

# This I Believe

by **Mary Jane Allison**

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# THIS I BELIEVE

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I have been called the ultimate pragmatist. I pay a lot of attention to “what works”. This practical and somewhat pedestrian approach to life makes it difficult when trying to talk about a belief system. It will help if I define my terms. (you will note these are practical too.)

For me religion is a personal belief system hopefully guiding all actions. Worship is what we focus on in life. Of course, with this definition of worship we all worship whether or not we make conscious choices.

I started as a basically happy and accepting child, an identical twin, growing up in a loving home. I did not ponder the questions that bother many adolescents, such as purpose in life or ultimate virtues. I already knew and had decided by age 11 where my life was going. I was going to be a doctor. Being so certain does have some positive value for setting and reaching goals. But one’s judgment is still pretty limited in childhood.

As a girl I did not question basic assumptions. I trusted that my parents knew what was right and good. My father loved to discuss religion but my mother was very quiet on the subject. My sister and I went with a neighbor girl one time to a vacation bible school and heard a sermon on ‘God is Love’. I came home and asked mother about it saying, “that’s not right, is it?” She told me she thought it was and since this was all I ever heard her say about religion I believed her and it stuck.

I never wondered about purpose in life as I was taught that we were each given gifts and that God expected us to develop and use those for the benefit of all people. [You cannot imagine how shocked I was when one of my sons as a teenager told me one day that he had been worrying about the purpose in life and had finally decided “There wasn’t any” and how relieved he felt.]

At about age 15 I realized that the religion my father was busy talking about was not about love and I stopped going to church with him. In college I went a few times with roommates or friends but felt uncomfortable being there when I really didn’t believe most of what I heard.

I married and went to Medical School and had a family and in general was too busy to stop and think about anything. After moving to Mason, Michigan and starting in general practice, my husband suggested we join the Presbyterian Church. It was very handy, a half block away and had a pleasant minister. I often revised the sermon in my head or my mind wandered on a certain point, but I happily sang in the choir for over 10 years.

When scientific minded friends asked me what I really believed I would tell them that I thought one’s god was what one worshipped, that I hoped I worshipped a loving god and that I believed everyone worshipped something. We just didn’t always know it or

make a conscious choice. But I believed we had a choice. About anything else I really didn't know.

In my 30s I did a lot of reading including all of C. S. Lewis and was somewhat persuaded by his arguments for a God by finding what he thought was a universal moral code. Another author impressed me with his somewhat long-winded argument about the kingdom of God being within one. And I read a lot of Alan Watts and his "Way of Zen". In fact, I heard him speak twice and remember his saying that the problem with preachers was that they preached. He was very much into meditation and in trying to reconcile Eastern and Western philosophical points of view. One could call this my religious period. Certainly, this was the time I was exploring a variety of points of view and trying hard to sort out what I really believed.

But I was living a very busy life, being a solo general practitioner, raising 4 children and in general not taking much time to reflect. I was so "dedicated" that I sometimes got out of a sickbed to make calls on people less ill than I.

Fortunately, I also found a mentor, someone I admired and felt I would like to be more like. He was an older doctor who I thought unusually wise. He was very supportive to me in my medical work. But more than this he was delightfully funny even in difficult times. He had a wonderful joy in living and knew how to spread this joy to others. One of his favorite sayings was "It isn't what you have, It is what you do with it."

Then a serious illness during which I thought I would die or be brain damaged. Rather than being essential to my family or my patients I was expendable. How depressing! My life had been built on how much I was needed and the feeling that I was the only one who could do what had to be done. What arrogance!

But it was also liberating. My office nurse said I had suffered a personality change and she was right. I had lost some of my dedication -- also my arrogance. This loss of arrogance gives one a chance to grow up, but oh, what it does to certainty! Losing certainty is losing faith and also innocence. When I found my whole life had been built around how important I was and I found it was not so, I realized I must find a way to reorganize that life. I had to look critically at all my basic assumptions. Is what I am doing really useful, what is useful anyway, etc.?

Life, of course, went on very busily but I was paying more attention. There came a point where I could no longer be happy at the Presbyterian Church. I had always had to revise and reinterpret sermons but the relatively new minister had preached a sermon using examples that were 180° different from my own experience. I thought he was preaching timidity. I knew that what I needed to hear was a call to courage. The crowning blow was when one of my friends in the choir said to another, "Wasn't that a wonderful sermon?" All I could think was, "What am I doing here?" I left and did not go back. And did not go to church for awhile.

Getting my life reorganized meant sorting out, prioritizing and learning that I had needs too. And even limits. (That one was very hard for me as I had always done the Superwoman bit.) I had to figure out what in my work was important to me and how to decrease the demands. Somewhere along the way I also learned to pay more

attention to actions rather than words. We often use words to obscure the truths of our actions even from ourselves. So I learned to pay a lot of attention to what I did and how I felt about it.

All my life I had prayed in one way or another. As a child I said words given by others. As I grew more and finally learned to meditate, I came to understand that it was a way of helping me get in touch with all of me and to accept what is.

I have certainly come to understand the importance of a supportive community, of a loving personal relationship, and how important it is to me to share. For me, to share a joyful experience doubles the pleasure. After all, sharing has always been part of my life starting *in utero*.

I have also taken time to sort out what kinds of feeling really help me and have found that when I feel very grateful, I feel my best. I believe that we have some choices about our feeling state and the more we practice tuning in on really good feelings, the better we are able to do it

And what do I now hold as true and important to the best of my current knowledge? I believe that we as humans are limited in our understanding and perceptions, both by our nervous systems and our training. We probably cannot answer cosmic questions. I also feel there is much in our world that we cannot physically document and that we must keep our options and awareness as open as possible.

The Buddha said:

“I have not explained that the world is eternal or not eternal. I have not explained that the world is finite or infinite. And why have I not explained this? Because this profits not nor has to do with the fundamentals of religion”.

This makes sense to me as cosmic questions are not about how we live our lives. That, for me, is the function of religion. What we worship will show in our actions. We organize religion externally for societal purposes and for figuring out how to talk about it but it is essentially internal.

I would really like to believe in a loving presence somewhere, or everywhere, and part of me feels this. But the best I can do is to choose to act as much as I can as if love is what I worship.