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It’s About Believing in Something, Lest My Eyes Should Deceive Me

I am fascinated by evangelists. I admire their conviction. For as long as I can remember, my dad commandeers the couch to troll the Sunday morning political talk shows. During the commercial breaks, he flips to the mega-church sermons delivered by ministers I can only assume to be bipolar (or spiritually possessed) the way they move fluidly between manic, grandiose gestures to near motionlessness. The phone number to donate money that scrolls across the bottom of the screen launches my dad into a tirade about the hypocritical position of Christianity and how religion is at the root of every major war across every era of history. My dad was raised Catholic, but has since renounced his Catholic upbringing, preferring to seek spiritual solace in the woods. I listen to my dad, intermittently acknowledging his points, but I am weirdly transfixed by these people. The minister commands the crowd with an eerie sense of bravado and overconfidence. When the minister’s voice drops to barely a whisper, I watch the crowd move to the edge of their seats, lean in to hear every word. Then, a sweeping proclamation! His voice booms, the microphone carries out this life (soul) saving message to every corner of the rich, ornately decorated walls of the church. Hands from the congregation reach up towards the ceiling as if pulled by some invisible puppeteer. They are as transfixed as I, but it is for different reasons the minister holds our attention. They believe him; I don’t. I study him like an animal caged at the zoo.

I watch Sunday evangelist TV because they have what I am in desperate search of: belief in something. They can dock themselves to their deep-seated beliefs when their boats are rocked by the shitty weather that will inevitably come in our lifetime.

I tried believing in the Christian God. In fact, some of my earliest memories are at church. My first completed piece of writing was about going to Sunday school in second grade. I loved getting out of the boring adult sermon early, as if being a child gave me some sort of hierarchical power that allowed me to walk out sermons I found boring whenever I pleased. We were taken to a room behind where the congregation sat and watched Veggie Tales about all of the classic Bible stories, made art projects, and went to Fellowship for cookies. I thought I had it all figured out. Despite having perfected all of the social niceties, I realized early on I was missing the larger point. I always felt weird about proclaiming my faith, praying, and especially talking to other people about it. Even in second grade, I felt like I was pretending. At any rate, when I was in about fourth grade, my pastor got caught embezzling money from the church and my youth pastor turned out to be a sex offender. I never went back to church.

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Enter academia. I placed my faith in a different kind of religion: the hard sciences. I threw myself into the most fact-based area of study I could fathom. Kinesiology: the study of human movement. It’s a hard science that you can *see.* I loved it. Biomechanics, exercise physiology, motor control. It was all about how we moved and it had direct clinical application. I learned about things I could see happening. I learned about why they occurred when I couldn’t see them happening. And I believed it whole heartedly. My faith in the hard sciences had come to be how I defined myself as a human being. I was studying the sciences, I went to labs, I wore goggles and even a white coat once. This stuff was the unshakable stuff. You couldn’t argue its truth; it just was.

What I found however, was that when you begin to wholeheartedly believe in and vest yourself in something, your ability to notice other things and be open-minded to other things, gets a little more and more closed off. So firmly believing in one thing as true, makes you closed minded to a lot of other things. This happened to me with my desperate search for something to hold on to, I got my brain locked up in believing science had all the answers and could explain every phenomenon. I could root myself in sciences because it was rooted in fact and fact was truth. But really, scientific fact is a promiscuous use of the word “fact.” Did you know that they have now accelerated protons faster than the speed of light? Physics is largely built up around this fact that the fastest speed in the universe is the speed of light. This discovery rocks the *very foundation* of the entire field of physics. In science, a “fact” is a fact until it’s proven false. This premise drives scientific inquiry.

Here’s the thing; it goes both ways. When you believe something to be true, you selectively and inherently say that other things, then, are not true. You choose to block those out in favor of saying this one other thing is what you believe, is that truth. We do that because we have to. We don’t hear our heart beat or the blood run through our arteries or our joints flex or our intestines break down food. We would go crazy. Instead, we have a bone that covers that part of our ear so we don’t make ourselves nuts. We selectively respond to stimuli physiologically the way we selectively believe certain truths over others. It makes us who we are, builds us up into more than constructions of ourselves.

When I got to college, there were all of these great opportunities to do all of these great things: volunteer at the children’s hospital, raise awareness about HIV/AIDS, send money and medical relief supplies to victims of the earthquake in Haiti, attend lectures about worldly, cultural stuff. But the more I trolled through these meetings and events, I got increasingly disheartened. Everyone seemed to be doing everything for entirely selfish motivations. I cannot paint myself as entirely pure intentioned either. However, I found myself intensely bothered by the fakeness of it all. Everyone was always engaging in these imaginary success ladder-climbing of “resume-building” and “grade-grubbing,” always trying to impress future employers and medical schools. I felt like I was cheating the system by participating, so I did not. No one believed in what they were doing, it was being done so it could be a line on a future resume. It put me in this weird space where college is these four years where you are supposed to explore, find yourself, etc. but when you go looking for yourself you have to already have some idea of where you want to find yourself, whether it is approaching the bench in a courtroom, bedside in a hospital, in front of a classroom of kids, or under the stage lights. So we spend these four years half-heartedly engaging in this stuff, building our resumes one step at a time on the ladder of success until we stop when we get to the top and we look around. Hopefully you find yourself up there, kid. I propose the opposite idea and it was inspired by an article I read about my generation. I propose that it’s about losing yourself. Everything we experience in the world is self-constructed through our eyes, our brain, our language, our interpretation. When the ego descends so that the task may transcend our sense of self, we have found something to believe in.

The professor was talking at us about vision. “No two people see the exact same color.” he said. I could see that. I was firmly convinced that I looked terrible in the color red, while my friend said that I already owned a bunch of red shirts (they are orange, or maybe a burnt sienna, I think) Anyway, he was pointing at this slide about the visual pathway. Light enters your eye through your cornea and is focused on the fovea part of the retina. Then the image travels back through your optic nerve for simultaneous hierarchical and parallel processing in the brain. The details are too complex to go into here, but did you know that there are neurons that only respond to specific orientations of objects in space? They are in our ocular dominance columns. It’s insane. And then my professor said, “Because of the speed of visual processing, you don’t ever see the world in real time. Everything you see has already happened.” As human beings, we are visually dependent. My entire world, everything I know and value and ascribe meaning to is deconstructed by my brain and little tiny neurons that tell me what color something is, how it’s oriented in space, if it’s accelerating angularly or linearly, if the texture is rough or smooth. The world is deconstructed by my brain and then reconstructed and spit back out to my eyes to become my world. Everything I know relies on my interpretation and reconstruction of the world. What if I’m seeing the world wrong? What if I don’t see it as it is? How can I even believe what is right in front of my face?

Do the neurons in my brain know that I am thinking about them? That I’m on to them and what they do? Everything is so fragile, so constructed. Believing in something you can’t see, like God or Allah or forgiveness or love, is on about as much faith as you can believe that you see the words you are reading on this page. Firm belief in something grounds us in a world that is fluid and constructed. It gives us something to hold on to when we have to interpret and describe and experience everything through the limitations of sight and language. We search for, yearn for, existential beliefs because our bodies break. They break all the time. We are just a stroke or lesion away from tasting colors or seeing music. The stuff that makes up our beliefs, our passions, our “who we are,” is not tangible and thus can’t be broken. We let our bodies take the beating of life day in and day out, but we root ourselves and thus our “values,” the set of things we say are not compromisable can’t be beaten down or misinterpreted by diseases and brains.

I’m still looking for my inspiration, passion, and belief. Luckily for me, I’m in college and I have a four year pass to “find myself’ and figure out what matters to me, lest my eyes should deceive me. I really want to believe unfailingly in something: myself, God, love, human nature, good, evil, science, government. It all still eludes me.

The parallels are actually very ironic to organized religion. After a certain point in learning, you begin to take a lot of stuff on faith. Just accept that it is true.

Everything is so fragile. The brain constructs our world, but we are all just a stroke or lesion away from tasting colors or seeing music. Someday, our bodies will break, my body will break. I won’t be able to rely on what is in front of me