



**Discussion Questions for *This I Believe:*
The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women
Edited by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman**

1. Studs Terkel's foreword raises the question of truth and how we discern it. What do the essays in *This I Believe* tell us about the way we go about deciding what is true and what should not be believed? Do you think there are any absolute truths that apply to everyone?
2. In two essays reflecting the toll of war, Newt Gingrich emphasizes the need for vigilance ("I believe that the world is inherently a very dangerous place"), while John McCain celebrates the power of the quiet hero ("The true worth of a person is measured by how faithfully we serve a cause greater than our self-interest"). What is your approach to the tides of danger and victory, destruction and reconstruction that have shaped the world for as long as history has been recorded? Do you think the future can be more peaceful than the past?
3. Several of the essays describe discrimination, such as Phyllis Allen's recollections of growing up in a racially segregated town, and Eve Ensler's observations about atrocities committed against women. What do you believe is at the root of discriminatory behavior? What causes some members of society to feel justified in causing the suffering of entire populations? How can we ensure equality in the face of the forces behind discrimination?
4. What did you observe about the essays from half a century ago compared with contemporary ones? Which issues have remained constant? What new ones have arisen that Edward R. Murrow's generation could not have imagined?
5. Questions of mortality and immortality are raised throughout the book, from Isabel Allende's response to her daughter's death to Elvia Bautista's experience of visiting her brother's grave. At the heart of many of these essays is the notion that love endures beyond a person's lifetime. How does this book define a life well lived and a grief that is not in vain?
6. Martha Graham's "An Athlete of God" closes by describing the acrobat as "practicing living at that instant of danger. He does not choose to fall." In what way does this describe the tandem of fear and faith experienced in our daily lives? What does it take to "choose" not to fall?
7. What is the role of art and whimsy in shaping our beliefs? What do the contributors' words about fashion, reading, jazz, and other creative ventures say about the significance or value of imagination?
8. In "Seeing Beautiful, Precise Pictures," Temple Grandin describes how her ability to visualize resulted in humane new procedures for numerous livestock-handling facilities. What ethical balance shapes her work? What small vision could you translate into grand action in your community?

9. The contributors to this book express a broad variety of viewpoints about religious beliefs, including the belief that there is no God (Penn Jillette) and the belief that we should protect our fellow human beings from harm, even when their religious affiliations are quite different from ours (Eboo Patel). What cultural observations are made in the essays on religion? What is its role in shaping identities and worldviews?
10. Benjamin Carson pays eloquent tribute to his mother in “There Is No Job More Important than Parenting.” What qualities make her a good parent? What beliefs enabled her to sustain and inspire her son? Who has held a similar role of redemption in your life?
11. In what ways does *This I Believe* serve as a time capsule for the dawn of a new millennium? What conclusions will future readers draw about our era when reading these entries in another half century?
12. Which of the essays resonated with you the most? Did any of them inspire you to become an agent for change, either globally or simply in the way you affect the life of another individual?
13. What do you believe? What were your greatest influences in shaping those beliefs? How have your beliefs changed throughout your life?