

This I Believe

In 1978, a man I had known for three days, and had grown to trust, pulled out a gun and shot me four times. As a student of perennial philosophy and psychology, and as a lifelong pacifist, I was forced to question every belief I had.

I had believed that I was intuitive. But I did not even suspect his evil intent. I believed that I would live forever. But looking down the barrel of his gun, I knew that I would die. I believed that life had some purpose for me, and although I didn't know what it was, I was certain that my destiny lay ahead. I had never considered the possibility that my destiny was to be killed by a gunman in the middle of the wilderness. When death looks you in the face and welcomes you with open arms, all beliefs are placed face up on the table.

I had always believed that we are more than our bodies, and that our true nature is Spirit. This belief proved itself to be true as I rose up and out of my body. I felt the spark of light I call my "self" shining – as a bright sphere of consciousness, encompassing my crumpled body, my assassin, the van we were in, and the plants and earth surrounding us. Beliefs dropped away, irrelevant from that vantage point, as the truth of light and love overwhelmed all worldly concerns.

When I realized that I wasn't dead, that I had survived being shot in the head, I found a faith that transcends mere beliefs. This faith is more akin to trust – that there are forces beyond us that protect us, that we have a destiny that is stronger than bullets or wounds, and that love, and not violence, is the answer to our ills, to our woes, and to our problems.

In the years and decades that have passed since that moment, I have taken it upon myself to study the very nature of beliefs, of the mind, of consciousness itself. I now understand that beliefs act like colored filters over our eyes, coloring our experience of the world by interpreting what actually happens. These filters can be changed, but only if we are aware that they exist.

My beliefs bring structure to my world. If I believe that a person is beautiful, I can see their beauty shining, regardless of their appearance. If I believe that there is something wrong with them, I notice their flaws. If I believe I'm not smart enough, an authority sounds logical and wise. If I trust myself, I can question that same authority.

It is as if our world is made from our beliefs. When I try on other people's beliefs, step into their shoes, and see their world through their filters, I understand their point of view. I feel our connection. I am filled with compassion and love. They are just like me. What makes us different is simply our beliefs.

My destiny changed on the day I was shot, as did my beliefs. After 30 years of exploration, I believe more than ever that we are here to love one another, to understand one another, and to bring our own individual, unique, and precious light into this world.

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Note: The full story of this incident, "A Shot in the Light," was published in the book "I Thought My Father Was God... and other true tales from NPR's National Story Project," edited by Paul Auster. It is available for review, along with my biography and other writings, on my website: www.everydayawakening.com.