

Three Shifts to Free Your Mind

by Rabbi Rami Shapiro / Originally published in Spirit Journal August 2017

Shifting from Belief to Hypothesis

Beliefs are ideas you hold to be true without any evidence that they are in fact true. We usually inherit beliefs from someone in whom we have invested authority: parents, clergy, teachers, etc. For example, I was taught by all three authorities that God, the creator of the universe, chose the Jews to receive His (sic) one and only revelation, and to hold in perpetuity the deed to the Land of Israel. The only evidence for this belief is in the belief itself. This is to say that the only evidence for this is in the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, and because we Jews are to believe Torah is the Word of God, and Torah says we are God's Chosen, therefore we must be God's Chosen because the Word of God says so. I get dizzy just typing this.

My suggestion is that we abandon belief for hypothesis. A belief insists something is true. A hypothesis says something may be true, but to know for sure we must test it. Belief has no need for testing, and in fact is adamantly opposed to testing. Hypothesis is nothing without rigorous testing, or, if testing is not possible, we should hold the hypothesis lightly, knowing that it could very well be false.

So, the first shift I wish to offer is that you recast all your beliefs as working hypotheses open to testing and even invalidation. The result from such a shift would be to free you from fixed and unprovable ideas, and open you to inquiry.

Shifting from Nouns to Verbs

The reason why every great sage and saint values silence over words is that language is the Great Illusionist, distracting us from Reality with words, especially nouns.

There are no nouns in the universe. Nouns are things, and there are no things in the universe—only happenings, only processes, only verbs. Yet we insist otherwise. Take the great grammatical ghost of “it.” When we say, “It is raining,” what is the “it” that is raining? There is simply rain happening: no it, no noun, at all. When someone asks you, “How was it?” don't answer without at least internally questioning the “it” that was. The correct answer to the question “How was it?” is simply this: “It wasn't.”



A world of nouns is a world of fixed and often clashing isms and ideologies; a world of haves and have nots forever caught up in the struggle to have more at the expense of others who, by definition, must be forced to have less. A world of verbs is a world without fixedness; a world of exchange, a world of giving and receiving and passing on. A world of nouns is a world of having, a world of verbs is a world of being.

So, the second shift I invite you to make is replacing every noun with a verb or gerund. Don't speak of trees but of treeing; don't see chairs but chairing; don't encounter Frank or Mary but Franking and Marying. This shift frees you from seeing the world as a clash of its, and allows you to engage the world as a cacophony of is.

Shifting from Metaphysics to Metaphor

We are taught to think flat. We are raised to believe that something that is literally true is more real than something that is figuratively true. We are taught to value prose over poetry.

One of the best examples of this is C.S. Lewis' Trilemma. Lewis takes Jesus's claim that "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (Gospel of John 14:6) literally, and then challenges us to say in response to this claim whether Jesus is a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. From Lewis' point of view—the point of view that Jesus is Lord—the only logical answer is that Jesus is Lord, for how could the Lord be a liar or a lunatic?

This Trilemma has been presented to me many times, and my answer is always the same: I refuse to be limited to these three choices. Maybe Jesus is a poet, or a mystic; maybe he is speaking metaphorically rather than metaphysically. Maybe Jesus isn't speaking from his ego at all when he makes these claims, but is rather speaking from his realization of the unity of all happening in the infinite Happening of God. Maybe he is saying, "The Infinite I of God is the way and the truth and the life, and only when you awaken to this I as your truest I can you realize your unity with God."

When we think flat, we think literal. When we think literal, we cling to belief rather than open ourselves to hypothesis, and hold fast to nouns and fixedness rather than engage life as verbs and process. So, the third shift I wish to offer you is to shift from metaphysics to metaphor, read sacred texts as poetry rather than literalist prose. Such a shift frees you to understand old ideas in new ways, rather than force your new ideas to conform to old ones.

Conclusion

When you shift from belief to hypothesis, you live more humbly. When you shift from nouns to verbs, you see more clearly. When you shift from metaphysics to metaphor, you think more creatively and imagine more boldly. And when you do all these things, you free yourself from secondhand opinion and for firsthand knowing; a freedom essential if you are to become what you can be rather than conform to who you are told you must be.

But how can you make these shifts? One way, though by no means THE way, is contemplative practice such as Centering Prayer. As beliefs, nouns, and metaphysical assertions arise, we “simply” let them fall of their own accord; we offer them to Christ or Krishna or Whomever we find leads us beyond the Gods of our understanding to the God who surpasses understanding (Philippians 4:7), the God “in whom we live, and move, and have our being,” (Acts 17:28).