

How True Is What We Believe?

We think that what we believe is the truth. Read about how easily we can be manipulated in our beliefs. Find the home site of author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

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Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all others because you were born in it.

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[George Bernard Shaw](#)

, Irish writer, Nobel laureate (1856-1950)

While I like Shaw's quotation, I would alter that last part a little. We may believe that our country is superior to all others because we have been told that. What we believe is what we think and what we think we believe is true. If we believe something is true, we accept it as true and valid. Yet our belief is based on what we have been told by others.

Once we think something, we believe it. "If I think something and have no questions about it or doubts, it must be true." If we believe it's true, we will believe it as fact.

Once we believe something, our conviction is hard to shake. One example might be cars. Some people will go through their entire lives owning few cars that are not Fords. They believe in Ford cars. "GMs are crap." Other people devote themselves so much to General Motors cars that they wouldn't be caught dead owning a Ford. That devotion might be based on their experience. But more than likely it's based on what their fathers believed about GM and Ford cars. Seldom does either group have any hard evidence that their car of choice is the best, though they will tend to accept the advertising of their preferred choice as more true than the advertising of other manufacturers.

For many years my wife and I owned a couple of coffee shops. We believed our coffee was the best. The owner of the company that supplied our system's coffee also supplied coffee to coffee shop franchises that competed with ours. He told us once, in confidence, that ours was better than the others, even giving some evidence to support the claim. A few years later he denied both the evidence and the claim that our brand was superior. (He even denied the additive that was proven to make coffee addictive.)

Our customers were so devoted to our coffee that they would not buy coffee in other coffee shops. Customers in competitors' shops were equally convinced that their favourite brand was best. Over a period of years, several of the original stores closed. The customers all transferred their loyalties to their new favourite shops and coffee brands, without hesitation. Their new brand was best, because they drank it (though they would never admit that as their reason).

Because they believed something, it must be true. People don't think of their beliefs that way, but when you argue them to a fine point, they hold fast that their beliefs are true even without supporting evidence.

Advertising depends heavily not on persuading people that the advertised product is better not based on evidence, but on persuading them that the product is best because they have heard the advertising so often they have come to believe it. In the advertising industry it is accepted among big advertising agencies that a person who receives the same advertising message ten times or more will believe it. Big industries spend fortunes on advertising to deliver the exact same message to your television screen a few dozen times each evening or day. The most bought products tend to be those that are advertised most heavily. People believe what they have been told. Told often.

I have had people tell me that when they want to buy a product they know nothing about, they ask people who already own that product which brand and quality level they prefer. "I would rather take the word of someone who has experienced a product," they say. They will take someone's word about a product, even the word of a stranger who has experience with the product or at least an opinion, rather than do some research themselves to learn tested and proven facts about it. They believe something about the product because they have been told.

People tend to vote for candidates in elections that either belong to parties they have always voted for or that have the strongest presentations in the community. The latter means television advertising or lawn signs. The more signs people see, the more they believe that the candidate must have great support. They vote for the candidate they believe will win because they equate numbers of yard signs with popularity. Most voters know very little or nothing about the political persuasions of the candidates they vote for. When their candidate is elected, then later helps pass laws they believe are bad, they simply justify it by claiming that "politicians are all crooks."

We each like to believe that we have chosen, as adults, the best religion to belong to. In fact, most belong to the same religion (or lack thereof) as adults as they were introduced to by their parents when they were children. When people change to a different religion than the one they were brought up in, it is usually the one in which they find greatest acceptance by others of that religion. Religion is a social association, so attending service with friendly people is a very persuasive factor.

Many people around the world wonder how terrorist organizations manage to persuade individuals to commit suicide as they kill many others in events such as suicide bombings. Studies of suicide bombers suggest that most of them came, alone, from small rural settings to the city to find work. They don't find work or friends, but they do find a few people who welcome them into their small religious community. That social acceptance begins the process of brainwashing that eventually shows itself in suicide bombing. The bombers believe that the religious beliefs of the sect must be best because they have been accepted where no one else would welcome them. Eventually they believe what they are told about what will happen to them--how they will be welcomed in heaven--when they kill the enemy.

Suicide bombers do not make the connection that life here on earth, in the present, is good because it hasn't been for them. Except in one case where they were accepted by a group and promised something greater in the afterlife. [I have often wondered how those lonely country boys would fare in heaven if they were "given" 72 virgins. When you think about it, not only does it not make sense, it is totally unrealistic. In fact, dangerous. Virgins know nothing and can be clumsy or insensitive.]

This tendency to believe what we have been told is worldwide. Politicians, religious leaders and advertisers depend on it. If people are told something often enough, most people will believe it. No matter how wrong it seems and how unsupported it may be. Do you suppose that US troops are still looking for those "Weapons of Mass Destruction" they heard so often that Saddam had in Iraq? The believers never thought that someone else would benefit from a lie that was told so often. Told by those who would benefit. And it worked.

The only way to change a society that depends on the gullibility of its people is to teach the children to ask questions, to doubt, to wonder, to investigate, to think. It would not be hard to effect such change. It would be cheap, almost without cost. But it would require people who care to urge those who create curriculum for schools to change the way kids are taught. Today most kids learn to not think, only to obey and believe.

Our kids need to learn differently. Your kids and mine. The people who one day will decide our living arrangements when we are too old to do for ourselves. If we want them to think of us instead of themselves first, we will have to teach that now. Most kids today learn that they are the most important people they will ever know.

Remaining quiet and letting others decide for us is what got us where we are now. What our parents did, which was to trust that someone who cares would do the right thing. So, how do you think that worked out?

Bill Allin is the author of ***Turning it Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems, a guidebook for people who want things to change for the better. Social problems depend on our doing nothing, were created because we let others make decisions for us. This book shows a path for change without great cost or revolution.***

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Author: builder

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