

**“This I Believe Essays”**  
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## **Tarak McLain: “Thirty Things I Believe”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/57159> (text and audio)

- I believe life is good.
- I believe God is in everything.
- I believe we're all equal.
- I believe we can help people.
- I believe everyone is weird in their own way.
- I believe hate is a cause for love.
- I believe that when I meditate I feel peaceful.
- I believe we should be generous.
- I believe brothers and sisters should be kind to each other.
- I believe kids should respect their parents.
- I believe I should not whine.
- I believe people should wake up early.
- I believe people should go outside more.
- I believe in nature.
- I believe people should use less trees.
- I believe we should help the Arctic and rainforest animals.
- I believe people shouldn't throw litter on the ground.
- I believe people should not smoke.
- I believe God is in good and bad.
- I believe in magic.
- I believe people should not give up.
- I believe love is everywhere.
- I believe that God helps us to have a good time.
- I believe we live best in a community.
- I believe we can protect people in danger.
- I believe we should help the poor.
- I believe it's OK to die but not to kill.
- I believe war should not have started.
- I believe war should stop.
- I believe we can make peace.

***Seven-year old Tarak McLain was born in Thailand and lives with his family in Austin, Texas. He collects and hands out food to the homeless, raises money for orphans and impoverished schools, reads about the world`s religions and listens to public radio.***

## **Alaa El-Saad: “America’s Beauty is in its Diversity”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/42798> (text and audio)

America is built on the idea of freedom, and there is no exception for Muslim women. I believe in the freedom of religion and speech. But mostly, I believe it’s OK to be different, and to stand up for who and what you are. So I believe in wearing the hijab.

The hijab is a religious head covering, like a scarf. I am Muslim and keeping my head covered is a sign of maturity and respect toward my religion and to Allah’s will. To be honest, I also like to wear it to be different. I don’t usually like to do what everyone else is doing. I want to be an individual, not just part of the crowd. But when I first wore it, I was also afraid of the reaction that I’d get at school.

I decided on my own that sixth grade was the time I should start wearing the hijab. I was scared about what the kids would say or even do to me. I thought they might make fun of me, or even be scared of me and pull off my headscarf. Kids at that age usually like to be all the same, and there’s little or no acceptance for being different.

On the first day of school, I put all those negative thoughts behind my back and walked in with my head held high. I was holding my breath a little, but inside I was also proud to be a Muslim, proud to be wearing the hijab, proud to be different.

I was wrong about everything I thought the kids would say or even do to me. I actually met a lot of people because of wearing my head covering. Most of the kids would come and ask me questions—respectfully—about the hijab, and why I wore it.

I did hear some kid was making fun of me, but there was one girl—she wasn’t even in my class, we never really talked much—and she stood up for me, and I wasn’t even there! I made a lot of new friends that year, friends that I still have until this very day, five years later.

Yes, I’m different, but everyone is different here, in one way or another. This is the beauty of America.

I believe in what America is built on: all different religions, races and beliefs. Different everything.

*Fifteen-year-old Alaa El-Saad is a student at John B. Connally High School in Austin, Texas. She hopes to study medicine and become a pediatrician. El-Saad says she wants help children learn to embrace their differences and accept who they are.*

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## **Toya Smith Marshall: “Doing What’s Natural”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/41045> (text and audio)

What I believe is that I am right and beautiful — now, in this moment, in this body, I am right and beautiful. Do you know how hard that is, to believe in my own rightness, in my own beauty? But my greatest desire in life is to be *free* and freedom means that I have to loosen the shackles of others’ expectations and just “be.”

As an outward symbol of my determination to embrace my own personal beauty, I decided to stop straightening my hair and “go natural.” Going natural often seems more simple than it really is. But in the back of my mind, I’ve always known that it’s not that easy. I’ve always known that the very essence of my being is militant. I am the last to cave to authority. I am the first to question. Admit it or not, choosing to rock a natural is still a political statement. For me, that statement is, “I will not let you dictate. I will not concede to your idea of beauty.”

It didn’t go over well with everyone. The only one who accepted me without any backtalk was my daughter and she was a baby. In her innocence, she saw me, and the texture of my hair made no difference. In her eyes, I was beautiful and loved. And I love me this way. I love not having to wonder, “What am I going to do to my hair?” I do nothing to it. I work with it. My hair and me? We’re a team. A wild, nappy, adventurous, rules-be-damned sort of team.

Growing out 18 years of relaxed hair allowed me to get to know myself through getting to know my hair. I realized that my hair is a reflection of who I am. It is stubborn, unyielding — it takes much heat to beat it into submission. It fires right back, even after it’s been subdued. Those little kinks burst right through within a week or two.

At different times in my life, when I’ve made transitions, my hair has transitioned, too. It has gone from long to short; it’s been black, red, brown, and blonde; it’s been straight and now it’s nappy. When I finally reached a point in my life where I was happy and secure in my own being — as a woman, a wife, a mother — I allowed it to do its natural thing.

And my hair and me? I believe we’re the most beautiful we’ve ever been.

*Toya Smith Marshall is a wife, mother, government employee, and makeup artist in Baltimore, Md. She is a member of The Niraja Dance Company and is owner of Makeda Makeup Artistry. Marshall founded and writes the beauty blog [The Life of a Ladybug](#).*

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**Joshua Yuchasz: “We’re All Different In Our Own Ways”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/14338> (text and audio)

What if everyone in the world was exactly alike? What if everyone talked the same, acted the same, listened to the same music, and watched the same T.V. programs?  
The world would be extremely dull! I believe it’s important to accept people for who they are.

Differences are important and they should be respected. For example, many important people throughout history were considered different, such as Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Harriet Tubman, Peter Tchaikovsky, and Abraham Lincoln. They did great things, but some people thought they were weird, because they had strong feelings about something. I can relate to these people, because I’ve been in that situation before, many times.

It all started in elementary school when I realized that I wasn’t like everyone else. My mom says that I have a tendency of obsessing on certain subjects. Unfortunately, these subjects don’t interest other kids my age and they really don’t interest my teachers. In fact, my kindergarten teacher said she would scream if I mentioned snakes or lizards one more time, while she was teaching the days of the week. I would get in trouble for not paying attention, and the teasing began.

In third grade, my teacher informed me that I have Asperger’s Syndrome, and I said, “So what? Do you know that Godzilla’s suit weighs 188 lbs.?:

Later, I asked my mom, “What is Asperger’s Syndrome? Am I gonna die?” She said that it’s like having blinders on, and that I can only see one thing at a time, and that it’s hard to focus on other things. Like, I would tell anyone and everyone that would listen about Godzilla, because my big obsession was, and still is, Godzilla — not a real popular subject with the middle school crowd, and so the teasing continues.

I might be different, because I have different interests than other teenagers, but that doesn’t give them the right to be so mean and cruel to me. Kids at Oak Valley make fun of me for liking what I like the most.

People also make fun of me for knowing facts about volcanoes, whales, tornadoes, and many other scientific things. My mom says that she has been able to answer many questions on Jeopardy just by listening to what I have to say, but I’ve even been ridiculed for being smart.

Maybe someday, I’ll become a gene engineer and create the real Godzilla. I can dream, can’t I?

Sometimes I wish I were like everyone else...but not really. Because I believe people should be respected for being different. Because we’re all different in our own ways.

*Fourteen-year-old Joshua Yuchasz is a high school freshman in Milford, Michigan. He plays in his school’s concert band and on its football team. In addition to Godzilla, Yuchasz likes other reptiles including Bubba, his pet red-tailed boa constrictor.*

**Kamaal Majeed: “Being Content with Myself”**  
<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/10490> (text and audio)

“Why don’t you ‘act black’?”

Since my middle school years, I’ve been asked this question more than any other. It seems to me that too many people have let society program into their brains what should be expected of me, a black person, before ever interacting with me. But I believe in being who I am, not who others want me to be.

On my first day of high school, going into math class, Two of my classmates pointed and laughed at me. I initially thought my fly was open, or that something was stuck in my teeth. But as I took my seat, I heard one of the students whisper, “Why is a black person taking Honors?” So my fly wasn’t open. An honors level class had simply been joined by a student whose skin was an unsettling shade of brown.

Many people think my clothes should be big enough for me to live in. or expect me to listen exclusively to “black music.” In seventh grade, a group of my peers fixed their cold stares on my outfit: cargo shorts and a plain, fitting t-shirt. They called out to me, “Go get some ‘gangsta’ clothes, white boy.”

In one of my Spanish classes, as part of a review exercise, the teacher asked me, “¿Te gusta más la música de rap o rock?” “Do you like rap music or rock music more?” I replied, “La música de rock.” The look of shock on my classmates’ faces made me feel profoundly alienated.

I am now in my junior year of high school. I still take all Honors courses. My wardrobe still consists solely of clothes that are appropriate to my proportions. My music library spans from rock to pop to techno, and almost everything in between. When it comes to choosing my friends, I am still colorblind. I continue to do my best work in school in order to reach my goals; and yet, when I look in the mirror, I still see skin of that same shade of brown.

My skin color has done nothing to change my personality, and my personality has done nothing to change my skin color.

I believe in being myself. I believe that I – not any stereotype – should define who I am and what actions I take in life. In high school, popularity often depends on your willingness to follow trends. And I’ve been told that it doesn’t get much easier going into adulthood. But the only other option is to sacrifice my individuality for the satisfaction and approval of others. Sure, this can be appealing, since choosing to keep my self-respect intact has made me unpopular and disliked at times, with no end to that in sight. Others’ being content with me, though, is not nearly as important as my being content with myself.

*Kamaal Majeed is a high school student in Waltham, Mass. In addition to his studies, he works part-time at the local public library, and enjoys studying foreign languages and writing a personal journal. Majeed hopes to pursue a career in journalism.*

## **Yo-Yo Ma: “A Musician of Many Cultures”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/41282> (text and audio)

I believe in the infinite variety of human expression.

I grew up in three cultures: I was born in Paris, my parents were from China, and I was brought up mostly in America. When I was young, this was very confusing: Everyone said that their culture was best, but I knew they couldn't all be right. I felt that there was an expectation that I would choose to be Chinese or French or American. For many years I bounced among the three, trying on each but never being wholly comfortable. I hoped I wouldn't have to choose, but I didn't know what that meant and how exactly to “not choose.”

However, the process of trying on each culture taught me something. As I struggled to belong, I came to understand what made each one unique. At that point, I realized that I didn't need to choose one culture to the exclusion of another, but instead I could choose from all three. The values I selected would become part of who I was, but no one culture needed to win. I could honor the cultural depth and longevity of my Chinese heritage, while feeling just as passionate about the deep artistic traditions of the French and the American commitment to opportunity and the future.

So, rather than settling on any one of the cultures in which I grew up, I now choose to explore many more cultures and find elements to love in each. Every day I make an effort to go toward what I don't understand. This wandering leads to the accidental learning that continually shapes my life.

As I work in music today, I try to implement this idea — that the music I play, like me, doesn't belong to only one culture. In recent years, I have explored many musical traditions. Along the way, I have met musicians who share a belief in the creative power that exists at the intersection of cultures. These musicians have generously become my guides to their traditions. Thanks to them and their music I have found new meaning in my own music making.

It is extraordinary the way people, music, and cultures develop. The paths and experiences that guide them are unpredictable. Shaped by our families, neighborhoods, cultures, and countries, each of us ultimately goes through this process of incorporating what we learn with who we are and who we seek to become. As we struggle to find our individual voices, I believe we must look beyond the voice we've been assigned and find our place among the tones and timbre of human expression.

*Yo-Yo Ma created the Silk Road Project in 1998 to explore the cultural traditions of the countries along the ancient trade route through Asia. A cello player since age four, Ma has won 15 Grammy Awards. He lives with his family in Cambridge, Mass.*

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**Stephanie Disney: "Seeing with the Heart"**  
<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/1000> (text and audio)

Looking at my daughter, the clerk behind the counter asks, "What is she?" Since this is not the first time I have heard this question, the stored up, smart-aleck answers swirl through my mind. Instead, understanding that I am my daughter's role model for handling life issues, I stifle the negativity and respond, "She's beautiful, and smart, and well-behaved, too."

The clerk says, "Oh," and glances at me, wondering if I just didn't understand the question, and I smile because I understood the question right away, but I am only just now beginning to understand the real answer: that family is defined by bonds much deeper than birth, or skin color, or genetics. Like anyone lucky enough to experience "found" love, I believe that family is defined only by the heart.

I met my daughter, Rudy, while working as an audiologist at the Commission for Children with Special Health Care Needs. She was a small, quiet, non-communicative two-and-a-half-year-old — and my heart recognized her immediately.

I am the whitest of white women and my daughter is some indefinable combination of all that is beautiful from at least three races: curly dark hair, petite features, freckles, a golden tan skin tone, one blue eye and one brown. If her race had only one name it would be perfection.

My daughter and I share so much in common, it never occurs to me that others may not see us as a family. That's why I was startled the first time a stranger inquired about my daughter's race and our relationship. I had forgotten that we didn't look alike. The next time I was asked, I politely explained that we are mother and daughter and that Rudy's race is unknown. The twentieth time somebody asked about my daughter's race and our relationship, I explained why the questions were inappropriate. The fortieth time someone asked, I just pretended not hear.

Now, after much time to reflect about the purpose of these questions, I understand. I understand that everyone wants love and acceptance. And these are such rare gifts, that when people see them freely demonstrated, they are compelled to seek the source.

Recently, Rudy surprised me when a white-haired lady, standing right beside us, asked if I was her mother. Rudy threw the lady a disbelieving glance and said, "Well, she helps me with multiplication, fixes my hair, kisses me, and we both have freckles on our noses — who else could she be?"

When Rudy asks me to explain why people need to ask questions like that, I tell her not to worry, it's the answers that really matter. The questions of race and family can be complicated to be sure, but I believe all of the answers can be found by seeing people first with the heart.

*Clinical audiologist Stephanie Disney has led hearing screening programs for newborns and has served adults with mental disabilities and children with special health care needs. Disney lives with her husband and two children in Louisville, Ky.*

**Cecile Gilmer: “The People Who Love You When No One Else Will”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/7154> (text and audio)

I believe that families are not only blood relatives, but sometimes just people that show up and love you when no one else will.

In May 1977, I lived in a Howard Johnson’s motel off of Interstate 10 in Houston. My dad and I shared a room with two double beds and a bathroom way too small for a modest 15-year-old girl and her father. Dad’s second marriage was in trouble and my stepmother had kicked us both out of the house the previous week. Dad had no idea what to do with me. And that’s when my other family showed up.

Barbara and Roland Beach took me into their home because their only daughter, Su, my best friend, asked them to. I lived with them for the next seven years.

Barb starched my drill team skirts same as Su’s. She made sure I had lunch money, doctors’ appointments, help with homework, Jordache jeans, puka shell necklaces and nightly hugs. Barbara and Roland attended every football game where Su and I marched, every drama performance I was in even when I had no speaking lines. As far as I could tell, for the Beaches, there was no difference between Su and me: I was their daughter, too.

When Su and I left for rival colleges, they kept my room the same for the entire four years I attended school. Recently, Barb presented me with an insurance policy they bought when I first moved in with them and had continued to pay on for 23 years.

The Beaches knew all about me when they took me in. When I was seven, my mother died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound and from then on my father relied on other people to raise his kids. By the time I went to live with the Beaches, I believed that life was entirely unfair and that love was tenuous and untrustworthy. I believed that the only person who would take care of me was me.

Without the Beaches, I would have become a bitter, cynical woman. They gave me a home that allowed me to grow and change. They kept me from being paralyzed by my past, and gave me the confidence to open my heart.

I believe in family. For me, it wasn’t the family that was there on the day I was born, but the one that was there for me when I was living in a Howard Johnson’s on Interstate 10.

*Cecile Gilmer has moved 26 times since her birth in San Antonio in 1962. She now lives with her cat and dog in Logan, Utah, where she is an events planner. Gilmer is still close to her friends Su and the Beaches, having recently joined them for a family reunion.*

## **Janet Jayne: “The Blessings of Step”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/44831/> (text only)

For most of my life, I've been a step. I'm a stepdaughter. I'm a stepmother. I'm also a stepsister, though I've never lived with my stepsiblings.

Step relationships happen as a result of significant changes within families. Divorce. Death. But then, love transforms. Mom or Dad finds love again and we get—for better or worse—a stepparent in the deal. And they get us, for better or worse as well.

My stepfather got me when I was an incorrigible adolescent. He missed out on whatever cute/endering phases I may have had and landed smack in the middle of my moody/surly teenage years. Our relationship survived because he loved my mother, and even though he had six children of his own, he loved my mother's children, too. His heart was, and is, big enough for all of us. Somehow, I had the good sense to meet him halfway.

It delights my mother that her beloved husband, to whom I am not officially related, is one of my favorite people on earth. My stepfather now lives in a nursing home. When I visit him, his caretakers say, “Oh, you must be Bruce's daughter!” I say, “Yes,” and do not qualify; not stepdaughter, not stepfather. Our love for each other goes beyond the “step.”

“Step” is how we describe a person we're related to because someone we're related to married him or her. But being a step is really about being a part of an ever-widening circle of connection. Families within families; layers are added as relationships grow and change. It is through this gift of overlapping layers of families—past, present, and future—that I believe in the blessings of “step.”

Now I'm part of another stepfamily. The stepchildren that I acquired were already grown when I met and fell in love with their father over a decade ago. I didn't know the joys and difficulties of raising them, but our connection to one another forms another branch on my rambling family tree.

Of course, stepping is often complicated. Being a step-something sometimes feels more fragmented than familial. My two stepsons experienced the tensions of loyalties divided, and although my husband and their mother had been divorced for many years, my relationship with their father served as a catalyst. Lingering misunderstandings and unresolved anger bubbled up and burst forth. It was not fun. These are strains that many stepfamilies know well.

But I believe that successful step relationships are possible through the acknowledgement of mutual love. My stepchildren may not know me very well, but they know that I love their father, and they love their father, too. So I must be okay.

We recently celebrated my oldest stepson's wedding, where both the bride and the groom have four parents each—moms and dads and stepmoms and stepdads—and it took forever to get the family pictures taken. But as we all stood together, arms around one another and beaming, we formed another overlapping circle of love in a chaotic world.

I believe that we “steps” are lucky because we have so many people to call family. I have more people to love, and more people to love me. And in this world, we need all the love we can get, even when it comes in steps.

*Although Janet Jayne's beloved stepfather died before this book was published, he was known to carry a copy of her essay around in his pocket. Ms. Jayne now shares a home and a garden with her husband and an assortment of cherished pets in the Appalachian Mountains of southwestern Virginia.*

**Brighton Earley: “Finding the Flexibility to Survive”**  
<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/31840> (text and audio)

Every Friday night the cashier at the Chevron gas station food mart on Eagle Rock Boulevard and Avenue 40 offers us a discount on all the leftover apples and bananas. To ensure the best selection possible, my mother and I pile into our 20-year-old car and pull up to the food mart at 5 p.m. on the dot, ready to get our share of slightly overripe fruits.

Before the times of the Chevron food mart, there were the times of the calculator. My mother would carefully prop it up in the cart’s child seat and frown as she entered each price. Since the first days of the calculator’s appearance, the worry lines in my mother’s face have only grown deeper. Today, they are a permanent fixture.

Chevron shopping started like this: One day my mother suddenly realized that she had maxed out almost every credit card, and we needed groceries for the week. The only credit card she hadn’t maxed out was the Chevron card and the station on Eagle Rock Boulevard has a pretty big mart attached to it.

Since our first visit there, I’ve learned to believe in flexibility. In my life, it has become necessary to bend the idea of grocery shopping. My mother and I can no longer shop at real grocery stores, but we still get the necessities.

Grocery shopping at Chevron has its drawbacks. The worst is when we have so many items that it takes the checker what seems like hours to ring up everything. A line of anxious customers forms behind us. It’s that line that hurts the most — the way they look at us. My mother never notices — or maybe she pretends not to.

I never need to be asked to help the checker bag all the items. No one wants to get out of there faster than I do. I’m embarrassed to shop there, and I’m deathly afraid of running into someone I know. I once expressed my fear of being seen shopping at Chevron to my mother and her eyes shone with disappointment. I know that I hurt her feelings when I try to evade our weekly shopping trips.

And that is why I hold on to the idea of flexibility so tightly. I believe that being flexible keeps me going — keeps me from being ashamed of the way my family is different from other families. Whenever I feel the heat rise to my face, I remind myself that grocery shopping at a gas station is just a twist on the normal kind of grocery shopping. I remind myself that we won’t always have to shop at Chevron — that just because at this point in my life I am struggling does not mean that I will always struggle. My belief in flexibility helps me get through the difficult times because I know that no matter what happens, my mother and I will always figure out a way to survive.

*Brighton Earley is a senior at Immaculate Heart High School in Los Angeles. She is editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, and founder and editor of a student literary/arts magazine. She will attend the University of California, Berkeley this fall.*

## **Juliet Frerking: “A Drive to Achieve the Extraordinary”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/34055> (text and audio)

I believe in the challenge to accomplish something out of the ordinary. I have to confess I acquired this belief from the “Guinness Book of World Records.” That book showed me the value of equal opportunity and competition. It proved to me, early on, that I could rise above anonymity and achieve remarkable things.

When I was nine, I used to huddle in the back of the library with my friend Leanne and we’d turn the 1991 edition of the “Guinness Book” pages with purple hands sticky from raspberry Laffy Taffy. Reassured by Mrs. Balanoff, our third grade teacher, that we could be anything when we grew up, we felt challenged by 320 pages of incredible feats. And so with the obsessive focus of nine-year-olds, we assumed the daily task of finding our place in the universe.

The “Guinness Book of World Records” taught me to believe in the accessibility of the improbable. I was captured by the little bit of fame conferred by inclusion in that book: the fastest, the longest, the widest, the most — whatever you can imagine. It opened up the possibility of what I might be able to do.

I was attracted to the lure of the unusual. How long would it take to grow my fingernails to beat a record for a total of 14-feet, six inches? I bet our teachers never thought the equation “ $d = rt$ ” would be used to figure that one out, or that we would be tempted to research everything about Namibia, because it was home of the world’s fastest caterpillar. Leanne settled on holding her breath for the longest time, and I decided to make the world’s largest cookie. Thus, Leanne joined the swim team, and I gained ten pounds.

The “Guinness Book of World Records” taught me tenacity and perseverance and, more importantly, the desire to do something unexpected. So many people in the book were mocked by family and friends for what they were doing, yet they did it. I see them as success stories — the normal people who did something extraordinary.

In college, I decided to study Arabic before September 11th. I am not Muslim or of Arab decent; I am a Southern Baptist girl from Texas. Enticed by the sounds of elongated alifs and lams, I fell in love with the complexity of the language and the beauty of its slanting script. After graduation, to put my skills to use, I moved to Cairo, and then to Tunisia, where I just finished working with divorced women.

I am not saving the world, I am not the best at what I do, but I am only 24 — there’s still time. The “Guinness Book of World Records” helped give me new perspective on the impossible and instilled in me the desire to try something unconventional. I believe in making the implausible a reality, and I hope to someday break a few records myself.

*Juliet Frerking graduated from Stanford University in 2005 with honors in International Relations and a minor in Arabic language. Last year she conducted research in Tunisia under a Fulbright Fellowship. Frerking currently lives in New York City.*

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## Tony Hawk “Do What You Love”

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/22870> (text and audio)

I believe that people should take pride in what they do, even if it is scorned or misunderstood by the public at large.

I have been a professional skateboarder for 24 years. For much of that time, the activity that paid my rent and gave me my greatest joy was tagged with many labels, most of which were ugly. It was a kids’ fad, a waste of time, a dangerous pursuit, a crime.

When I was about 17, three years after I turned pro, my high school “careers” teacher scolded me in front of the entire class about jumping ahead in my workbook. He told me that I would never make it in the workplace if I didn’t follow directions explicitly. He said I’d never make a living as a skateboarder, so it seemed to him that my future was bleak.

Even during those dark years, I never stopped riding my skateboard and never stopped progressing as a skater. There have been many, many times when I’ve been frustrated because I can’t land a maneuver. I’ve come to realize that the only way to master something is to keep it at — despite the bloody knees, despite the twisted ankles, despite the mocking crowds.

Skateboarding has gained mainstream recognition in recent years, but it still has negative stereotypes. The pro skaters I know are responsible members of society. Many of them are fathers, homeowners, world travelers and successful entrepreneurs. Their hairdos and tattoos are simply part of our culture, even when they raise eyebrows during PTA meetings.

So here I am, 38 years old, a husband and father of three, with a lengthy list of responsibilities and obligations. And although I have many job titles — CEO, Executive Producer, Senior Consultant, Foundation Chairman, Bad Actor — the one I am most proud of is “Professional Skateboarder.” It’s the one I write on surveys and customs forms, even though I often end up in a secondary security checkpoint.

My youngest son’s pre-school class was recently asked what their dads do for work. The responses were things like, “My dad sells money” and “My dad figures stuff out.” My son said, “I’ve never seen my dad do work.”

It’s true. Skateboarding doesn’t seem like real work, but I’m proud of what I do. My parents never once questioned the practicality behind my passion, even when I had to scrape together gas money and regarded dinner at Taco Bell as a big night out.

I hope to pass on the same lesson to my children someday. Find the thing you love. My oldest son is an avid skater and he’s really gifted for a 13-year-old, but there’s a lot of pressure on him. He used to skate for endorsements, but now he brushes all that stuff aside. He just skates for fun and that’s good enough for me.

You might not make it to the top, but if you are doing what you love, there is much more happiness there than being rich or famous

*Tony Hawk got his first skateboard when he was nine years old. Five years later, he turned pro. Hawk’s autobiography and video games have been best-sellers, while his foundation has funded skate-park construction in low-income communities across America.*

## **William Wisseman: “Accomplishing Big Things in Small Pieces”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/39318> (text and audio)

I carry a Rubik’s Cube in my backpack. Solving it quickly is a terrific conversation starter and surprisingly impressive to girls. I’ve been asked to solve the cube on the New York City subway, at a track meet in Westchester and at a café in Paris. I usually ask people to try it first. They turn the cube over in their hands, half-heartedly they make a few moves and then sheepishly hand it back. They don’t even know where to begin. That’s exactly what it was like for me to learn how to read. Letters and words were scrambled and out of sequence. Nothing made sense because I’m dyslexic.

Solving the Rubik’s Cube has made me believe that sometimes you have to take a few steps back to move forward. This was a mirror of my own life when I had to leave public school after the fourth grade. It’s embarrassing to admit, but I still couldn’t consistently spell my full name correctly.

As a fifth-grader at a new school, specializing in what’s called language processing disorder, I had to start over. Memorizing symbols for letters, I learned the pieces of the puzzle of language, the phonemes that make up words. I spent the next four years learning how to learn and finding strategies that allowed me to return to my district’s high school with the ability to communicate my ideas and express my intelligence. It took me four weeks to teach myself to solve the cube — the same amount of time it took the inventor, Erno Rubik. Now, I can easily solve the 3×3×3, and the 4×4×4, and the Professor’s Cube, the 5×5×5. I discovered that just before it solves, a problem can look like a mess, and then suddenly you can find the solution. I believe that progress comes in unexpected leaps.

Early in my Rubik’s career, I became so frustrated that I took the cube apart and rebuilt it. I believe that sometimes you have to look deeper and in unexpected places to find answers. I noticed that I can talk or focus on other things and still solve the cube. There must be an independent part of my brain at work, able to process information.

The Rubik’s cube taught me that to accomplish something big, it helps to break it down into small pieces. I learned that it’s important to spend a lot of time thinking, to try to find connections and patterns. I believe that there are surprises around the corner. And, that the Rubik’s cube and I, we are more than the sum of our parts.

Like a difficult text or sometimes like life itself, the Rubik’s Cube can be a frustrating puzzle. So I carry a cube in my backpack as a reminder that I can attain my goals, no matter what obstacles I face.

And did I mention that being able to solve the cube is surprisingly impressive to girls?

*William Wissemann was raised in Hastings-on-Hudson, NY. A freshman at Bard College, he is studying economics, computer science and photography. When not at school, Wissemann lives with his mother and younger sister.*

## **Dan Tani: “An Optimistic View of the World”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/40806> (text and audio)

Like many people, I have a job that requires me to take a business trip every now and then. I'm on one right now. As I write this, I'm flying over New Zealand; it looks so beautiful out the window. Unlike most people, however, I'm traveling over 200 miles above the Earth, and I'm going 17,500 miles an hour.

When I look down, I am stunned by the intense colors of the Earth, the intricate patterns and textures, and sheer beauty of our home planet. When I watch the Earth roll by, I realize I believe in optimism.

It would be hard to believe that there is no hope for Earth from up here. The International Space Station is a collaboration of 16 nations — and one of our primary partners was our sworn enemy only a few decades ago. The space station itself is the embodiment of where we can go as a global society.

My own optimism is rooted in two very different ideas: statistical probability and trust. First, I accept the statistical probability that I am not likely to be killed by a terrorist or contract some horrible disease. It's not that I think that everything will work out okay; it's that I think that everything will probably work out okay.

And second, trust. I learned trust from my mother, and in a way this essay is for her. Two months ago, while I was up here, she died in an accident and of course I have been unable to return to honor her. I have been thinking about her life, which was not an easy one. She was born into poverty, forcibly relocated during World War II, survived the premature deaths of her husband and a son — and yet, her outlook was so life-affirming. She felt that people were good and well-meaning. Sometimes I felt that she trusted too easily, and I was afraid that that stranger she talked to on the street or the airplane might not be as nice as she thought. But I was almost always proven wrong, and I'm so grateful for her example.

I came to believe, like her, that most people want to live their lives without conflict. They care about the other people in their house, their neighborhood, their country, and their planet.

I am an astronaut, and I cannot imagine doing what I'm doing, seeing what I'm seeing, and not being an optimist. We climb aboard extremely complex machines which hurl us into space, and we have to trust that every engineer, every technician, and every manager has done their job, and that we have a high statistical probability of success.

And once we are here, we get to look back and see the Earth as a thing of stunning beauty. Of course, I know there are awful things going on down there, that people are in pain, wars are raging, poverty and hunger are taking far too many lives — but from here, I can only see the whole.

I wish that everyone could see the world from my perspective; I believe that more people would be optimistic about our future.

*Dan Tani served as flight engineer on the International Space Station where he conducted four space walks. He joined NASA as an astronaut candidate in 1996. Tani was raised in Lombard, Ill., by his mother, and now lives with his wife and children in Houston.*

## Howard White: "The Power of Hello"

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/48202> (text and audio)

I work at a company where there are about a gazillion employees. I can't say that I know them all by name, but I know my fair share of them. I think that almost all of them know me. I'd say that's the reason I've been able to go wherever it is I've made it to in this world. It's all based on one simple principle: I believe every single person deserves to be acknowledged, however small or simple the greeting.

When I was about 10 years old, I was walking down the street with my mother. She stopped to speak to Mr. Lee. I was busy trying to bulls-eye the "O" in the stop sign with a rock. I knew I could see Mr. Lee any old time around the neighborhood, so I didn't pay any attention to him. After we passed Mr. Lee my mother stopped me and said something that has stuck with me from that day until now. She said, "You let that be the last time you ever walk by somebody and not open up your mouth to speak, because even a dog can wag its tail when it passes you on the street." That phrase sounds simple but it's been a guidepost for me and the foundation of who I am.

When you write an essay like this you look in the mirror and see who you are and what makes up your character. I realized mine was cemented that day when I was 10 years old. Even then, I started to see that when I spoke to someone, they spoke back. And that felt good.

It's not just something I believe in; it's become a way of life. I believe that every person deserves to feel someone acknowledge their presence, no matter how humble they may be or even how important.

At work, I always used to say hello to the founder of the company and ask him how our business was doing. But I was also speaking to the people in the cafe and the people that cleaned the buildings, and asked how their children were doing. I remembered after a few years of passing by the founder, I had the courage to ask him for a meeting. We had a great talk. At a certain point I asked him how far he thought I could go in his company. He said, "If you want to, you can get all the way to this seat."

I've become vice president but that hasn't changed the way I approach people. I still follow my mother's advice. I speak to everyone I see, no matter where I am. I've learned that speaking to people creates a pathway into their world, and it lets them come into mine, too.

The day you speak to someone that has their head held down and when they lift it up and smile, you realize how powerful it is just to open your mouth and say, "Hello."

*Former University of Maryland point guard Howard White is vice president of Jordan Brand at Nike. He founded Believe to Achieve, Nike's motivational program for youth, and wrote a book by the same name. White lives with his family in Lake Oswego, Ore.*

**Maria Zapetis: “The Time to Help is Now”**  
<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/43395> (text and audio)

Last year my beliefs changed.

Until last summer I had a very comfortable life: winter vacations skiing and summer cruises. My parents spent a lot of money on a private prep school, so they could get me into a competitive middle school, followed by the uber-expensive high school. Everything was about tomorrow, next year, my graduation. We never had to worry about today.

Before last summer I never thought much about the people in the world who live day to day, every day, whose lives are controlled by poverty and hunger. Then I enrolled in a two-week intensive program sponsored by Heifer International. We lived in a “Tribal Village,” in a hot, dry open grassland in Arkansas. I know it was only a simulation, that I could go back to my regular life, but the experience gave birth to a belief in helping others. Today.

I am a tribal member in Mozambique. Every meal, I make the fire for my family, and feel the flames lick up my nostrils as I blow to keep the fuel alive. I cook mush with vegetables. This is all my family is ever given.

I feed the hen and three rabbits their dinner. I grow attached to the rabbits, even though I know I shouldn't. I name them.

We are living in a house that feels like an oven with no air conditioning like I am used to, and even though water is available, everyone is too hot and tired to move. I go to the kitchen — an area of dirt floor — to make the fire for breakfast. Again I stir and eat the same unfulfilling mush. It's a bad dream, over and over and over again. My lungs fill up with smoke, ash blocks my vision, and I can almost see through the eyes of people who really live like this every single day with no hope for change.

I'm not getting enough to eat; it's time to decide whether or not to kill the rabbits. I feel pain but it's a privileged child's pain because I know I will soon be eating again. That's not true for a lot of other children around the world.

Growing up comfortably in the U.S., I've never had to worry about my dinner, and even though this whole process was only a simulation, it changed my life. Now I believe in doing whatever I can to help find practical ways to defeat hunger. Today.

So I've become president of Roots and Shoots, a group working to improve local environments for people and animals. I'm also working to create a program at my high school called the “Safe Passage” trip, to help young people in the Guatemala City dump. And I've got plans to do more.

If I ever feel lethargic, I remember laboring in the hot sun and think of the millions who still do. Now, I try to live for today and stop worrying so much about the future. When I eat or feel full, I am grateful for this fortunate life and want to extend the same feeling to others.

I believe in offering help to those who need it. Right now.

*Maria Zapetis is a senior at Miami Country Day School in Miami, Fla. In addition to her school activities and theatrical productions, Maria works to fight poverty and hunger in her community and around the world.*

# “This I Believe” Essay Follow-ups (arranged by topic)

## BEING YOURSELF:

**Alaa El-Saad: “America’s Beauty is in its Diversity”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/42798> (text and audio)

**Toya Smith Marshall: “Doing What’s Natural”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/41045> (text and audio)

**Joshua Yuchasz: “We’re All Different In Our Own Ways”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/14338> (text and audio)

Who are you? What makes you interesting or unique? Write about a special quality you have, and how you developed it. How do others respond to your special quality? What have you learned from this uniqueness? What belief do you form from it?

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## STEREOTYPES:

**Kamaal Majeed: “Being Content with Myself”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/10490> (text and audio)

List stereotypes people might have about you. The stereotype might be based on race, gender, age, hair color, clothing style, activities, name, etc.

Then write in detail about one of those stereotypes. Include:

- what the stereotype is
  - your experience(s) hearing the stereotype made about you (if applicable)
  - why you think that stereotype is associated with you
  - what parts (if any) of the stereotype are true for you
  - how you feel about the stereotype
  - what belief you form from your experiences
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## CULTURE

**Yo-Yo Ma: “A Musician of Many Cultures”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/41282> (text and audio)

What do you consider your culture? What does it mean to be part of your culture? What attitudes do you have toward your culture and how are they similar to/different from what others might think? What have you learned from your culture? What belief does this lead you to form?

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## FAMILY:

**Stephanie Disney: “Seeing with the Heart”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/1000> (text and audio)

**Cecile Gilmer: “The People Who Love You When No One Else Will”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/7154> (text and audio)

**Janet Jayne: “The Blessings of Step”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/44831/> (text only)

What do you believe about family? Your belief might be about who makes up a family, like Stephanie Disney, Cecile Gilmer and Janet Jayne write about. It might be about qualities a family should have. It might be about something your family does together or teaches you. State your belief, then give specific examples to support it.

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## ADAPTING:

**Brighton Earley: “Finding the Flexibility to Survive”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/31840> (text and audio)

What is something unexpected you’ve had to adjust to? What were the circumstance that brought about the change? How did you react—immediately and over time? What did you learn from the experience? What does this experience lead you to believe?

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## CHALLENGE:

**Juliet Frerking: “A Drive to Achieve the Extraordinary”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/34055> (text and audio)

**Tony Hawk “Do What You Love”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/22870> (text and audio)

**William Wisseman: “Accomplishing Big Things in Small Pieces”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/39318> (text and audio)

What have you had to work hard to achieve? What is your motivation for that work? What does it involve? How does working hard and accomplishing something make you feel? What have you learned from this experience? What does this experience lead you to believe?

## **OR**

Write about a time when you tried to achieve something and failed. What was it? Why did you want to do this? What challenged you? What did you learn about yourself from this experience? What belief(s) can you form from this experience?

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## **OPTIMISM and PESSIMISM:**

**Dan Tani: “An Optimistic View of the World”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/40806> (text and audio)

Are you an optimist or a pessimist? What makes you have the outlook you do? How do you feel about it? How do you adjust for when things work out opposite from what you expected? What belief can you form from your experiences?

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## **BEING A BETTER PERSON:**

**Howard White: “The Power of Hello”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/48202> (text and audio)

**Maria Zapetis: “The Time to Help is Now”**

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/43395> (text and audio)

*What is something you try to do every day that makes you a better person? What is something you do regularly to help others? Choose one of these questions above to write about. Tell about the background of your actions. Give specific examples. Explain your thinking about the actions--why do you do what you do and how does it make you feel? Also specify a belief that comes from this experience.*