

True Believers

by Bill Herbst

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*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,
and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is lost
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
are filled with passionate intensity.*

— **W. B. Yeats**

Opening stanza from his 1919 poem,
“**The Second Coming**,” published in the wake
of World War One, which was arguably up to that time
the greatest catastrophe humanity had ever suffered,
and the first global warning that the future of modern
civilization wouldn't be so rosy

As they say, reasonable people can disagree, and often do. I have no problem with reasonable people who disagree with me. In fact, thoughtful conversations with people I trust or respect who disagree with me are often clarifying in helping me to identify beliefs I hold that may be overly dogmatic or too sweeping in their generalizations. In that sense, disagreement is frequently more valuable than agreement, at least for me.

On the other hand, True Believers scare the hell out of me. Whether they agree or disagree with me, I always have the same reaction: I mistrust whatever they say and feel endangered by simply interacting with them. There's a certain tone to their expression that implies (or at least resonates toward) absolute certainty that what they believe is accurate and correct, either as the way things are or the way they should be. That apparent certainty may be because they truly do believe whatever they seem so sure of, or it could be that they are clinging fiercely to their belief out of insecurity or protection of their ego — to mask uncertainty, anxiety, or insecurity from others or from themselves. Often, I can't tell which.

Whenever I interact with anyone who expresses what seems to me absolute certainty about a particular belief, all my radar sensors flash red at once. I go right to DefCon 1. I conclude instantly that they're full of shit, at least in regard to the belief being expressed, and perhaps as a more widespread tendency within their psyches toward black-and-white dogma.

Trump's "base" of fervent supporters are like that. As if they were members of a cult. Nothing that Trump does, and nothing anyone points out about Trump will sway them even a little from their passionate faith in him.

Evangelical Christians are sometimes that way, too, as are some New Age Metaphysical types. Not all in either camp, by any means, but some. And they're easy to spot. The same applies to militant Islamic Jihadists. Such people have crossed over into True Believer Land.

But Trump supporters, Republicans, and Evangelicals are not the only True Believers among us. Nope. True Believers inhabit every demographic, and the particular topics of their fervent certainty cover every possible realm. Astrology has True Believers (I'm not among them, by the way).

True Believers aren't the same as people with strong opinions and definite likes and dislikes. If someone says, *"I really love chocolate ice cream. I eat it every chance I get, and I could never get enough,"* that's OK with me. I'm not inherently opposed to passion. If, on the other hand, someone says, *"Chocolate ice cream is the **BEST** food on the planet, and anyone who doesn't love it is **wrong**,"* then my True Believer radar sensors trigger.

The issue isn't passion. It isn't about love or hate. It's not even about how anyone would like the world to be. It's about certainty that one is right, that what one believes is correct, and that anyone who doesn't share that belief is wrong. That's an example of Us-versus-Them being taken to an extreme.

All of us are vulnerable to that in some facet of our psyches, but some people do it in spades. True Belief becomes a centerpiece of their lives, the cornerstone that defines and dominates everything else.

Baron William Thomson Kelvin, usually identified as Lord Kelvin, was a 19th-century British scientist who studied gases (and for whom the brand of Kelvinator refrigerators was named). Though respected for that work, Kelvin was something of a grand pontificator. Many of his public pronouncements have come down to us looking quite foolish in hindsight, such as *"Radio has no future," "X-rays are clearly a hoax,"* and *"Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible."* The quote of his I find most striking, though, delivered in 1895 to the British Scientific Society, is this one: *"There is nothing new to be discovered in physics now. All that remains is more and more precise measurement."* A mere decade later, quantum mechanics burst on the scene, opening the door to previously unimagined and often disturbing realms of sub-atomic realities. Perhaps Lord Kelvin should have kept his opinion to himself. Or, better yet, maybe he could have worked on personal humility a little, so as to mollify what looks suspiciously like arrogance.

The ability to entertain uncertainty and live with ambivalence are among the many hallmarks of maturity. If we require the eradication of all doubt by demanding certainty, whether through faith or science, we remain adolescent at best and downright childish at worst. Easy, pat answers to life's mysteries and complexities are seductive and may be attractive, but they inevitably lead to betrayal. Being smart doesn't necessarily mean knowing more, and it sure as hell doesn't mean knowing everything. Conversely, being stupid has little to do with I.Q. Having a Ph.D. is no guarantee of intelligence. Consciousness has nothing to do with credentials, nor with success, wealth, or cultural validation, for that matter.

And so here we are, finding ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic, about which we know some but not much. It took nature to challenge the collective fantasies that built modern civilization. A tiny, invisible virus has brought our world crashing down around our heads. As they say, Nature bats last.

We need to rethink nearly everything, to reconsider all our plans, dreams, and cherished beliefs. Certainties are collapsing, and even though some people will try with all their might to resurrect "normalcy" and go back to the way they imagined life to have been before, that's not where we're headed. A significant portion of Americans, however, haven't read the memo from Cosmic Central. Some think that what's happening is little more than a temporary aberration, while others regard it as a conspiracy.

The right-wing media fever swamp is now screaming that the country must be immediately "re-opened" for business, which is gospel to millions of Americans who live in that echo chamber. The result is rebellious (and dangerous) protests against stay-at-home orders occurring in various state capitals. No doubt we will see more of these in the weeks and months ahead. The protesters tend to share numerous common dogmas, including virus denial, hatred of government, and absolute insistence on personal freedom.

Now, I'm definitely in favor of questioning authority: "Consider the source" is one of my standard cautions to myself. But those angry, freedom-obsessed protesters are True Believers who are unhinged and dangerously delusional. I don't know what will bring those people back to reality. Actually, I'm not sure anything will.

As for the rest of us — those Americans who live on planet Earth — let's work on embracing uncertainty and accepting ambivalence. Let's give up the arrogant insistence on false certainties that have kept us self-deceived and leave behind the toxic fantasies (human dreams that seemed like a good idea at the time, but have proven not to be) that brought us to where we are now, to nature's inevitable re-balancing. It's time for some humility, and boy oh boy, America has ordered up a major serving of really nasty humble pie.

Yes, some of what we lose from the pandemic and further crises waiting in the wings will be tragic in its suffering, but we've been collectively barreling down the road hell-bent-for-leather toward tragedy for a long time. Now we've arrived. Tragedy is upon us, and it's not going away. It may remain with us (allowing us to adapt) or possibly engulf us even if we make some headway toward growing up. At this point, we can't know which, but it really doesn't matter. Both individually and collectively, working toward maturity is now our main task, no longer on the back burner or reserved for those in monasteries or writing their memoirs.

A little progress in our collective maturity might take us a long way in reality, and a bit more personal maturity as individuals sure wouldn't hurt.

Meanwhile, I intend to stay as far away from True Believers as possible.