

# Airing Beliefs: National Public Radio's "This I Believe" Show, Past and Present

by Alexis Burling

*"We hardly need to be reminded that we are living in an age of confusion – a lot of us have traded in our beliefs for bitterness and cynicism or for a heavy package of despair, or even a quivering portion of hysteria. Opinions can be picked up cheap in the market place while such commodities as courage and fortitude and faith are in alarmingly short supply...What truths can a human being afford to furnish the cluttered nervous room of his mind with, when he has no real idea how long a lease he has on his future?"*

Edward R. Murrow, 1951

**1951** or 2005? Taken from the original broadcast in 1951 of National Public Radio's daily program *This I Believe*, the quote cited above could just as easily have been excerpted from an essay in this week's edition of *The New Yorker*. The alarming reality is that after a brief period of growth, economic prosperity, and relative peace within our borders, post-9/11 America feels frighteningly similar to the Cold War America of 50 years ago that was dominated by fear (nuclear war), distrust (McCarthyism), inequality (racial, gender, economic) and religious intolerance. In 2005, despite the rapid advances in science, technology, and access to information, we are still grappling with many of the same questions and problems we faced then. In fact, we are still searching for a core set of beliefs to stand behind when defining ourselves both collectively, as members of a supposedly free and democratic nation, and individually, as thinking, feeling, breathing human beings.

The act of creating and sticking to a belief system is no easy task. Harder still is maintaining these convictions while also allowing others to build and share their own set of ideals, whether or not they match one's own. Today's hustle-bustle society often pushes for immediate gratification and success, and often downplays the significance of feelings, commitment, and ethics. It is therefore crucial to find forums where open discussions about moral codes are championed and honest, varying opinions are welcome.

**THE HISTORY OF THIS I BELIEVE** In 1951, radio pioneer and eminent journalist Edward R. Murrow attempted to create just such a forum, in which people from all walks of life could participate. With the help of advertising executive Ward Wheelock, CBS President William S. Paley, and General Manager of WCAU radio in Philadelphia Donald Thornburgh, Murrow put together a daily radio program that would broadcast people's beliefs to anyone who would listen. Politicians and poets were asked to send in their thoughts, as were factory workers and homemakers. People with opposing political views were welcome to contribute, as were those of disparate faiths and religions. The goal of the series was to present a snapshot of a diverse and hopeful America – a picture that would serve as an inspiration to people and countries the world over. This program was called *This I Believe*.

For four years, *This I Believe* continued to air compelling five-minute essays from people both famous and unknown.

President Harry S. Truman, Eleanor Roosevelt, baseball star Jackie Robinson, physicist and scientist Albert Einstein, and author/activist Helen Keller all participated. At the height of the program, 39 million listeners tuned in and 85 national newspapers ran weekly columns based on the show. In 1952, an anthology of these recordings was published by Simon & Schuster that sold 300,000 copies – the second most popular book that year aside from the Bible. Eventually, the series was translated and broadcast globally through the BBC and Voice of America. In its four-year life span, *This I Believe* had become an international, larger-than-life phenomenon that changed the lives of millions of people.

Sadly, in 1955 Ward Wheelock died in a tragic boat accident off the Bermuda coast while vacationing there with his family. Wheelock provided most of the financial support for the program, and neither his company nor CBS could sufficiently fund *This I Believe* after his death and the series had to be pulled from the airwaves.

**THE REVIVAL OF THIS I BELIEVE** Fifty years later, however, two prominent radio producers decided it was time to resurrect the project. After a few years spent brainstorming, working out kinks, and drumming up funding from organizations such as the Farmers Insurance Group, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, long-time friends and collaborators Dan Gediman and Jay Allison brought their proposal to NPR. Because Gediman and Allison are two of the most widely respected veterans in radio and are both contributors to a multitude of NPR and Public Radio International programs such as *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, and *This American Life*, the new version of *This I Believe* had little trouble being picked up by the national public broadcasting organization.

On April 4, 2005, the first segment of *This I Believe* in half a century was heard on public radio stations nationwide, showcasing novelist Isabel Allende's essay entitled "In Giving I Connect with Others." Although modeled

after the original, the new version of *This I Believe* differs from its predecessor in a few minor respects. The new version airs weekly instead of daily, and is integrated into already established programs, *Morning Edition* or *All Things Considered*, airing every Monday on both shows. The essays solicited and read are slightly shorter in length at three minutes instead of five, and all material heard on the program, as well as photographs of each essayist taken by renowned photographer Nubar Alexanian, can be viewed and downloaded at [www.thisibelieve.org](http://www.thisibelieve.org).

According to Allison, "there will be people from the right or the left or from the north

*"I believe in questionings, doubtings, searchings, skepticism, and I discredit credulity or blind faith. The progress of man is based on disbelief of the commonly accepted."*

Writer and Folklorist J. Frank Dobie, "Whatever Makes Me Feel Big," 1953

WHAT DO THEY BELIEVE? – Essay Excerpts from the 1950s and Today

or the south...whatever it is...the coasts or the heartland" contributing to the show. Celebrities as well as run-of-the-mill citizens are welcome to submit essays to the program and each week an essay is selected by members of Allison's Atlantic Public Media staff, read aloud by its author and posted on the NPR website.

Expected 2005 contributors include former President Bill Clinton, writer and activist Gloria Steinem, author Jamaica Kincaid, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Dr. Anthony Fauci, and heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, as well as everyday people from all over the country.

Apart from the actual content of the project, Allison and Gediman hope to extend *This I Believe* far beyond the radio waves and past the initial year contract they've been given. "As long as people are responding to it, we'll just keep building it. Why not? It's a great thing," says Allison. For starters, they hope to garner enough listeners and support to warrant another year or two of on-air programming. "We're just starting," Allison says. "Everything's been a projection and an idea that this made sense to do. A lot of it will really depend on whether people are game, whether they'll respond, whether they're willing to listen without judgment, whether they're willing to just see if they might hear something that surprises them from someone they thought they hated."

Through grassroots outreach and marketing, the pair of producers also hopes to inspire newspapers and magazines to adopt columns

derived from the show, much like they did in the 50s, as well as prompt publishers to bid for a new collection of anthologies based around the 2005 essays.

Lastly, they are searching for fresh, ingenious ways to introduce the program to young people by targeting schools and universities for submissions, as well as libraries, bookstores, and other

*"A person believes various things at various times, even on the same day. At the age of 73, I seem most instinctively to believe in the human value of creative writing, whether in the form of verse or fiction, as a mode of truth-telling, self-expression and homage to the twin miracles of creation and consciousness."*

Author John Updike, "Testing the Limits of What I Know and Feel," April 18, 2005

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Helen Keller, "The Light of a Brighter Day," 1951

“It is Helen Keller who salutes you. You are not familiar with my voice, but my friend Polly Thomson will interpret the belief I have written from my soul. I choose for my subject faith wrought into life apart from creed or dogma. By faith, I mean a vision of good one cherishes and the enthusiasm that pushes one to seek its fulfillment, regardless of obstacles. Faith is a dynamic power that breaks the chain of routine, and gives a new, fine turn to old commonplaces. Faith reinvigorates the will, enriches the affections, and awakens a sense of creativeness. Active faith knows no fear, and it is a safeguard to me against cynicism and despair.”

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organizations that may be helpful in getting the word out. “We want to try to get as many different voices out there as possible by letting people speak for themselves and getting other people to listen,” says Allison. “That’s basically been the through line to all of my work and has been for 20 years. When you hear somebody’s story and you relate to it and understand it and it touches you in some way, it’s very hard then to dismiss the person who told it and their beliefs. In some way, their story becomes your story once you’ve accepted it. That would be my utopian hope for this whole project.”

**THE “WHY” OF IT ALL...WHAT’S THE “BIG IDEA?”** The act of summing up your convictions on paper in 500 words or less, let alone reading them aloud on national public radio, isn’t as easy as it sounds. “The tricky part is that it’s onion-like because you have to peel back down through what you think you believe or what you would like other people to think you believe, to what you were taught to believe...and just keep whitening away at it until you get something that you really can stand behind that’s not just rhetoric or restatement of dogma,” says Allison.

Identifying with and defending what you’ve written is even more challenging. “If you do it right, you’re kind of laying yourself bare...you’re opening yourself

up,” says Allison. “We live in the age of irony here. And it’s very easy to take potshots at people who speak emotionally. It’s so easy that everybody does it. To stand up there and say ‘I’ll take it! I’m going to speak now without irony and without attacking anybody else, about the things I hold most dear.’ That’s a brave act.”

What Allison and Gediman hope is that by creating a safe haven where people of all ages, creeds, backgrounds, colors, and races can feel

free to openly discuss their thoughts, inspirations, and feelings without fear of judgment or harassment, they will have laid the groundwork for a more tolerant and brilliantly diversified America. It is only through teaching, sharing, learning and listening that we as people can hope to learn from our past mistakes, make responsible choices for our future, and embrace each other as fellow travelers through life.

**WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?** To submit an essay to *This I Believe* for consideration and possible inclusion in NPR programming and/or online archives, visit [www.thisibelieve.org](http://www.thisibelieve.org) or [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org) for instructions. \*

During his 20-year tenure in public broadcasting, Executive Producer Dan Gediman has won many awards, including the Corporation for Public Broadcasting’s Gold and Silver Awards. Gediman’s colleague, host and producer Jay Allison, has also earned a number of major awards for his work as an independent broadcast journalist over the past 30 years, including the Corporation for Public Broadcasting’s Edward R. Murrow Award – the industry’s most prestigious honor. He is the host and co-producer of NPR’s *Lost & Found Sound* and *The Sonic Memorial Project*, the Executive Director of *Atlantic Public Media*, and the architect of *TRANSOM.org* and the *Public Radio Exchange, PRX.org*, two Web sites that were created in order to bring ingenuity and free expression to public radio.

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“I believe in truth. There is such a thing...but we often have a vested interest in ignoring it or outright denying it. Also, it’s not just thinking something that makes it true. Truth is not relative. It’s not subjective. It may be elusive or hidden. People may wish to disregard it. But there is such a thing as truth and the pursuit of truth: trying to figure out what has really happened, trying to figure out how things really are.”

Documentary filmmaker Errol Morris,  
“There is Such a Thing as Truth,”  
May 2, 2005

## The Poet and the Stargazer by Jackie Carreira

“Why must you spend your time staring outward into the universe?” said the Poet to the Stargazer. “Do you not see that there is an expanse of equal vastness waiting to be explored inside a man?”

The Stargazer sighed and shifted his weight to the back of his chair. “And which man might this be, my friend?” asked he.

The Poet shifted forward and replied, “Not a man, but any man.”

“Ah!” said the Stargazer. “Anyman is a different beast altogether. I must admit that I have never met a man so ignorant that I could not learn from him.” He paused briefly to let the Poet know he might have something further to say of importance, then changed his posture to match that of his companion. “But you mistake my actions, dear fellow. It is not the Universe I stare into, but God himself.”

“That explains much,” the Poet responded. “I see why the Church condemns you so fiercely. If you tell them that you stare at God through a telescope, they will hang you for a heretic before you can calculate that two plus two makes four.”

The Stargazer let out a short snort of disdain. “The Church!” he cried, “I would no sooner speak of God to the Church as I would speak mathematics to a flock of gulls. They despise me for blasphemy and force my silence.”

“Do not mistake their motives,” the Poet said with knowing. “The Church hates only

what it fears, and what it fears is your voice, should you choose to set it free.”

“But I am not a wordsmith as you are,” the Stargazer protested, “I am a man of science and thinking.”

The Poet, with a patient blink, said, “Be careful now, it is dangerous to think too much in times such as these,” and paused before continuing. “But being a thinker, think: if you do not speak your revelations, how will the world be changed? For if something is not written, it simply does not exist.”

The Stargazer stared back with a frown and said, “You expect me to throw my dearest discoveries into penny plays for the tickling of the masses?” And further he added, “You talk of talk and words as if they are the only tongue, but mathematics is the language with which God has written the universe.” And there the Stargazer folded his arms as if he had won a great tournament.

“Now you mistake me,” the Poet protested, “I stare into God as you do, but I can speak him to any man. I have learnt that the best place to lay a truth is within a sigh or a speech, a tickle or a tear, for love is love and hope is hope for both queen and serf. As human feelings are the same for all, so may truth be; and that, my friend, is my philosophy.”

The Stargazer now smiled, because he was warming to his companion. “Fine words,” said he, “and intelligently spoken. But perhaps we

could have the humility to agree that there are more things in heaven and earth, dear Poet, than are dreamt of in our philosophy.”

The Poet smiled. “There we must agree and see that we are not so different. But I fear now,” said the Poet, “that you have stolen my line!”

Although this story is not intended to be about a specific poet or astronomer, it may be of interest to know that William Shakespeare and Galileo Galilei were born in the same year, 1564.

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