A Reflection on Habitual Belief
and Habitual Doubt

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My friend Pat and I once discussed how we each behave in academic discussions, and the conversation has stayed with me ever since. Pat said, "I just don't feel like I've connected with people unless I've disagreed with them, and argued!"

"Really?" I asked, marveling, "I can't even imagine that! I feel more comfortable by far if I am agreeing with people!" It's true; in spite of the fact that I like to see myself as an independent thinker, I have a habitual response in conversation to go along automatically with the other person's views. If the person thought a book was good, I will sometimes say I liked it too, and actually feel that I liked it, even if, later, I think, "I actually had some real criticisms of that book; why didn't I say so?" The answer is that I'm a habitual player of the believing game: shifting my own perspective in the name of someone else's is my knee-jerk way of connecting.

And Pat is the opposite, a habitual doubter; she always brings up objections and counterpoints. Her insistence on arguing used to make me cringe sometimes when we were among colleagues. I would see that she could make people uncomfortable when she insisted on bringing up arguments that contradicted theirs, and inwardly I'd think, "can't you just let it go, as I would, in the name of diplomacy?" I secretly felt that my own overly conciliatory people-skills were superior to Pat's, because, I believed, they made social interactions smoother.

Hearing that Pat saw doubting as a way of connecting, though, caused a shift in my thinking about what constituted good people-skills. Her approach, I suddenly realized, was based on a willingness to grapple with the other person's thoughts, and thus it might result in a deeper and more nuanced connection than the pseudo-compatibility I sometimes fostered by agreeing too much. Furthermore, to disagree with someone, as Pat did, meant that one had to honor one's own thinking. My approach, I realized, required that I was always more than willing to dismiss my own ideas.

So Pat and I are mirror-opposites of each other when it comes to the believing and doubting games—she's a habitual doubter, and I'm a habitual believer. That thought led me to reflect on other people I knew. Yes, some were clearly doubters, others definitely believers, still others more difficult to classify. We each tend to do both in varying degrees and in different contexts: I might be more of a believer in a professional setting, and more of a doubter at home. Another person could be the opposite. The stances are changeable depending on situations and personalities.

This fluid view of believing and doubting stances is perfectly in keeping

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with the way Peter Elbow conceived of the two habits of mind. His point has always been that they exist together in all of us: we can make use of each depending on what we want and need in particular circumstances; he never claimed that either of them was sufficient on its own. He takes a strong position—that the academic world tends to valorize doubting at the expense of believing and would do well to embrace believing more—but he never says that doubting should be abandoned; on the contrary, he takes pains to acknowledge that at times it can be invaluable.

That should seem quite clear to anyone reading Elbow, and yet some of the reaction to his work on the believing game has been to respond as though he is advocating that everyone throw doubt out the window and become doctrinaire believers, looking only for agreement. For example, Susan Jarratt in "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict," says, "Elbow encourages participants in the 'believing game' to give up the aggressive, combative, argumentative rigidity required for the 'doubting game'" (110). But Jarratt's doubting stance toward Elbow makes her look for disagreement, and she thereby deeply misreads Elbow. He never says that we should give up the rigidity of doubting for all time, just that we should do so while we are playing the believing game.

Habitual doubters miss out on connecting with people when the act of looking to reject beliefs other than their own makes their ideas, and sometimes their very being, sterile and unyielding. In the face of new ideas, they can get angry or disdainful and dedicate themselves to proving that those new ideas are wrong. They reject the possible vulnerability that using their "believing" muscle might cause although that is the muscle they could most benefit from exercising.

The antidote for them is more believing, which is Elbow's point. If Jarratt had played the believing game with Elbow's believing game, she would have understood that he was advocating "believing" not as an alternative to the traditional habits of academic argument, but as a complement, a stance that people could take in order to think more deeply and broadly about each other's views. Much of the doubt in the academic world is aimed not at connection, or the pursuit of truth, but simply at winning. The habit of believing, in contrast, requires that we turn our attention away from triumphing over people who disagree and toward pursuing a fuller and more nuanced perspective by understanding positions other than our own.

In order to move out of the rigidity caused by doubting, then, doubters would paradoxically do well to do a little more doubting, but of their own ideas. Self-doubting could feel uncomfortable and strange to them, but questioning oneself is the route toward softening the rigid boundaries, and the lack of openness to other views, that habitual doubting fosters.

Habitual believers don't have to worry about having too-rigid boundaries. We have a different problem. Sometimes, when I am playing the believing game to a fault, I have an almost physical sensation that the very boundaries of my body melt, and I take on an amoeba-form that oozes in any direction. I am the opposite of a habitual doubter who can't get beyond his own idea: whatever I personally might have to say turns liquid and seeps or evaporates away from the edifice of whatever the other person is saying.

I see it happening in some of my students, too: they have a fledgling idea, but then someone contradicts it, and the idea gets stuffed away, surreptitiously, like an olive pit that escapes from one's mouth at a cocktail party. One slips it

into one's hand, eyes darting around for a civilized, private way to dispose of it. Other people's ideas, for knee-jerk believers, can immediately overpower the tiny olive pits of our own. We say, as shy students do, "the conversation moved away from the thing I was going to say so I kept quiet; my idea was no longer relevant; it didn't matter," to explain away the fact that we have stifled our own views in the name of honoring others'.

I like to think I do that less these days, but believing used to be more of a habitual state for me. I was not aware of it as a "state"; it was just the way I most often approached the world, at least in social settings—I let other people's ideas lead the way. As I emerged from that state of unquestioned belief, though, I became resistant to the idea of the believing game. When I heard Elbow give a lecture on believing in a crowded ballroom at a recent meeting of the Conference for College Composition and Communication, for example, I noticed that I was listening with a sinking feeling, of "no, please don't make me do this more! I don't want to believe! I need doubt, only doubt can save me from this sea of boundlessness. I want clarity and doubt!"

I now see that that reaction is a function of the fact that being steeped far too deeply in believing makes us habitual believers lose sight of our own power and self-definition. Saying, all too often, "yes, you have a point. I see what you mean. Your point makes excellent sense. I hear what you're saying," has made our doubting muscle flaccid from under-use.

To counteract that, I have been working on believing less and on cultivating doubt. Lately, then, I sometimes pretend to be my friend Pat when I'm in a discussion, and I focus on plumbing myself to discover the ways in which I disagree with the person I'm talking to. That forces me to articulate my own positions more clearly and to refuse to rest in the relative ease and thoughtlessness of abandoning my own firmly held views in the name of getting along better with the other person.

So, if habitual doubters need to doubt themselves more in order to develop their "believer" side, habitual believers need to believe themselves more. The more believers turn the believing spotlight inward, just as habitual doubters can turn the doubting spotlight inward, the more we can access our own views. Doubting others, at its best, requires that a habitual believer refuses to brush her own ideas away like annoyances: she must strive to believe them. That can be difficult because it's not habitual, but in a way it is such a relief. Believing my own ideas wakes me up; it means I have to sit up and take myself seriously, not just lie at the feet of others, patiently honoring their ideas. So doubting is exciting and energizing. It seems to give clear boundaries to my body, to create barriers that sternly work to contain any tendency I might have to merge, liquid-like, into other points of view. Those barriers temporarily shut off my empathy with other people or viewpoints, thereby forcing me to focus in on my own sense of what I think is right or true. This feels unfamiliar and a bit strange or wrong; I have to work to resist the impulse to tear down the barriers so I can focus on the other, not myself.

In spite of how exhilarating it can be to play the doubting game, then, it's quite difficult for me, partly because I like my own ability to believe, to shift away from my own perspective. I think it's a good thing not to be "selfish," and playing the believing game means resisting one's selfishness. However, criticizing myself for potentially being selfish can prevent me from getting the benefits

I need from doubt. I need to keep in mind instead that too much believing will keep me away from my own best ideas.

After all, without doubt I wouldn't be able to write anything, including this essay. Overbelievers often have writer's block because we continually imagine other perspectives than our own and we try to incorporate them into our own thinking. Without access to doubt we could rewrite forever because our work would never conform perfectly to what others want and expect. So ultimately I have to turn away from my imagined sense of a reader's needs in order to doubt and to assert my own position.

Paradoxically, my turning away from my readers' needs can be my way of connecting with them more deeply. Doubt is complex. It can say, "you are wrong. I reject what you're saying, and I don't care what you want to say in response." But it can also say, "I want you to be changed by what I have to say; I insist that you listen to my perspective and consider it deeply as part of your thinking." So in a sense a habitual believer will best be able to care about someone if she doubts that person because doubting leads to herself, which leads her to be able to con-nect with that person as an equal and not as a handmaiden.

 The doubting game at its best is motivated not so much by a desire to de-molish, but by a loving desire to look closely at the other's argument and re-spond to it. We all want to be responded to in detail, and doubting is certainly capable of that as much as believing is. In fact, sometimes the connections that doubt brings are deeper than those brought by belief because, as people argue and struggle together, they can arrive at a mutually held truth while people who are overly generous with each other might avoid examining any underlying con-flicts that insidiously keep them, or their perspectives, apart.

Doubt is powerfully effective for people like me who have spent our lives believing to a fault. We can imagine a more grounded and self-aware form of doubt, one that insists that the only way to be effective in any conflict is to re-spect one's own ideas as well as one's opponent's, one that, in fact, requires that, while we practice the doubting game, we keep "belief" tucked away somewhere close so that we can access it as needed.

What I am advocating here then is something that Elbow has always spoken of in his discussions of the believing game: the importance of cultivating both habits of mind. For people like my friend Pat, believing others' perspectives can be an exotic and intriguing new way to connect, and for people like me the act of doubting others' views can help me break through my fear of asserting my own perspective.

In either case, getting outside of the habit that we are most comfortable with can make us see that believing and doubting could have the same ultimate goals. While they seem so different, they both, at their best, aim for connection and the growth of our thinking as a result of interactions with others. They each need the other to be whole because at the extreme of one is a boundless amoeba and at the extreme of the other is an iron wall.

So the way to benefit most from believing and doubting is to balance them. Habitual doubters need to believe more, and habitual believers need to doubt more. The best way to do that, paradoxically, can be to turn one's habitual prac-tice on oneself: habitual doubters need to doubt themselves; habitual believers need to believe themselves. Self-doubt pushes a habitual doubter out of the rigid trenches dug by unwavering positions, and self-belief allows a habitual believer to be more grounded in her or his own views.

When believing and doubting are both present, and when people can move back and forth freely between them, true communion among people, buttressed by clearer thinking, is more possible because we are more able really to listen to perspectives outside our own. ⌂

Works Cited

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