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# The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies---How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths

By Michael Shermer

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Synthesizing thirty years of research, psychologist and science historian Michael Shermer upends the traditional thinking about how humans form beliefs about the world. Simply put, beliefs come first and explanations for beliefs follow. The brain, Shermer argues, is a belief engine. Using sensory data that flow in through the senses, the brain naturally begins to look for and find patterns, and then infuses those patterns with meaning, forming beliefs. Once beliefs are formed the brain begins to look for and find confirmatory evidence in support of those beliefs, accelerating the process of reinforcing them, and round and round the process goes in a positive-feedback loop.

In *The Believing Brain*, Shermer provides countless real-world examples of how this process operates, from politics, economics, and religion to conspiracy theories, the supernatural, and the paranormal. And ultimately, he demonstrates why science is the best tool ever devised to determine whether or not our beliefs match reality.

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**The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies---How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths** By Michael Shermer Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #49295 in Books
- Brand: Griffin
- Published on: 2012-08-07
- Released on: 2012-08-07
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.16" h x .99" w x 5.44" l, .75 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 385 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“Michael Shermer has long been one of our most committed champions of scientific thinking in the face of popular delusion. In *The Believing Brain*, he has written a wonderfully lucid, accessible, and wide-ranging account of the boundary between justified and unjustified belief. We have all fallen more deeply in his debt.”  
?Sam Harris, author of the New York Times bestsellers *The Moral Landscape*, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and *The End of Faith*.

“The physicist Richard Feynman once said that the easiest person to fool is yourself, and as a result he argued that as a scientist one has to be especially careful to try and find out not only what is right about one's theories, but what might also be wrong with them. If we all followed this maxim of skepticism in everyday life, the world would probably be a better place. But we don't. In this book Michael Shermer lucidly describes why and how we are hard wired to 'want to believe'. With a narrative that gently flows from the personal to the profound, Shermer shares what he has learned after spending a lifetime pondering the relationship between beliefs and reality, and how to be prepared to tell the difference between the two.”  
?Lawrence M. Krauss, Foundation Professor and Director of the Origins Project at Arizona State University and author of *The Physics of Star Trek*, *Quantum Man* and *A Universe from Nothing*

“Michael Shermer has long been one of the world's deepest thinkers when it comes to explaining where our beliefs come from, and he brings it all together in this important, engaging, and ambitious book. Shermer knows all the science, he tells great stories, he is funny, and he is *fearless*, delving into hot-button topics like 9-11 Truthers, life after death, capitalism, Barack Obama, Sarah Palin, and the existence of God. This is an entertaining and thoughtful exploration of the beliefs that shape our lives.” ?Paul Bloom, author of *How Pleasure Works*

“*The Believing Brain* is a tour de force integrating neuroscience and the social sciences to explain how irrational beliefs are formed and reinforced, while leaving us confident our ideas are valid. This is a must read for everyone who wonders why religious and political beliefs are so rigid and polarized--or why the other side is always wrong, but somehow doesn't see it.” ?Dr. Leonard Mlodinow, physicist and author of *The Drunkard's Walk* and *The Grand Design* (with Stephen Hawking)

“We might think that we learn how the world works, because we take the time to observe and understand it. Shermer says that's just not so. We just believe things, and then make our world fit our perceptions. Believe me; you don't have to take my word for it. Just try clearing some space in your own *Believing Brain*.” ?Bill Nye, the Science Guy ©, Executive Director of *The Planetary Society*

“*The Believing Brain* is a fascinating account of the origins of all manner of beliefs, replete with cutting edge evidence from the best scientific research, packed with nuggets of truths and then for good measure, studded with real world examples to deliver to the reader, a very personable, engaging and ultimately, convincing set of explanations for why we believe.” ?Professor Bruce Hood, Chair of Developmental Psychology, Bristol University and author of *Supersense: Why We Believe in the Unbelievable*

#### About the Author

MICHAEL SHERMER is the author of *Why People Believe Weird Things*, *The Science of Good and Evil*, and eight other books on the evolution of human beliefs and behavior. He is the founding publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, the editor of Skeptic.com, a monthly columnist for *Scientific American*, and an adjunct professor at Claremont Graduate University. He lives in Southern California.

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1

### Mr. D'Arpino's Dilemma

The voice was as distinct as the message it delivered was unmistakable. Emilio "Chick" D'Arpino bolted upright from his bed, startled that the words he heard so clearly were not spoken by anyone in the room. It was 4 a.m. on February 11, 1966, and Mr. D'Arpino was alone in his bedroom, seemingly unperturbed by what he was hearing. It wasn't a masculine voice, yet neither was it feminine. And even though he had no reference guide built by experience from which to compare, Mr. D'Arpino somehow knew that the source was not of this world.

\* \* \*

I met Chick D'Arpino on my forty-seventh birthday, September 8, 2001, just three days before the calamitous event that would henceforth cleave history into pre- and post-9/11. Chick wanted to know if I would be willing to write an essay to answer this question: *Is it possible to know if there is a source out there that knows we are here?*

"Uh? You mean God?" I queried.

"Not necessarily," Chick replied.

"ET?"

"Maybe," Chick continued, "but I don't want to specify the nature of the source, just that it is out there and not here."

Who would ask such a question, I wondered, and more important, *why*? Chick explained that he was a retired bricklayer interested in pursuing answers to deep questions through essay contests and one-day conferences he was sponsoring at San Jose State University and at Stanford University, near his home in Silicon Valley. I had never heard of a retired bricklayer sponsoring conferences before, so this got my attention, as I have long admired autodidacts.

Over the years, as Chick and I became close friends, I grew more and more curious to know why a bricklayer would spend what little money he had on funding essay contests and conferences to answer life's big questions. I had a sense that Chick already knew the answers to the questions he was posing, but for a decade he took the Fifth with me until one day, when I probed one more time, he gave me a hint:

*I had an experience.*

An experience. Okay! Now we're talking my language—the language of belief systems grounded in experiences. What type of experience?

Chick clammed up again, but I pushed and prodded for details. When was this experience?

*Back in 1966.*

What time of day did it happen?

*Four in the morning.*

Did you see or hear something?

*I don't want to talk about that aspect of it.*

But if it was a profound enough experience to be driving you to this day to explore such big questions, it is surely worth sharing with someone.

*Nope, it's private.*

Come on, Chick, I've known you practically a decade. We're the best of friends. I'm genuinely curious.

*Okay, it was a voice.*

A voice. Um.

*I know what you're thinking, Michael—I've read all your stuff about auditory hallucinations, lucid dreams, and sleep paralysis. But that's not what happened to me. This was clearly, distinctly, unmistakably not from my mind. It was from an outside source.*

Now we were getting somewhere. Here is a man I've come to know and love as a dear friend, a man who otherwise is as sane as the next guy and as smart as a whip. I needed to know more. Where did this happen?

*At my sister's house.*

What were you doing sleeping at your sister's house?

*I was separated from my wife and going through a divorce.*

Aha, right, the stress of divorce.

*I know, I know, my psychiatrist thought the same thing you're thinking now—stress caused the experience.*

A psychiatrist? How does a bricklayer end up in the office of a psychiatrist?

*Well, see, the authorities sent me to see this psychiatrist up at Agnews State Hospital.*

What?! Why?

*I wanted to see the president.*

Okay, let's see ... 1966 ... President Lyndon Johnson ... Vietnam War protests ... construction worker wants to see the president ... mental hospital. There's a compelling story here for someone who studies the power of belief for a living, so I pressed for more.

Why did you want to see the president?

*To deliver to him the message from the source of the voice.*

What was the message?

*That I will never tell you, Michael—I have never told anyone and I'm taking it to my grave. I haven't even told my children.*

Wow, this must be some message, like Moses on the mountaintop taking dictation from Yahweh. Must have gone on for quite some time. How long?

*Less than a minute.*

Less than a minute?

*It was thirteen words.*

Do you remember the thirteen words?

*Of course!*

Come on, Chick, tell me what they were.

*Nope.*

Did you write them down somewhere?

*Nope.*

Can I guess what the theme of the message was?

*Sure, go ahead, take a guess.*

Love.

*Michael! Yes! That's exactly right. Love. The source not only knows we're here, but it loves us and we can have a relationship with it.*

## **The Source**

I would like to understand what happened to my friend Chick D'Arpino on that early morning in February 1966 and how that experience changed his life in profound ways ever since. I want to comprehend what happened to Chick because I want to know what happens to all of us when we form beliefs.

In Chick's case the experience happened while separated from his wife and children. The details of the separation are not important (and he wishes to protect the privacy of his family), but its effects are. "I was a broken man," Chick told me.<sup>1</sup> "I was broke in every way you can think of: financially, physically, emotionally, and psychologically."

To this day Chick maintains that what he experienced was unquestionably outside of his mind. I strongly suspect otherwise, so what follows is my interpretation. Lying alone in bed, Chick was awake and perhaps anxious about the new dawn that would soon break over his day and life. Away from his beloved wife and children, Chick was troubled by the uncertainty of where his life would go from there, restless about which path before him to take, and especially apprehensive about whether he was loved. Those of us who have felt the sting of unrequited love, the anguish of relationship uncertainty, the torturous suffering of a troubled

marriage, or the soul-shattering desolation of divorce, well know the painful inner turmoil that stirs the emotional lees—stomach-churning, heart-pounding, stress-hormone-pumping fight-or-flight emotional overdrive—especially in the wee hours of the morning before the sun signals the possibility of redemption.

I have experienced such emotions myself, so perhaps I am projecting. My parents divorced when I was four, and although detailed memories of the separation and disruption are foggy, one memory is as clear to me now as it was those late nights and early mornings while lying awake: I had an almost vertigo sense of spiraling down and shrinking into my bed, as the room I was in expanded outward in all directions, leaving me feeling ever smaller and insignificant, frightened and anxious about ... well ... everything, including and especially being loved. And although the ever-shrinking-room experience has mercifully receded, today there are still too many late nights and early mornings when lost-love anxieties return to haunt me, emotions that I usually wash away with productive work or physical exercise, sometimes (but not always) successfully.

What happened to Chick next can best be described as surreal, ethereal, and otherworldly. On that early morning in February 1966, a soothing, tranquil voice calmly delivered a message of what I imagine a mind racked in turmoil longed to hear:

*You are loved by a higher source that wants your love in return.*

I do not know if these are the exact thirteen words heard by Chick D'Arpino that morning, and he's still not talking, other than to exposit:

*The meaning was love between the source and me. The source identified its relationship to me and my relationship to it. And it dealt with L-O-V-E. If I had to say what it was about, it was about the mutual love we have for one another, me and the source, the source and me.*

\* \* \*

How does one make sense of a supernatural occurrence with natural explanations? This is Mr. D'Arpino's dilemma.

I am burdened by no such dilemma because I do not believe in otherworldly forces. Chick's experience follows from the plausible causal scenario I am constructing here for what I believe to be an inner source of that outer voice. Since the brain does not perceive itself or its inner operations, and our normal experience is of stimuli entering the brain through the senses from the outside, when a neural network misfires or otherwise sends a signal to some other part of the brain that resembles an outside stimulus, the brain naturally interprets these internal events as external phenomena. This happens both naturally and artificially—lots of people experience auditory and visual hallucinations under varying conditions, including stress, and copious research that I will review in detail later demonstrates how easy it is to artificially trigger such illusory ephemera.

Regardless of the actual source of the voice, what does one do after such an experience? Chick picked up the story and recounted for me one of the most transfixing tales I've ever heard.

\* \* \*

*It happened on a Friday. The next Monday—I...*

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Elaine Bell:**

The book *The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies---How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths* can give more knowledge and information about everything you want. So just why must we leave the best thing like a book *The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies---How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths*? A number of you have a different opinion about guide. But one aim this book can give many information for us. It is absolutely proper. Right now, try to closer with the book. Knowledge or information that you take for that, you may give for each other; you may share all of these. Book *The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies---How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths* has simple shape but you know: it has great and massive function for you. You can search the enormous world by open and read a guide. So it is very wonderful.

#### **David Barthel:**

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#### **Norman Duque:**

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