrase, “drop in the bucket,” is precisely why I still hope. The Buddha once said, “Think not lightly of good, saying, ‘It will not come to me.’ Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise, the wise [person], gathering it little by little, fills [themselves] with good.” Taking in the good, drop by drop, small moment by moment, has changed my life.

I've dabbled in related wild speculation that attention might even border on the holy, so consider this an invitation to chat if you're interested.

I loosely believe that attention is mystical and holy, but that's not my main point. My point is the importance of noticing the fragile and miraculous details of our lives. Attention is the currency of love, with the power to change lives, bridging from self-loathing to a belief in inherent worth. If somebody risks exposing who they really are, I want to hold that cupped in both hands as precious. I want to see them and value them as they are, because how I handle that gift has lasting effects. I have felt seen in this community, and that's central to my belonging. I can't feel truly loved unless I am truly known. I say to you what the little girl said to my daughter, “I saw you see me, so I came to you.”

Attention to small things matters. That's really just another way of saying that I believe there's hope for change, and perhaps there's hope that I might matter. I want to treat the details of this moment in my relationships as if they really matter. Because they do. This I believe.



## **THIS I BELIEVE - Thomas Christie**

Good morning!

My name is Thomas Christie and I use pronouns he/him/his. I live in St Paul with my wife, Emily, and our two wonderful kids. I've been a member of White Bear UU Church for about four years. Today I have the honor and privilege to speak with you for a few minutes about what I believe.

To begin, I'd like to share a quote by a statistician named George Box. In 1976, Box wrote a paper in which he claimed, and I quote, "All models are wrong." In a follow-up paper, he repeated that phrase and added, "But some are useful." "All models are wrong, but some are useful." This has become a pretty famous quote in the scientific community. It has its own Wikipedia page.

Box was referring to scientific models. He's correct that all scientific models are wrong, because a scientific model is a simplified version of whatever it is you're trying to study. It's simplified, but it captures something important about that thing. Box's assertion has become a mantra for me, and I'll say more about that in a few minutes.

When I was a child, I thought it was really, really important to have a correct belief about God. I grew up going to a Methodist church, which was relatively laid back, but I was a pretty serious kid and a little high strung. I grew up in Arkansas, surrounded by people who thought that what happened to you when you died, for eternity, depended on your beliefs about God. An eternity in hell or heaven depended on your ideas about God and Jesus overlapping 1-for-1 with the truth.

This really stressed me out. A lot. Because, of course, you couldn't actually observe that particular truth. There was no real evidence that Methodists were right and Baptists were wrong, for example. Or that Muslims weren't right, or Buddhists. Any of those people could be correct in their beliefs, and there's no evidence to tell one way or the other. I found this alarming, because so much was at stake.

To solve this problem, I tried to gather as much information as I could. I went to church camp. I went to Christian youth groups as a teenager. . I went on a week-long Christian youth retreat in Colorado, where someone called me "one of them" for admitting I still wasn't sure what I believed about God. In church with my parents, I found that asking serious questions about God made conversations really uncomfortable. I wouldn't say I was a believer, but I was really looking for a reason to believe.

I never adopted a firm set of cosmological beliefs, because when I did adopt a belief, I wanted it to be the right one. So until I found the right model, and convinced myself that it was right, I wanted to keep my options open. Maybe I was afraid of commitment - but perhaps my hesitancy arose from a desire for certainty. Paradoxically this left me as uncertain about God as anyone I knew.

College-level math is mostly concerned with proving things. So, naturally, when I got to college, I became a math major. At last! I thought, here were some things I could \*know.\* Whether mathematical theorems had anything to do with God was still an open question. But you might be surprised by how many mathematicians think they do. When mathematicians see a proof that is particularly elegant and beautiful, and demonstrates something that's both simple and profound, they say that the proof is "from The Book." Capital T, capital B. The book they're referring to is the one written by God, of course, where he keeps all of his favorite mathematics proofs. A mathematician named Paul Erdos once said, "You don't have to believe in God, but you should believe in The Book." This Book also has its own Wikipedia page, and you can buy something called Proofs from The Book at a bookstore if you're interested.

My first semester in college, I met a very nice Unitarian woman named Emily, and we started dating. After a couple of months, I went with her to Tulsa, Oklahoma, one weekend and met her parents. On Sunday we went to their church, All Souls Unitarian Church.

At the risk of stating it too strongly, my eyes were opened that day. I can't say I learned anything about God that Sunday, but I learned a LOT about the way a community could be, and what a church could be. The sanctuary was large and open, with clear windows and light streaming in, instead of dark stained glass blocking out the world. They didn't say the Apostles creed and chant together what they believed. Instead, they were there to share the questions, to share the mystery of existence, to be in awe together. To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

And I learned that there existed a group of people, many of whom had the same questions that I had, the same lack of certainty, and all of whom were OK with me still asking questions. At that church I wasn't "one of them." I was one of us. I had found my people. Four years later, Emily and I got married in that church.

Two years after that, in a classics program New Mexico, I read a book by a philosopher named Baruch Spinoza. Baruch is the same name as Barack, and Benedict, meaning "blessed," like a benediction. Spinoza was a smart and confident young Jew in 17th-century Amsterdam. When he was 23, he was excommunicated from the Jewish community for asking hard questions and expressing strong opinions about God and the Torah that were not the same as the opinions of community leaders.

The leaders ostracized Spinoza and forbade any communication with him, and I quote, "orally, or in writing." So Spinoza spent most of the rest of his life by himself, grinding lenses for astronomical equipment and thinking about God. When he died, one of his friends went through his desk drawers and found a manuscript for a book titled Ethics. He smuggled the manuscript into another country to be published.

When I first read Ethics, my mind was really, really blown. It was exactly what I'd been looking for. This guy structured the entire book like a mathematical treatise, starting with definitions of terms and a set of axioms. He then filled the book with propositions and

lemmas and proofs, just like a mathematical treatise. Except the book isn't about mathematics, it's about God, and humans, and how to live, and how to treat each other. To a certain eye, it's absolutely beautiful. I've read it cover to cover, probably five times. But it's been a while since I've read and discussed it, so if anyone wants to do a Zoom book group, just let me know.

So what does Spinoza say? Basically, that God and Nature are the same thing, just viewed in two different ways. Viewed as a physical thing, we call this stuff around us "nature." Viewed as an intellectual thing or idea, we call this same stuff "God." Like nature, God is always changing, moving. Spinoza used the Latin phrase *Deus sive natura*, meaning "God or nature." God, that is, Nature. God, or in other words, Nature.

If nature and God are the same thing, considered in different ways, and if we're part of nature, then we're also part of God in the only really meaningful way I can think of. We're also part of each other. To put it as Spinoza would, you and I are participating in the same substance, unseparated. And what we think are differences between us are only "incomplete ideas," figments of our imagination, that do not correspond to any reality.

Spinoza's God isn't the Abrahamic God. This God doesn't have a personality or a will in the way we usually use those words. But God has an order, and has created, and is the same as this beautiful world around us. When someone asked Einstein if he believed in God, he said he believed in Spinoza's God. I do too. Spinoza became my guy. Somewhere along the way, the question about what would happen to my soul un-asked itself. I realized in hindsight that to discuss the fate of your individual soul was a conversation with a loaded premise, and one that I have been able to let go of.

The next year my cosmological world shattered again when I realized that the application of Spinoza's philosophy to everyday life was really dependent on the human capacity for rationality. That is a noble assumption for an Enlightenment philosopher, but to modern sensibilities it seems terribly naive.

That year I read philosopher David Hume. To paraphrase, Hume said, "Don't forget that you are an animal, whose messy, noisy, and failure-prone sense organs are your only method for knowing anything about the world. Also, you're very forgetful, and your reasoning ability is awful." I had a hard time arguing with any of that. It meant that Spinoza's quest to use reason to participate in the mind of God was doomed to failure.

So where does that leave me now? Well, I still believe in Spinoza's God. But I hold that belief loosely. Spinoza's understanding of God is not the same thing as God, whatever that is. If nothing else, it's limited by his finite human brain. It's just a model. And all models are wrong. They are simplifications, and maybe not even very good ones. That includes Spinoza's, and mine.

So if all models are wrong, why would you believe one thing over another? Remember that George Box said, "But some models are useful." What does it mean for a model, or a belief, to be useful?

I'll tell you what I think: some beliefs drive hatred, exclusion, and the diminishment of other human beings. Other beliefs promote compassion, human flourishing, creativity, joy, community, forgiveness, love, respect for those born and not yet born, and respect for this world that we somehow, mysteriously, have been given to care for. When in doubt, always choose that second set of beliefs. Choose the model that helps you be good to other people, and the natural world. It's OK if your cosmology is a little off.

That's what I believe. Choose the useful model, because you'll never find the true one. In honor of Baruch Spinoza, the Blessed, I'll leave you with the closing words at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK: Be blessed, and be a blessing. Thank you.

