Look to Your Superstitions

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Educated people smile tolerantly at a person who throws spilled salt over his shoulder. We regard as quaint futility the idea that tomato plants must be set out at new moon and that rain on the first Friday of the month means a rainy month. Yet many of the beliefs by which we shape our own actions would scarcely withstand rigorous scrutiny any better than these superstitions.

For instance, do you believe that the Government will take care of the people and see to it that no one starves or goes cold? Or do you believe that teachers don't understand managerial matters, aren't interested anyway, and are a lot better off (their pupils too) if they are let alone to do their teaching?

In spite of the tangled issues concerned with the details of politics, government, teaching, and the world in general, perhaps you have faith that "everything will come out all right in the end," that the American nation is destined to continue to be great, that progress is inevitable. Or perhaps you secretly harbor the conviction (or openly flaunt it) that all the furor over postwar plans and international cooperation is futile, that events will run their course despite anything that you may do; so the best thing is not to worry about how the world is getting along, but to settle down and do your own job as well as you can.

Where Do Our Beliefs Come From?

The various points of view just cited differ somewhat in scope from simple superstitions about the weather, but they have no more justification for being taken for granted. Above all, these are no times for anyone, least of all educators, to be swayed by beliefs which seem to have come from nowhere and which gain acceptance chiefly by their plausibility. It behooves us, rather, to search their source and to test continually those things on which we pin our faith. Though our education has done little (alas!) to aid us in such a search, the method is not hard to grasp and the reward is great.

For a start one takes a single belief and explores the various possible grounds on which it rests. One usually finds that the grounds actually supporting a single belief are several. To be sure that all have been identified it is helpful to use a sort of check-list. To what extent, for example, does the belief in question rest on authority? To
what extent is its source in suggestion? Does prejudice play a part in supporting it? Is it one which stands the test of practice? Is it supported by reason or held in defiance of reason? Questions like these five may be considered to cover fairly adequately the scope of the sources of belief. The criteria which they embody are amplified in the next few paragraphs.

**When Doctors Disagree**

Authority is frequently a necessary basis of belief. This is particularly so because of the specialization of knowledge. We believe the doctor is right when he prescribes a cure. Of course we encounter instances where "doctors disagree." This confronts us with the necessity of choosing the authority on which a belief shall be based, and the choice must be made with the best information and intelligence we can muster.

**The Power of Suggestion**

Suggestion is a source of belief which is all too frequently unrecognized and unexamined. We tend to assume the beliefs of our associates, particularly those in which we have confidence. The power of suggestion is the power behind propaganda. "The strength of this country has been built by free enterprise. Can we afford to throttle free enterprise now?" is a line which tends to make the unthinking reply in the negative, without examining the degrees and conditions of freedom.

Though beliefs founded on suggestion are sometimes held tenaciously, and even defended fiercely through ingenious verbal artifices, for lack of a firmer basis of security (or for ulterior motives), suggestion is not a sound foundation for intellectual integrity. The pure fact of suggestion does not make a belief unsound, but unless suggestion is supported by some surer basis of evidence, it is inadequate.

**Choosing Prejudices Wisely**

Prejudice as a basis of belief is another source of the power of propaganda. People tend to believe what they want to, particularly when it appears to be in their immediate interest. Obviously this is no proper long-run basis for beliefs. But in the purer sense of the word, prejudice is a necessary ground of belief, in that beliefs have to depend on prejudget, on impressions of probability.

Anyone who before Pearl Harbor favored increased military appropriations may have done so on the basis of prejudice, prejudget, his impression of the probability that this country would soon be drawn into the war. In this sense, prejudice cannot be dismissed lightly as a source of belief. Man must believe if he is to live morally. Belief cannot be based exclusively on certainty but in some degree on impressions of probability, in other words, prejudice. But, as in the case of authority, we can choose our prejudices intelligently.

**Does It Work?**

In practical affairs, such as teaching and supervising, individuals acquire a set of beliefs based on pragmatic foundations. They come to believe in this method or that because "it works" for them. They reject the other method, even though recommended in a summer school class, because it doesn't
work. Surely one cannot be expected to live by a belief which cannot ultimately stand the test of practice, but the objection to applying only the pragmatic test is that it may be applied too narrowly. Many primitive methods of controlling a class seem to work, in that they maintain the outward semblance of order. But in the long run they may be vicious, because they deprive pupils of opportunity to develop self-control.

When applied to more fundamental and far-reaching beliefs, the pragmatic test has a further shortcoming: we cannot tell with certainty whether some things work or not. Is democracy as an ideal to be rejected because it does not work? Or is it to be retained as an aim worth striving for and a goal toward which an approach can be made? In spite of its limitations, pragmatism can give partial support to beliefs.

Life by Logic

Rational processes furnish another source for beliefs. Generalizations built up from experience are potent guides to action. From some accepted principle, logical implications are developed as a part of a philosophy of life. Reason properly tests the other grounds for belief. But reason itself is not equal to the whole task of substantiating a philosophy of life.

The act of believing is from its very nature an act of faith. This does not mean that one must accept on faith any idea which is repugnant to his intelligence. On the contrary, one's philosophy of life should be subjected to the most thorough intellectual scrutiny. But feeling, born of action, is the final arbiter.

Let's Turn the Spotlight on Ourselves

It is a very wholesome and invigorating experience to examine one's beliefs. Choose one by which you are living. Search out its grounds, using the above five points as a check-list if you will. Much of this process may be pure solitary introspection. After a certain stage it may be fruitful to proceed further with other individuals. When values have been somewhat clarified, they should be refined through the process of group discussion. As one continues he comes to realize that beliefs, to be realistic, are essentially tentative. This does not mean that they are capricious. On the contrary, by being always open to further clarification, they are continually being strengthened. The process of sharing values serves to strengthen them, and this process extending into wider and wider circles is the most hopeful foundation of broader social understanding and a reasonably cohesive world order.

Rigorous examination of beliefs is not a practice in which one can dabble lightly. It is a skill which requires long cultivation—an attitude toward life which is ever in the making. The early steps may lead one to the edge of an abyss which appears bottomless. Contemplation of the scene is usually depressing. But it is difficult to understand how a teacher, who daily observes the adaptability of human beings, who witnesses the emergence of insights, who is continually attending the birth of a new world, could fail to detect some solid ground. If in addition he has experienced group endeavor, he should be able to find a sound foundation for a fighting faith.