

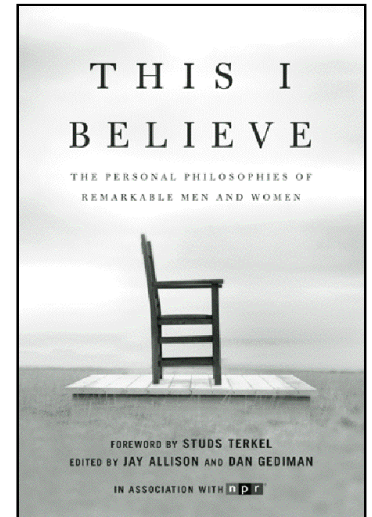
# This I Believe

The Personal Philosophies of  
Remarkable Men and Women

Edited by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman  
Foreword by Studs Terkel

“My father, Edward R. Murrow, said that ‘fresh ideas’ from others helped him confront his own challenges. This superb collection of thought-provoking *This I Believe* essays, both from the new program heard on NPR and from the original 1950s series, provides fresh ideas for all.”

—Casey Murrow, Education Publisher



304 pages • 978-0-8050-8658-4

## TO THE TEACHER

Based on the popular National Public Radio series of the same name, *This I Believe* features eighty different statements of individual principles from the famous and unknown alike. Each essay candidly and compellingly completes the thought that begins this book's title. Further, each piece invites all readers to rethink not only how they have arrived at their own personal beliefs but also the extent to which they share these beliefs with others.

Featuring many well-known contributors—including Isabel Allende, Colin Powell, Gloria Steinem, Bill Gates, and John Updike—the collection also contains words of wisdom from a Brooklyn lawyer; a part-time hospital clerk from Rehoboth, Massachusetts; a woman who sells Yellow Pages advertising in Fort Worth, Texas; and a man who serves on the Rhode Island Parole Board. Also presented are several remarkably up-to-the-minute essays from the original *This I Believe* CBS Radio series, created in the 1950s by legendary journalist Edward R. Murrow.

*This I Believe* thus presents the hearts and minds of a diverse group of people, both past and present, whose beliefs reveal the American spirit at its best. Practical yet reflective, varied yet familiar, human yet universal, the statements of personal

PRAISE FOR  
THIS I BELIEVE

conviction collected here are ultimately a testament to that crucial endeavor known simply as listening—and to the insight, empathy, and self-contemplation that can *only* be achieved through listening.

*This I Believe* teaches without preaching. As such, this book is a must read for students—and instructors—of all grades, levels, backgrounds, and disciplines.

“This feast of ruminations is a treat for any reader.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“To hold this range of beliefs in the palm of your hand is as fine, as grounding, as it was hearing them first on the radio. [These are] heartfelt, deeply cherished beliefs, doctrines for living (yet none of them doctrinaire). Ideas and ideals that nourish.”—Susan Stamberg, Special Correspondent, National Public Radio

“NPR listeners have been moved to tears by the personal essays that constitute the series *This I Believe*. Created in 1951 with Edward R. Murrow as host, the sometimes funny, often profound, and always compelling series has been revived, according to host Jay Allison, because, once again, ‘matters of belief divide our country and the world.’ . . . Essays from the original series are interleaved with contemporary essays to create a resounding chorus. . . . Appendixes offer guidelines and resources because the urge to write such declarations is contagious, and schools and libraries have been coordinating *This I Believe* programs, which we believe is a righteous endeavor.”—Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

“[This book] gives me a feeling about this country I rarely get: a very visceral sense of all the different kinds of people who are living together here, with crazily different backgrounds and experiences and dreams. Like a Norman Rockwell painting where all the people happen to be real people, and all the stories are true.”—Ira Glass, Producer and Host of WBEZ-Chicago’s *This American Life*

“It’s tough not to get goosebumps reading [these] essays.”—*The Denver Post*

“Allison and Gediman have assembled a cadre of remarkable, insightful contributors.” —*The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY)

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This teacher's guide mainly consists of three sections: Reading and Understanding the Book, Questions and Exercises for the Class, and Terms and Phrases to Define. The first section will help students follow along with the essays comprising *This I Believe*. The second will aid in their broader explorations of, discussions about, and reflections on, this book. The third will sharpen their comprehension by way of word-recollection and vocabulary-building. Teachers should note that the book itself includes information on bringing the *This I Believe* project into the classroom (see Appendices B and C). Instructors will also want to visit [www.thisibelieve.org](http://www.thisibelieve.org) in that regard.

## READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK

1. At first, it might seem like the essay by Sarah Adams is a joke—a short, familiar “operating philosophy about life” that makes a point while making us laugh. But Adams is actually making a few different points. What are they?
2. The Isabel Allende essay tells us: “You only have what you give.” Is this idea a paradox? Explain why or why not, referring to Allende’s piece as you explain.
3. What are the “red” and “blue” that appear throughout the essay by Elvia Bautista? What do they signify? What might they stand for?
4. Why does Niven Busch favor riding in a subway over riding in a cab? Explain this key metaphor of his essay.
5. “My story is really my mother’s story,” admits Benjamin Carson. Why does Carson make this claim? How does he defend it?
6. Near the start of his essay, Greg Chapman writes: “I was raised to be a good Baptist and to be a patriotic American. I was raised to believe Catholics were idol-worshippers, liberals were communists. . . .” How would you describe Chapman’s tone at this point? What reasons might he have for using such a tone? Finally, explain why Chapman is finally able to assert, “The more I loved myself, the more beauty I saw in everyone else.”
7. Warren Christopher’s essay refers to different ways in which we all rely on one another. Describe these ways.
8. The last line of Mary Cook’s moving and well-said statement reads: “I believe there is strength in surrender.” What do you think she is saying, in light of her thoughts and experiences? How did she arrive at this belief?

9. Norman Corwin talks about “the blood relatives of common courtesy” in his essay. What are these, and how—in your view, and in light of Corwin’s writing—are they “related” to being courteous? Also, what does Corwin mean by “a calm sea and prosperous voyage do not make news but a shipwreck does”?
10. “Prayer,” says Susan Cosio, “is less about what I say and more about what I hear.” What does Cosio hear—or hope to hear—when she takes a walk in the mountains while trying to discern “God’s voice”?
11. In his essay, William O. Douglas relates the last words his father ever said to his mother: “If I die, it will be glory; if I live, it will be grace.” As a boy, Douglas was puzzled by these words, but he eventually came to understand them. Paraphrase the understanding Douglas arrived at—and how he got there.
12. Comparing the two personal credos written by Elizabeth Deutsch Earle, one composed when she was a teenager and the other when she was a grandmother, what would you say she has held on to over the years, in terms of her beliefs? And what has she let go of?
13. Albert Einstein’s essay concerns “the individual” and his or her relationship to “society.” How does Einstein view this relationship? What reasons does he give for having this view? Does his view still hold true today? Explain.
14. “I believe freedom begins with naming things,” writes Eve Ensler. Why does she assign so much might and import to the act of assigning names to things? What courage or solidarity does she locate in this act?
15. Anthony Fauci cites “three guiding principles that anchor [his] life.” A very bright and driven person, Fauci takes these principles seriously. What are they? How do they influence his work as well as his day-to-day living?
16. Two kinds of fathers are described in John W. Fountain’s essay—who are these fathers? Which father was it who embraced Fountain? When and how did this happen?
17. Why does Bill Gates call himself an “optimist”? What’s his rationale for taking this outlook?
18. Cecile Gilmer’s essay gives us a somewhat unorthodox take on the word “family.” What is this take? How did the author arrive at it?
19. What is the “gift” (both physical and symbolic) at the heart of the essay by Miles Goodwin? Why was it given to him? And how did it affect his own thinking and behavior?
20. The artful essay by dancer Martha Graham ends with an image of an acrobat walking on a high wire. Why, as Graham asserts, is this acrobat smiling? What lesson(s) does she think we should draw from this?

21. Temple Grandin tells us she believes in “doing practical things [to] make the world a better place.” How is Grandin, as a high-functioning individual with autism, especially equipped to do this?
22. The Brian Greene essay begins with a childhood memory, in which the author tells how, at one time, “science had made me feel small.” How did science do this? And why, later on, did Greene’s view of science alter so dramatically? What does Greene now take from science—what does he seem to find in it, or derive from it?
23. “In the company of the confident,” writes Ted Gup, “I had always envied their certainty.” The author of this essay is that rare individual who can not only admit his confusion and indecision but also, in effect, embrace them. Why does Gup add that it’s good to have people like himself on hand, especially in times of crisis?
24. What does Debbie Hall mean by asserting that “presence is a noun, not a verb”? What “power” does Hall assign to “being present”?
25. “I don’t believe anyone can enjoy living in this world,” writes Oscar Hammerstein II, “unless he can accept its imperfection.” Why does such enjoyment rely on such acceptance? What about the old saying that ignorance is bliss? What is Hammerstein telling us about how people should best weather the “storm of life”?
26. Victor Hanson’s essay endorses “living with the past as present,” and in doing so endorses certain “ancient vines [and] roots.” What are these? What does this author believe about how we all relate to the world around us?
27. “The quantum physicists have it right,” notes Joy Harjo. “They are beginning to think like Indians.” Explain this.
28. The personal statement offered by Helen Hayes describes a big transition in how she saw the world, a realization that she could no longer “live aloof.” How did she come to this great shift, this fundamental change in her belief?
29. Explain the distinction made by Kay Redfield Jamison’s essay between “knowledge” and “wisdom.” Why does she favor the latter? And what does this distinction have to do with what Jamison calls “intensity”?
30. One of the guidelines in Appendix B, which tells us how to write a *This I Believe* essay, is “Be positive.” Yet Penn Jillette’s essay is called “There Is No God.” Is he breaking the rules? Why do, or don’t, you think so?
31. Explain the “elegant treeness” advocated by Ruth Kamps. How did she arrive at this unique view of life?
32. The essay by Helen Keller employs a broadly inclusive understanding of “faith.” Describe this understanding; try to explain all that it covers. How do you think Keller’s own life and background influenced this understanding?

33. What's the difference, as memorably put by Harold Hongju Koh's father, between democracy and dictatorship?
34. Deep down, Jackie Lantry believes in something that is "not therapy, counselors, or medications"—and that does "not cost money or require connections or great privilege." What is it, and how did she come to embrace it?
35. Alan Lightman thus quotes Albert Einstein: "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious." Is it conflicted or otherwise odd that two prominent scientists should so highly praise what cannot be known? Explain.
36. How would you paraphrase Thomas Mann's point about "the interchangeability of the terms 'existence' and 'transitoriness'"?
37. Remembering a high school teacher, Rick Moody writes: "What Mr. Buxton didn't tell me was what the play meant." Why is this point so important or special to Moody? And how does it relate to his core beliefs?
38. Errol Morris begins with a fact about the locations of Los Angeles, California, and Reno, Nevada. Were you surprised by this fact? Why or why not? Explain how Morris uses this fact to make his larger point about "truth."
39. "Probably the single greatest achievement of our society" is how Michael Mullane characterizes his central belief. What exactly is he describing with this phrase, and why does he prize this phenomenon so dearly?
40. Azar Nafisi says her notion of "empathy" has long been connected to the character of Huck Finn, specifically Huck's relationship with Jim, the runaway slave in Twain's great novel. Why does Nafisi make this connection?
41. "Even the saddest poem I write is proof that I want to survive," Gregory Orr tells us. Explain what he is saying here, both in terms of his own experience and in terms of poetry itself. What does poetry bestow to this author?
42. Eboo Patel writes of a Norman Rockwell illustration that hangs in his office. What is it called? What does Patel like about it? And what problems—thematically or symbolically—does he have with this particular depiction?
43. The decidedly real-world essay by Frederic Reamer ends with an open-ended question: "What do I believe?" And yet his essay itself is a memorable, unambiguous statement of belief. What is it that this author believes?
44. Often in life, we encounter situations where the child must become the parent. (Or, as William Wordsworth has written, the child is the father of the man.) How, if at all, is such wisdom demonstrated by Josh Rittenberg's essay?

45. “This is the area where I found imperfection,” writes Jackie Robinson, “and where I was best able to fight.” What is the “area” he refers to? And how does it echo his claim that “society can remain good only as long as we are willing to fight for it”?
46. How does Eleanor Roosevelt think you can truly achieve “what you were put here to do”? And why does she call herself “pretty much of a fatalist”?
47. “We are more than the inhabitants of our cubicles,” asserts Mel Rusnov. Elaborate on this assertion, explaining how it ties into Rusnov’s belief in creativity.
48. Carl Sandburg tells us, “I believe in humility,” and then tells us a couple of lines later, “I believe in pride.” How is this contradictory stance explained or defended by the famous American poet? Or isn’t it?
49. Margaret Sanger describes her belief in working for something “beyond thyself.” How did this belief lead to her wider goal of a world “where peace on earth may be achieved when children are wanted before they are conceived”?
50. What does Mark Shields like or admire about politicians? Why does he, in fact, believe in them? What makes politicians special? What sets them apart? And how can politics itself benefit “the powerful” as well as “the poor”?
51. “Born luckier than most of the world’s millions,” notes Wallace Stegner, “I am also born more obligated.” What reasons or grounds does he give for this obligation? And what does he seem to think such an obligation implies?
52. Gloria Steinem’s essay of belief is largely about childhood and the age-old “nature vs. nurture” debate. In the piece, she identifies “the root from which all social justice movements grow.” What is this root? Where is it found?
53. What does the phrase “Always go to the funeral” mean, in the more general or inclusive sense—i.e., as it is said in Deirdre Sullivan’s family? What does this piece of advice imply or include?
54. Arnold Toynbee writes that “by nature, each of us feels and behaves as if he [or she] were the center and the purpose of the universe.” How does this view influence the author’s overall belief in “toleration”?
55. John Updike’s essay claims that the fictional is more accurate—and even truer—than the historical. “The story or poem brings us closer to the actual texture and intricacy of experience,” he writes. Explain this paradox.
56. More than a few essays in this book celebrate or affirm—or even profess to a belief in—the marvelous human ability that is creativity. But Frank X Walker takes a rather different approach in expressing this sort of praise. How?

57. Rebecca West tells us how her notions of both “love” and “the law” changed considerably over time. Describe these changes, and describe how they in turn led to changes in West’s thoughts and feelings about life itself.

58. “Life isn’t a popularity contest,” notes Jody Williams. How does this conviction go hand-in-hand with the author’s all-important belief in “trying to do the right thing”?

59. When introducing the original *This I Believe* broadcasts (see Appendix A), Edward R. Murrow noted that some of those he spoke with in originating the series “helped me to see my own problems in truer perspective.” Explain whether and how, if at all, this was also true for you (as a reader of the old and new essays collected in this book).

60. In Appendix C, this book’s editors say that the many *This I Believe* essays are collectively meant “to facilitate a higher standard of active public discourse.” And recently, Jay Allison, one of those editors, acknowledged the strident and spiteful nature of most of today’s talk radio while telling an interviewer that “this series [of essays] attempts the total opposite.” How successful, in your own view, do these many and various essays seem as vehicles of public expression and personal reflection? How well, or how effectively, do they—or don’t they—work as remedies or antidotes to the talking points, soundbites, hate speech, and simplified spin of this day and age?

#### QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR THE CLASS

1. Some of the essays in this book were first aired during the original *This I Believe* radio series of the 1950s. Which of these, in your view, seem especially timely or relevant—despite being written fifty years ago? Also, how, if at all, does the timeliness of these pieces reflect the fact that *This I Believe* began in the time of McCarthyism?

2. Several essayists in this book—among them Maximilian Hodder, Pius Kamau, Harold Hongju Koh, George Mardikian, Cecilia Muñoz, Eboo Patel, Colin Powell, and Andrew Sullivan—put forth a central belief that seems closely if not fundamentally connected to their status as immigrants (or children of immigrants). What did reading *This I Believe* reveal to you of the American immigrant experience: historically, personally, socially, and culturally?

3. In his Foreword, Studs Terkel notes that a lot of these essays concern making a journey or setting forth in pursuit of something. “The chase is what it’s all about,” says Terkel. Cite a few of the journeys in this book that particularly resonated with you, explaining why and how they did so. Which chases could you most identify with? Finally, explain how such ongoing chases relate to the interrelated notions of personal development, growth, and change.



4. Beliefs can change, and they often do. “A person believes various things at various times,” observes John Updike toward the end of this book, “even on the same day.” And early in the volume, Phyllis Allen presents a clever and telling essay that chronicles her life thus far as a kind of timeline of what she’s believed with each new decade. Write an essay, poem, or short story that describes two or three beliefs of your own that have changed over time.

5. Activism—actively taking a stand or supporting a cause—is a major theme here. Many of our essayists thus believe wholeheartedly in “taking action.” Which of their writings moved or even inspired you on this point?

6. More than a few of these essays make careful distinctions between religious belief and spiritual belief, between institutional dogma and individual doctrine. How would you make such distinctions—given what you have read here, and given your own viewpoints? Discuss the various ideas of “faith” that appear throughout these pages.

7. Collecting the credos of renowned thinkers and artists as well as ordinary lawyers and social workers, celebrated activists and performers as well as working-class engineers and salespeople, famous politicians as well as everyday parents, *This I Believe* inevitably embraces the dual American blessings of freedom and diversity. Either as a class or in smaller groups, talk with other students about how and why this book is a reflection of this nation in particular.

8. Certain statements here are in support of things that might seem surprising—even offbeat—as things that one would believe in. For instance: jazz, Barbie, barbecue, generously tipping the pizza-delivery man, feeding monkeys on one’s birthday, etc. If you had to pick an out-of-the-ordinary belief in this vein, what would it be? And why?

9. The essay by Robert A. Heinlein mentions a figure from early American history named Roger Young. Who was this person? Why is he famous? Do some research, if you are unsure. And where else in this book did you encounter names or events that were new to you? Identify them, and define them, again conducting outside research as needed.

10. “Your beliefs are in jeopardy only when you don’t know what they are,” writes Jay Allison in his Introduction to this volume. As a class, discuss what he means. Then, in light of this discussion, and in light of the essays in this book that you most enjoyed, compose a *This I Believe* essay of your own. (Helpful hints on doing so are given in Appendix B.)

TERMS AND PHRASES  
TO DEFINE

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claxon	intangible	self-realization
liberal	“tap-dancing to work”	venerating
conservative	Nam Vets	voracious
credo	cultivation	“the Tinkerbell effect”
sermonizing	autism	traumatic violence
political cant	drudgery	complicity
empathy	resilient	parameters
identity issues	“Wobblies”	integrity
unconscious mind	grounding	portentous
congeries	apex	transmute
jingoistic	Inuit	crucible
animadversion	Yupik	capering
original sin	reciprocity	evangelical
communicable	ennobling	heretic
intellectualize	creed	sectarian
internalize	gallantry	zeal
physiology	Independence Hall	orthodoxy
human will	Grand Coulee Dam	nature
secular	guinea pig	nurture
Puritanism	irrationality	marmoset
“honest doubter”	bipolar disorder	American political
entitlement	tumultuousness	experiment
organic	atheism	skeptical
ego	active faith	cynical
atrophy	totality	heroic couplets
taboos	Theory of Everything	pogrom
coercion	transitoriness	

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Jay Allison**, the host and curator of *This I Believe*, is an independent broadcast journalist. His work appears often on NPR and has earned him five Peabody Awards. He is the founder of the public radio stations that serve Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, and Cape Cod, where he lives.

**Dan Gediman** is the executive producer of *This I Believe*. His work has been heard on the public radio programs All Things Considered, Morning Edition, Fresh Air, Marketplace, Jazz Profiles, and This American Life. He has won many of public broadcasting's most prestigious awards, including the duPont-Columbia Award.

Scott Pitcock, who wrote this teacher's guide, is a writer and editor based in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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**WE JUST WANT TO LIVE HERE**, Rifa'i & Ainbinder\*  
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