

After I'd been writing the radio show for a while, I had an itch to sum it up, to state in a few words what Belief Systems and Other B.S. was really about. The following essay is the result, so much so that Skip Naft, the show's producer, took to calling this particular essay the 'crux of the biscuit' - whatever that means.

Belief Systems



When I was about 15, I got serious about bird-watching and studied birds obsessively. Because I lived in a Los Angeles suburb, I assumed that the local birding wouldn't be very good and I would travel for hours to more exotic spots. But after a few weeks I began to notice all sorts of birds right in my yard - lots of woodpeckers, vireos, thrashers, several species of hawk...

The birds, of course, had been there all along. But I couldn't *see* them until I became aware of the possibility of their existence, until I learned the language associated with their appearance. By expanding my inner world, I expanded and enriched my outer world.

Our sets of assumptions about the world - our belief systems - dramatically affect our experience of the world. Consider a less trivial example; several studies have shown that patient expectations about a drug or therapy strongly affect the performance of the drug or therapy. That is, if you *expect* a pill to work, the odds are better that it will. But if you don't think the pill is going to work, it may not.

This being the case, we'd all be better off *believing* that we're going to be cured - in other words, learning to manage our belief systems is a valuable skill that will enhance and even extend our lives. In other other words, beliefs are a *choice* - they aren't built into us, they aren't forced upon us, they're

something we *choose*... and some of us choose exceptionally lousy beliefs.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina offers another lesson about belief systems. Several religious organizations declared that Katrina was divine retribution from their versions of the deity. Environmentalists declared that Katrina was evidence for global warming. Democrats saw massive evidence of government ineptitude, and Republicans saw massive evidence that more money should be given to Halliburton and that the Iraq war should definitely continue. Every group with access to a microphone had their own interpretation of what Katrina meant; that it might have no meaning at all was never publicly considered.

So one man's divine retribution is another man's natural disaster and yet another man's political point and the only difference between all these men is their belief systems.

The title of this show (and book), "Belief Systems & Other B.S.", is taken from the writings of cult philosopher Robert Anton Wilson who has spent much of his life adopting and analyzing various belief systems - that is, he doesn't just *study* belief systems he, um, *believes* them and then gauges the effect of the Belief System on his own happiness. This has led him down some mighty strange roads and Wilson says it's no coincidence that the phrase 'Belief Systems' can be shortened to 'B.S.'

And what are Wilson's conclusions after a lifetime of extreme philosophy? He has distilled them down to a couple of principles, also known as Wilson's Laws:

- 1) Never believe totally in other people's B.S.
- 2) Never believe totally in your *own* B.S.

And I should add a third law for readers - never believe totally in *Belief Systems and Other B.S.*