

Focused on *belief or insight about life* that is significant to the writer

Focused on a *significant event*

Focused on a *significant relationship* between the writer and a person, place, or object

# This I Believe

## Lesson 1 Stations

Group Names:

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Essay 1 "My Pal, Robert":

What parts or elements of the essay tell you that it is a personal narrative?

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Essay 2 "My First Life Line":

What parts or elements of the essay tell you that it is a memoir?

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Essay 3 "A Doubting, Questioning Mind":

What parts or elements of the essay tell you that it is a personal essay?

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Final Group Question:

Which essay did your group like best? Describe why.

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### My Pal, Robert

Have you ever heard the saying, “Hindsight is 20/20?” Well, I don’t think that there is a week that goes by that that saying isn’t proved to me over and over again. One night this past spring I learned a little “look before you leap” lesson that taught me to more carefully evaluate the circumstances of a situation before I actually put myself in it.

I think it’s safe to say that I am a “weirdo magnet.” I firmly believe that when I am at my most vulnerable, a flashing sign appears on my head that only strange people can see that says, “TALK TO ME! TALK TO ME!” You may think I’m exaggerating, but trust me, I’m not.

Beginning in the month of April through the month of September, I work for a wonderful and efficient organization called the Cincinnati Reds. When I first started the job, I wasn’t quite comfortable driving myself to the stadium, so I had to rely on my mom to drop me off and pick me up. Since there is never a set time that I get off work, I would have to call my mom and then go wait for her outside at the service entrance. The approximate time was usually around 11:00 p.m. Usually there is a trusty security guard named Arnie who works at the service entrance. You know the type, about sixty-five years old and couldn’t protect you from anything even if he wasn’t sleeping or missing in action.

So picture this: It’s 11:00 at night, I’m standing outside the service entrance alone, all dressed up and looking like the perfect target for any psychopath that happens to be in the area. I guess this might be a good time to describe what it’s like at the service entrance. The tunnel itself is dark, cold, smelly, and there is always some unidentified substance dripping from the ceiling. At the head of the tunnel there is a little security guard shack where the smell of a burning illegal substance is often present. There is also an entrance to the other field, a room for the night (clean-up) crew, and a metal folding chair where Arnie usually sits when he is around. Around this entrance is reserved parking for important people and it is generally the place where the night crew hangs out. Now I don’t want to be mean, but a night crew member who is not on probation of some sort is the exception to the rule.

Anyway, as you can imagine I was feeling kind of nervous, and of course, Arnie was nowhere to be found. Normally someone would wait with me for my parents, but the circumstances were out of the ordinary. As I was standing there outside the service entrance, that horrible feeling came over me that you get when you feel someone’s eyes on you, and I could see someone coming towards me out of the corner of my eye. Rather than just stand there awkwardly, I turned face to face with the person hoping and praying that he wasn’t going to touch me, talk to me, or maybe ABDUCT me.

When he got about two inches from my face he said hoarsely, “Hi, I’m Robert.” His breath reeked of alcohol and a mixture of some other things like, oh, I don’t know, garbage? I was inwardly freaking out. His appearance was even more unsettling. He was a guy about my height, was wearing a dirty bandana around his head that I think was white at one time, and he had one tooth in the front of his mouth that had a sign on it that said, “Next tooth—one mile.” “Hi,” I responded, trying to keep my cool. *Where are you Arnie?* I thought to myself. “What’s your name?” he asked. *Oh, no, he’s trying to pick up on me!* I thought. I contemplated making up a fake name, but my mind went blank. “Erin,” I responded, while shaking like a leaf.

"That's a pretty name," he said. Of course I could have said my name was Bertha Sue and he probably still would have said it was pretty. Every minute seemed like an eternity as I struggled to be polite and make small talk with my new pal. I kept inching away from him but he kept moving forward to make up for it. Every time he attempted to make conversation, I cordially gave him one-word answers with a forced smile. I couldn't help but feel a little guilty for the way I was acting, even though I was scared to death.

"You shouldn't be standing out here by yourself. Somebody could do something to you, you know? That wouldn't be right," he said, looking me up and down and making me want to crawl out of my skin. *Yeah, people like you!* I wanted to scream. Finally, after what seemed like years, but was probably only five minutes, my mom and step-dad pulled up. By that time Arnie (the trusty security guard) had materialized, but had taken no notice of my predicament. I grabbed my bag, took off at world record speed towards the car, and yelled over my shoulder, "There's my mom, bye!" Oh, but it wasn't over yet. My source of torture couldn't let me get away that easily. He followed me over to the car. No, I am not joking. As I opened the door, Robert stepped up to the car.

"Hi, I'm Robert" He said, extending his hand. My mom shook it to be polite. "I've been watching your daughter for ya." My mom was at a loss for words. "Uh, thanks," she said. "See ya later." She slammed the car door and as we drove away, I began to think about what had happened. I don't know what Robert wanted. Maybe his intentions were good, and maybe they weren't. Either way, I was never in any real danger. Even though I was scared, I could have been a little more polite. People are people, no matter what.

However, I don't think I'll ever wait for my ride alone again.

### My First Life Line

Throughout my six years as an elementary school student, I was a helpless victim, drowning in a sea of stressful book reports and searching for a way to express myself in open-ended questions. As I entered middle school, however, a life preserver was thrown to me. From the moment it appeared, I held on tightly until my rescuer taught me to swim on my own.

Mrs. Smith was the high-ranking “officer” at our middle school, whose sole purpose was to whip her “gifted but undisciplined kids” into shape. I take that back. Introducing sixth-graders to ulcers was another likely item on her agenda. She had a natural march in her step, setting the admired and ideal pace for others to follow. Mrs. Smith performed classroom procedures as though she had repeatedly practiced each one determined to achieve perfection. She was always neat and proper, never a single hair on her head nor a red pen on her desk out of place. The clarity of her voice demanded respect and attention, while her tone was often quite frightening. “My class will separate the men from the boys; the women from the girls; the writers from the dummies.” Despite her intimidating features, I found myself admiring, even liking this drill sergeant. Her gleaming smile could provide warmth like rays of sunshine and was always accompanied by some explanatory hand motion. She rarely grinned without providing some sort of manual or verbal gesture. Mrs. Smith was extremely blunt with her opinions—complimentary as well as critical ones. She was honest and truthful, with no strings attached. When asked for help, she would always respond, “I’d love to help you fix the mess you’ve created, so that someday, you might pass.” Due to the bitingly honest quality of her critiques, I feared the day she would evaluate one of my papers in class.

Nervously awaiting the return of our first essays my heart thumped with anxiety. Suddenly, her piercing voice cracked my security shell that had hidden me for the past six years. “Well, I can see that there is some potential buried beneath all that mumbo-jumbo. The hard part is just digging it out!” Confused, I searched for the correct response and answered, “Um, Mrs. Smith I don’t have a shovel to dig.” Of course Mrs. Smith replied, “That’s quite all right. You can use your hands. Pick up that pencil and go to work.” Until the bell rang, that day, I was lost in a maze of red ink. My goal was to distinguish between “mumbo-jumbo” writing and writing that, with editing, and more editing, might become worthy for Mrs. Smith herself to read. Overwhelmed with excitement, I was determined to receive a “well-written” comment from Mrs. Smith or at least a “not so mumboy-jumboy!” Sweat, tears, and a lack of sleep were all included in my “IMPRESS MRS. SMITH MISSION.” Although I was unaware of it at the time, her lovingly strict attitude and personality had already begun to inspire me.

Mrs. Smith’s sweet perfume danced happily through the air, luring me into her room the following day at school. Once again, we turned in our essays and awaited the dreaded comments. Her constant nail tapping was a tension building clock, a constant reminder of the doom that awaited us all. She always selected her “victims” for each new day, and then focused on her helpless “prey.” With magnetic eyes, she would irresistibly and forcefully draw students’ attention to her. With each point of her finger, I waited for her nail to lift me out of my chair and onto my feet. Eventually, it did. “Well, William,” she always had to recognize the writer before the humiliation could begin, “I’m quite impressed. You read my ‘red pen advice’ and actually applied it when you rewrote this paper. I’m really impressed.”

At that moment, Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Allen Poe were my equals. Even Shakespeare himself could not have put my sixth-grade essay to shame. Just because they had

created several masterpieces did not mean they were “Mrs. Smith Approved.” Whose essay had “impressed” Mrs. Smith? Mine!

I longed to rush across the room, wrap my arms around her, and burst into joyful tears. Did she realize what her words meant to me? I desperately wanted to embrace her. For the first time, someone had taken time to work with me, guide me, and have faith in me and my ability to write. She helped me find a writing style suitable and meaningful to me. If only she could understand how I truly admired and viewed her as a “teacher,” someone who earned and deserved that special title. Words of praise and gratitude filled my mind as I began to pour my heart out to this miraculous lady. Yet, as a lump rose in my throat, I simply muttered, “Thanks, Mrs. Smith.” For the first time, without any words, gestures, or laughter, Mrs. Smith just smiled.

### A Doubting, Questioning Mind

*This essay aired as a This I Believe segment circa 1954. Elizabeth Earle was sixteen years old at the time. For more information about Elizabeth and to hear the audio of this essay and an essay she recently wrote as an adult, please visit:*  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4538100>.

At the age of sixteen, many of my friends have already chosen a religion to follow (usually that of their parents) and are bound to it by many ties. I am still “freelancing” in religion, searching for beliefs to guide me when I am an adult. I fear I shall always be searching, never attaining ultimate satisfaction, for I possess that blessing and curse—a doubting, questioning mind.

At present, my doubting spirit has found comfort in certain ideas, gleaned from books and experience, to form a personal philosophy. I find that this philosophy—a code consisting of a few phrases—supplements, but does not replace, religion.

The one rule that could serve anyone in almost any situation is, “To see what must be done and not to do it, is a crime.” Urged on by this, I volunteer for distasteful tasks or pick up scrap paper from the floor. I am no longer able to ignore duty without feeling guilty. This is “The still, small voice,” to be sure, but sharpened by my own discernment of duty.

“The difficult we do at once, the impossible takes a little longer.” This is the motto of a potential scientist, already struggling to unravel the mysteries of life. It rings with the optimism youth needs in order to stand up against trouble or failure.

Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan minister, resolved never to do anything out of revenge. I am a modern, a member of a church far removed from Puritanism, yet I have accepted this resolution. Since revenge and retaliation seem to have been accepted by nations today, I sometimes have difficulty reconciling my moral convictions with the tangled world being handed down to us by the adults. Apparently what I must do to make life more endurable is to follow my principles, with the hope that enough of this feeling will rub off on my associates to begin a chain reaction.

To a thinking person, such resolutions are very valuable; nevertheless, they often leave a vacuum in the soul. Churches are trying to fill this vacuum, each by its own method. During this year, I have visited churches ranging from orthodoxy to extreme liberalism. In my search for a personal faith, I consider it my duty to expose myself to all forms of religion. Each church has left something within me—either a new concept of God and man, or an understanding and respect for those of other beliefs. I have found such experiences with other religions the best means for freeing myself from prejudices.

Through my visits, the reasoning of fundamentalists has become clearer to me, but I am still unable to accept it. I have a simple faith in the Deity and a hope that my attempts to live a decent life are pleasing to Him. If I were to discover that there is no afterlife, my motive for moral living would not be destroyed. I have enough of the philosopher in me to love righteousness for its own sake.

This is my youthful philosophy, a simple, liberal, and optimistic feeling, though I fear I shall lose some of it as I become more adult. Already, the thought that the traditional thinkers might be right, after all, and I wrong, has made me waver. Still, these are my beliefs at sixteen. If I am mistaken, I am too young to realize my error. Sometimes, in a moment of mental despair, I think of the words, “God loves an honest doubter,” and I am comforted.