

# THE POWER OF BELIEF

## Background and Context

*Our Beliefs are our Destiny.*  
-Mahatma Gandhi

The planets of our solar system are millions of miles away from us. And the stars are light-years and light-years distant. Yet it is true that they influence the course of lives and the moods of millions. You may have heard of astrology, and you may have doubted it. But the facts are in: it is centuries old, and it works.

How does it work? Simply: people believe that it works. They read their horoscopes, they plan their day, they interpret and respond to whatever they encounter with the lens of that reading. The positions of planets among the constellations influences the course of human history because people believe that it does.

This is a soft example—to speak of stars and horoscopes—but the power of belief, its very presence, runs to your very core. Most of us have never taken the time to articulate, much less examine, our beliefs. So it is that we lead unexamined lives—unaware of how we came to our beliefs and oblivious to how our beliefs limit us ... or empower us.

## Check In

We can heal each other with our energy: There is potential beyond your wildest imaginings. Miracles—magic—is possible when people gather and bring their whole selves—full presence—forward. To work with this idea, I will hold my palms in front of me, facing each other, a few inches apart and invite all of you to do the same. Then I will ask you if you can feel or sense the energy radiating between your palms. You can't see the energy but it is there; it can be measured. If you are struggling, I suggest that you start with your palms 30 inches apart and then bring them toward each other—20 inches, 15 inches, 10 inches, 5 inches—until you can sense the energy streaming between your palms.

Next—and this is where the *check in* or in today's case the *check around* comes in—I will shape a “ball of energy” between my own palms. I will stretch and play with this “ball” and pass it on to the person next to me, who can play with the energy in his/her own way, and then pass it on to the next person so that it goes around the circle. When this ball of energy eventually makes its way back to me, I will ask for a volunteer—someone who may feel tired or sick—and invite this person into the center of the circle. We will all then hold our palms facing out to this person, allowing our good intentions and healing energy to flow from our fingertips into the person in the center.

### *Check in Debrief:*

- What beliefs have I challenged with this activity?

Possible responses include:

-You have asked us to consider that there might be things that we can't see that are real (e.g., like energy vibrations).

- You have asked us to consider that our collective energy might have the potential to contribute to healing.
  - You asked us to consider that our individual failure to be present has grave consequences for the health, power, and potential of our group.
  - You asked us to consider that, united and present, we can create and accomplish acts of greatness, beyond our wildest imaginings.
- What would change (for you) in the world if you began to believe that this kind of healing were capable?

### **Activity One: The Healing Power of Belief**

Regardless of your belief in the efficacy of energy to heal your classmate, here are three scientific experiments published in reputable, peer-reviewed journals, and performed by esteemed medical researchers. Each of these scientific studies employed what we will call, "Treatment X," as a medical and healing procedure. Listen to the following descriptions carefully, keeping track in your mind—trying to figure out—what "Treatment X" could possibly be.

**A.** Researchers at Harvard Medical School performed an experiment in which they found 12 patients in the emergency department suffering from bone fractures. They randomly split these twelve into a control and experimental group of six patients each (although 1 patient in the experimental group left before treatment). Both groups received the standard treatment for broken bones—that is, casts, serial radiographs, and orthopedic care. The experimental group, however, additionally received Treatment X. The study's radiologist, "blindly," reviewed the X-rays of all patients, and observed a significant discrepancy in healing by six weeks. At that time, those patients who received Treatment X found their bones heal to a point A which their non-treatment counterparts required another two and a half weeks of healing to match. What was Treatment X?

**B.** Spinal surgery is often a bloody procedure that requires transfusions to maintain an adequate amount of total blood volume in the patient. However, doctors at the University of California Davis Medical Center were able to use Treatment X to reduce the amount of blood loss during surgery. In this instance, patients who underwent surgery via the standard operating procedure lost 900 cc of blood. Those who received Treatment X, **in addition to the standard methods of surgery**, lost only 500 cc. That is a 45% reduction in blood loss. What was Treatment X?

**C.** At the Baylor School of Medicine, Dr. Bruce Moseley performed an experiment in which he compared the results among three methods of surgical repair to the knees of patients suffering debilitating knee pain. In normal surgery for arthritic knees, surgeons make incisions and then flush out the knee joint, removing material thought to be causing an inflammatory effect. In addition, all damaged cartilage is snipped and shaved away. With this in mind, Moseley had three treatments in his experiment: 1) flushing the knee clean of debris; 2) snipping and shaving away torn/damaged cartilage; and 3) performing Treatment X. The patients were unable to experientially and visibly differentiate between any of the procedures—that is, all

treatments seemed and appeared to be the same to those who received the operation. As expected, the two treatment groups receiving the standard and bona fide surgical procedures improved, but those receiving the previously unused Treatment X improved every bit as much as the first two. What was Treatment X?

**Discussion:**

What was Treatment X? What are your suppositions? \_\_\_\_\_. Treatment X, at its grossest level, was **belief**. In each of the three above cases, the doctors told the patients that they were to, and would, heal ... and they did. In the first instance, the researchers employed **hypnosis** to induce patients to more effectively heal their own bones. Hypnosis, in its most simple terms, is the combination of relaxation and focus that brings the mind into a state of rich suggestibility. In the second experiment, the researcher simply **told** the patient, in the course of normal conversation, about the importance of blood conservation and the ways in which the blood should move away from the back during the procedure to prevent its loss, and then move back to the back after surgery to improve healing. Think about this, a 45% reduction in blood loss during spinal surgery due to CONVERSATION!

In the third experiment, the healing effect was again grounded in belief—the **placebo effect**. That is, this arthroscopic surgeon found that performing a sham surgery—that included incisions on the knee to give the impression of a full arthroscopic procedure—helped his patients just as much as the more complicated and medically documented procedure of arthroscopic knee flushing and cartilage shaving.

In all three cases, Treatment X was belief. In fact, one of the most important factors in the healing power of any clinical treatment is the patient's belief in that clinical treatment.

Yet, even after all this, does it not remain a little unbelievable? That you can heal your bones simply by believing that they will heal? Do you really believe this? And what is the difference between belief and opinion? Consider this: you may be of the opinion that one can heal bones in this way, that you can heal your broken bone in this way; but if you do not really believe it, then it is not a belief, it is just an opinion. Does this challenge your beliefs? If you begin to believe all of this, how would your world change? Will your world change, or won't it?

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## Activity Two: How Intelligent are You?

### *Part 1: Puzzles*

Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck performed an interesting study with 3 and 4 year old children. She gave them simple jigsaw puzzles to put together. Yet, unlike many psychologists before her, she didn't look to measure their IQ by analyzing the puzzles they could finish. She was looking for something else. The point on which her study turned: she gave the children a choice as to which puzzles they could play with. Her results, in brief: Some children chose to continue playing with an easy puzzle; others continued to choose harder and harder puzzles. Although you do not have enough information here to make a certain answer, throw out all the possibilities: **What was Dweck studying?**

*We offered four-year-olds a choice: They could redo an easy jigsaw puzzle or they could try a harder one. Even at this tender age, children with the fixed mindset—the ones who believed in fixed traits—stuck with the safe one. Kids who are born smart 'don't do mistakes,' they told us.*

*Children with the growth mindset—the ones who believed you could get smarter—thought it was a strange choice. Why are you asking me this, lady? Why would anyone want to keep doing the same puzzle over and over? They chose one hard one after another.*

*So children with the fixed mindset want to make sure they succeed. [They believe that] smart people should always succeed. But for children with the growth mindset, success is about stretching themselves. It's about becoming smarter. Dweck (pgs. 16-17)*

### *Part 2: Stupid Is As Stupid Believes*

When it comes to learning, there is nothing more important than our beliefs about our own individual intelligence. For example, consider the statements below. For each one, decide if you mostly agree or disagree with it:

1. Your intelligence is something very basic about you that you can't change very much.
2. You can learn new things, but you can't really change how intelligent you are.
3. No matter how much intelligence you have, you can always change it quite a bit.
4. You can always substantially change how intelligent you are (Dweck, 2006, pg. 12).

If you tended to agree with Statements 1 and 2, you have what Carol Dweck calls the “**fixed mindset**.” Individuals with this mindset believe that traits, like intelligence or musical ability or shyness, are like a card you are dealt and there isn't much you can do about it. This said, it is not always the case that a person has a fixed mindset across the board. For example, someone might have a fixed mindset when it comes to their artistic talent, believing that they were born without artistic sensibilities and there is nothing they can do about this, while, at the same time, believing that certain of their personality traits can be changed.

Now, if it turned out that you tended to agree more with Statements 3 and 4 above, then you fall into what Dweck has dubbed the “**growth mindset**.” People in this mindset believe that no matter what their traits and abilities are right now these can always be enhanced and improved through effort. In contrast to the fixed mindset, those with the growth mindset believe that it's impossible to know someone's true potential and therefore that almost anything might be

accomplished given enough hard work, passion, and training (Dweck, *Mindset*, Random House, 2006).

All of us come into the world with the growth mindset. To be human is to be curious and open; we are all born with an intense desire to learn. Babies are constantly observing and trying things out. They learn day-by-day and as they meet new challenges and learn their brains form new neural connections. This is true for adolescents and adults as well; human intelligence grows, develops; it is not fixed.

This, of course, demands the question: How is it that some of us take on the fixed mind set and others the growth mindset? **DISCUSS!** Friends you know? Experiences in your life? Things teachers told you? Discuss.

### ***Part 3: Working with “mindsets” in the classroom***

Fortunately, we are not stuck with our mindsets. We can choose to change them, though this requires unlearning. The fixed mindset belief that one is born smart, average or dumb and nothing can be done about this has to be uprooted before a growth mindset can take hold. The “uprooting,” according to Dweck (2006), involves giving students a new way to think about and understand intelligence. For example, imagine if, as a child you were told that your brain grows and gets stronger as you learn new things in the same way that one of your muscles gets stronger the more you use it. And you were shown images of how a small child’s brain grows more and more neural connections over time. And you were helped to see that as you learn new things the neural connections in your own brain were multiplying and growing stronger and that by tackling new learning challenges you helped your brain cells to grow and connect with each other, making your brain stronger and smarter. In short, what if you had been introduced to an “**expandable theory of intelligence**”?

Adopting this view of brain development is tantamount to embracing the growth mindset, and, when a person does this, his/her learning skills increase dramatically. This is what Dweck (2006) discovered through research conducted at a New York City junior high school. A student’s **beliefs** about intelligence (static vs. dynamic) appears to influence his/her academic performance. She began her research with the question, “What would happen if fixed mindset students learned / were taught the growth mindset?” With this question in mind she worked with colleagues to develop a workshop, consisting of eight sessions, designed to teach junior high school students study skills. Students were divided in two groups. Students in the first group received the basic study skill workshop. Those in the second group received the exact same workshop but with a twist: In their case, the study skills information was contextualized in terms of the growth mindset and how the brain works. For example, students in this group were told that the brain is like a muscle—i.e., it grows and develops when it is exercised and challenged (i.e., the ‘expandable theory of intelligence’).

Before this workshop the math grades of the students in both groups had been in rapid decline. But afterwards, math grades for the students in the second group (the ones who were taught about the brain) began to rise, while no such improvement was noted for the students in the first group. It is important to note here that the math teachers had no knowledge regarding their student’s participation in one or another of these workshops. Dweck (pg. 215) summarizes her findings this way:

*The growth-mindset workshop—just eight sessions long—had a real impact. This one adjustment of students’ beliefs seemed to unleash their brain power and inspire them to*

*work and achieve...The students in the other workshop did not improve... Because they were not taught to think differently about their minds, they were not motivated to put the skills into practice.*

Consider a 100 mile ultra marathon. We all have different genetic capabilities and training histories which can determine how quickly we might run the race. Take one hundred people and set them off to it: one hundred miles. Race! It doesn't matter if you win, it matters if you finish. And whether or not you finish has little to do with genetics or training; it has everything to do with belief. You are twenty miles in. You've never run this far before. You hardly even feel like you're running, for how slow you're going; you can't even muster the energy to laugh at your jog. Your feet hardly lift from the ground; you trip. The universe asks you a question: Can you get up? Can you finish? This is all about belief. If you believe that you aren't made for this, then you're not going to get up; you're going to quit. If you believe that you can do this, you're going to get up and continue on your way; you're going to make it. In many ways, learning is an ultra-marathon. It's not about beating anyone else to the end, it's simply about just getting there. Yet, how many of us learn to quit? How many believe that we can't make it? How many are simply never told that, "Yes, it's going to be hard. But it's possible. You can do it." This is how it is with learning. There are a lot of races we know of but never show to toe the line because we've never been told we were born to run; we don't know we're runners.

In sum, what we are talking about here is the biology of belief. These amazing brains of ours are filled with thoughts, concepts, beliefs. What we believe can change us—affect our motivation, our aptitudes, our very brain chemistry. Assume the fixed mindset and you are fearful, timid—you live in a world of limits and you have little control. Switch to the growth mindset and learning is about you—the world shimmers, desire and motivation are ignited.

Discuss. When did you quit the race? When did you get up and keep going? What have you learned about learning? Consider that belief, in many ways, is a socio-cultural artifact. Just as Japan is a country of long-distance runners, so too can a culture or sub-culture ingrain belief about intelligence and identity. Can you say anything about this for our culture, or another's?

### **Activity Three: Is it True?**

Whenever you notice yourself holding onto a belief out of habit, ask yourself if it is really true. Would you rather be right, or free from rigid mental limits? Find out where you are a fundamentalist, holding onto beliefs out of old habit, ask yourself if they are reliable or worth defending. For most of what we hold true we could just as easily believe the opposite and it would be just as valid. "There's not enough... there's plenty.... You can't trust people... everyone is trustworthy, deep down." All opinion.

Just in the moment between the inception of the thought and the solidification of the thought, get into the habit of stopping, pausing, taking a breath, and asking yourself, "**Is it true?**"

You could also ask yourself, "Would everyone agree with this thought?" I mean everyone on the planet. If there even one abstention, then it is an opinion.

Or ask yourself, "Is it possible to disagree with this thought?" If it is, then it is a belief and not reality. And this simple observation can be enough to let it go....

Once we recognize that limiting beliefs are only thoughts, and not real, we can ask a very simple question: "Could you, just could you, let it go?" Don't try to let the belief go, just ask if

you could. The idea is to just playfully toss the ball in the air a few times, to see what life might be like without that thought... It is the recognition that you can live without the thought that brings freedom from the mind, more than any intention to do anything about it.

***Instructions:***

This is a simple exercise. Pair up. Scour your heart for one interesting "belief" that you hold—"All guys are dogs," "I need to get an A in this class," etc. Then ask yourself, "Is it true?" "Can I let it go?" State your belief to your partner and discuss.

**Check Out**

Examining beliefs is both the hardest and most important work there is for humans; it is the work of growing up, and with growth inevitably comes pain. But after the pain comes lightness of being, freedom. To understand this somatically grab onto your chair with both hands. Really clutch it with all your might, imagining that a fierce wind is blowing, a wind so strong that it could blow you out of your chair. As you cling to your chair consider that this is how you hold onto your cherished beliefs—i.e., as if your life depended on it. Note how exhausting and stressful this is. Now, when you can stand it no more, let go of your grip on your chair. Let go completely and now notice the release of tension, the lightness and ease in your body. This is what happens when you let go of beliefs that diminish and disempower you (E. Tolle, *A New Earth*, 2005).

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**Supplemental Reflection: Life and Death**

This may sound morbid, but it is merely mortal. These are your instructions: hold your hands out before you. Don't move. Just ... die.

I told you you may think this morbid. What? You don't believe that you can do it? You don't believe that you can die simply because you want to? What then about the countless stories about the wife who dies, and the husband who follows shortly thereafter; dead from "a broken heart." The same, of course, is true of the wife who dies after her husband.

As a final testimony to the power of our beliefs in the realm of medicine and health, it is noteworthy that the number one factor influencing human longevity has nothing to do with physical criteria (weight, diet, smoking); no, the number one factor is belief—i.e., how long individuals believe they will live. What is the greatest predictor of when you will die? Your own prediction, that's what.

The power of belief, though, evinces itself at the time of your death not because it influences death, but because it influences life. Much of the world is as it is, and much of your life and yourself is as it is, because you tell yourself it is that way, or because the world tells you that it is. That is, much of what is, is, because you believe it to be. Belief, though, is not the thing; it is the food that feeds the thing. Here is a story from Martha Birch to bring that point out:

*When I was in college every few weeks I'd join this or that group of artists and we'd all pitch in a few bucks to rent a studio and hire a model. Most of the people we got to pose were college students with bodies that matched the social ideal—slender, fit, perfectly proportioned.*

*After all, who else would risk standing naked in a roomful of strangers? And then, one day, we got somebody really different.*

*She looked well over sixty, with a deeply lined face and a body that was probably fifty pounds heavier than her doctors would have liked. She'd had a few doctors, too, judging from her scars. Shining purple welts from a cesarean section and knee surgery cut deep rifts in the rippled adipose fate of her lower body. Another scar ran across one side of her chest, where her left breast had once been. When she first limped onto the dais to pose, I felt so much pity and unease that I physically flinched. But we were there to draw her, so I picked up a pencil. The thing about drawing is that you can't do it well with your social self. You have to bring out your essential self, which doesn't know anything about social stereotypes. And so, as I began to draw this maimed old woman, the most amazing thing happened. Within five minutes, she became a person of absolutely wondrous beauty. She didn't look like a supermodel; she didn't have to. Her body, in and of itself, was as beautiful as a piece of polished driftwood, or a wind-carved rock, or a waterfall. My essential self didn't know that I was supposed to compare the woman to various movie stars, any more than it would have evaluated the Andes mountains by judging how much they looked like an Iowa cornfield. It simply saw her as she was: an exquisite sculptural form.*

*When this perceptual shift happened, I was so surprised that I stopped drawing and simply stared. The model seemed to notice this, and without turning her head, looked straight into my eyes. Then I saw the ghost of a smile flicker across her face, and I realized something else: She knew she was beautiful. She knew it and she knew that I'd seen it... Maybe that's why she had consented to pose nude in the first place. Knowing that a roomful of artists couldn't draw her without seeing her—I mean really SEEING her—she may have decided to give us a gentle education about our perceptions. (pg. 78-79, Finding You Own North Star, Three Rivers Press, 2001).*

In this story, Birch speaks of a "perceptual shift." It is this perceptual shift which determines what you can and cannot see. And what you can and cannot see, most often, determines what you and cannot do, or know. It is for this reason, that the limits in our lives—no matter how greatly enforced by our abilities, talents, or connections—are most significantly created by the limits of our imagination. On the balance, you may not be able to do what you can imagine, but you certainly will not be able to do a thing you can not imagine. And you cannot seriously imagine a thing you do not believe in.

## OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: BELIEFS

### **Action and Belief**

One way to “see” one’s life—i.e., to get a hand hold on one’s world view—is to simply examine what one does during a typical day; and then, for each thing that is done, to ask oneself: “What must I believe, given that I am behaving in this way?” By the end of the day you will have assembled the, hitherto unexamined, canon of beliefs that you live by. This field study commences with the observation of others so that you can begin to see how it is that a life founds itself always upon its beliefs. It then progresses into the study of yourself, for by then you may have seen traces of yourself in those around you.

1) In the first part of this field study you will examine the actions of others, and then hypothesize as to the beliefs which underlie these actions. For sure, you have thought, "God, she thinks she's hot stuff." In this instance, you 1) made an observation—let's leave this current example to your imagination, and 2) hypothesized in the form of a belief—"she thinks she's hot stuff." You will do the same here. Find a place such as on a downtown street, a library, the steps of city hall, and observe your fellow humans. Make note of each observation. Your observations may be as large or small as you desire. Nothing is too small. If you observe, "She is not wearing a raincoat in the downpour; and she's singing," a period of meditation would arouse you to the slew of beliefs which could possibly found this action. It is not a minor thing to hypothesize that, "She wants to get wet." Yet, why not the observation, "She uses an umbrella in this downpour?" Is that not as rich a note, even if it seems too ordinary? After you have completed at least ONE hour of field study, you may begin a period of meditation over your observations. For each observation, hypothesize as to the beliefs (PLURAL) which might found that observation. Lastly, hypothesize as to the possible source of that belief.

2) In the second part of this field study, you will observe yourself. Ask yourself the simple but profound question: "What must I believe, given that I am behaving in this way?" Make a list of TEN things which you did over the course of the day. Meditate over the beliefs which found these actions. Compose a response piece which addresses the foundational beliefs beneath three of these actions. Address those beliefs which meditation has revealed as most significant to you. Continue in your response with an analysis of the source of these beliefs.