We cannot function without beliefs. No one can. Beliefs are the only thing we have to work from and off of. What is reality but whatever we each believe it is. Until it asserts itself.

There are many stories in air transportation where a captain believed one thing, but was overruled by something else, something real, and the aircraft and everyone in it were lost. The beliefs mattered up to that last moment, and only the beliefs mattered. They were the sole inputs for all the captain’s decisions and actions up to that point. Then, what was real became all that mattered.

The first space shuttle loss was that way. It exploded just over one minute after launch. The seven crewmembers all died in a fully televised spectacularly chilling event. It was January in 1986, and January means cold in many places, even at times in Florida, the launch site. On this morning, it was cold enough for ice to have covered everything before dawn. Temperatures at prior launches had been in the fifties, sixties, seventies, and even eighties.

There were two booster rockets that powered the shuttle (looking like tubes 12 feet in diameter and 45 feet long). The boosters were built in sections, and the joints of the assembled sections each had two ring seals. Each rubber-like ring seal was ¼ inch thick and 12 feet in diameter. These seals had been somewhat problematic in the past already. Now, the unprecedented cold temperatures added to it all by making them stiff. This was a well-known characteristic of the material from which these seals were made. The seals needed to be warm enough to be rubbery, so that hot burning rocket gases could push on them and flatten them a little and squeeze them into the small extra space around them making a tight fit. On this launch, the gases, heated to thousands of degrees, leaked past one set of rings enough to, like a torch, burn nearby metal fittings needed to hold a fuel tank in place. The tank came loose. There were managers who knew these seals had not been tested for use at such low temperatures, but the decision had been made to launch anyhow. Convenient belief that morning won out over technical concerns. Recognizing and confronting real would have been a frustration. It would have caused problems. Belief, on the other hand, was comforting. It helped ignore real things that were unpleasant to think about.

This seemingly natural human tendency to choose beliefs over reality has been a recurring storytelling theme for centuries. Aesop lived over 2500 years ago. His hundreds of Aesop’s Fables are littered with examples of characters acting upon
beliefs, ignoring what is real, and finding their demise when what is real comes. Take *The Horse, The Hunter, and The Stag* as an example.

A quarrel had arisen between the horse and the stag, so the horse came to a hunter to ask his help to take revenge on the stag. The hunter agreed, but said: "If you desire to conquer the stag, you must permit me to place this piece of iron between your jaws, so that I may guide you with these reins, and allow this saddle to be placed upon your back so that I may keep steady upon you as we follow after the enemy."

The horse agreed to the conditions, and the hunter soon saddled and bridled him. Then, with the aid of the hunter, the horse soon overcame the stag, and said to the hunter, "Now, get off, and remove those things from my mouth and back." "Not so fast, friend," said the hunter. "I have now got you under bit and spur, and prefer to keep you as you are at present."

The horse chose to believe only the portion of the facts it liked, and ignored the looming and obvious real other things that in the end prevailed. *The accepted reference list for all Aesop is the Perry Index, by Ben Edwin Perry, professor of classics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign from 1924 to 1960, should you want to read more.*

Another illustrative set of stories, *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, collected and compiled by the Grimm brothers in the more recent early 1800’s, gives us over 200 stories with lessons underpinning them. Many of the stories include tricksters using beliefs to gain from others. In *The Singing Bone*, that is exactly what happened.

A king promised his only daughter to whoever man could rid the community of a terribly destructive and dangerous wild beast. The younger of two brothers killed the beast, but then the older brother killed his successful younger brother and carried away the dead animal as if it were his own conquest. He told everyone that he had accomplished the feat, and the village and king believed this murdering brother. So, the princess went to her new home with him. Later, a chance discovery of a bone from the younger brother’s body exposed the real story. The wicked brother was sewn into a sack and drowned.

The evil brother gave the community a belief, something intangible, in exchange for a real and highly prized, very tangible reward in those times, a princess. Belief prevailed, but only for a time. Then things became real.

Also, there are Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales. Many people have heard of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” Another story, Mr. Andersen’s touching “The Little Match Girl,” makes the point that beliefs, even false ones, are not necessarily undesirable. They may be all one has to help comfort suffering. It may be the only defense one has against the harshness of what is real. Things can get that bad. The little girl’s life’s end was sweetened by her fleeting moments of match-lit imaginary beliefs as her world of nothing closed in around her, alone, with no one to care or help.

Coming back to modern times, the financial crisis of 2008 painted the backdrop for another story where belief made even one of the clearest of minds wander
away from reality, at least for a time. Alan Greenspan was Chairman of the Federal Reserve from 1987 to 2006. One time, before the crisis unfolded, Mr. Greenspan was asked in a broadcasted interview how long the growing real estate bubble could continue, and Mr. Greenspan said that it could theoretically go on continuously without stop. He stated that belief while ignoring that the rise in real estate values was surpassing the rise in people’s ability to pay for higher home values, a reality, a mathematical reality. Then, 2008 arrived.

Later, when asked about that earlier belief, Mr. Greenspan courageously and bluntly acknowledged, “I was wrong. I don’t know what I was thinking.” For a moment, belief prevailed where calculations and mathematical reality, the life and substance of a profession, were to the contrary.

Irving L. Janis worked 40 years as a member of the faculty in Yale University’s Psychology Department. He gave us the “groupthink” word. Dr. Janis spent years studying how teams of people acting as a unit in a planned and thoughtful management manner, can together choose a contrived belief that is contrary to fact. In his 1982 book, GROUPTHINK, Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes, Second Edition, Dr. Janis talks about five such cases under the administrations of five different U.S. Presidents.

- Franklin D. Roosevelt  Pearl Harbor
- Harry S. Truman  North Korea
- John F. Kennedy  Bay of Pigs
- Lyndon B. Johnson  Vietnam War
- Richard M. Nixon  Watergate

Also, he provides two alternate examples of decision-making to the contrary, where realistic inputs reigned in the meetings and governed the choices made.

- Harry S. Truman  Marshall Plan
- John F. Kennedy  Cuban Missile Crisis

But we do not have to look to history for examples. Today, we carefully document exactly how many students graduate from college with debt and precisely how much debt they have. We publish statistics on incomes and show that most of these graduates can expect incomes too low to pay off their debts if they are also to assume financially independent adult lives. They will need help of some kind in the end (or will need to endure a life of unforeseen financial suffering).
It is very real that many people can’t afford health care. The statistics are public conversation. We operate food pantries and openly talk of food deserts in inner cities. There are public employee pension funds that are without question by anyone beyond recovery. The Congressional Budget Office at one time said almost all state and local pension funds were underfunded. By how much? It seems that funding at only 70% or so is common, but Illinois is well below 50% with several other states ranking near. On top of all this, hard evidence shows that wealth is going to fewer and fewer people, with the incomes of everyone else falling.

We can do the math and we do do the math. We publish the math. But, we so often like to believe something else. Believing the algebra would be a frustration. We are taught algebra. We make it mandatory in school, and we must pass tests on it. But, we also find out that we can at times ignore it when we are adults, and we can build lives, at least parts of our lives, based on beliefs instead, and get away with it often if not always. Where we can, we look the other way when faced with facts beyond our beliefs. We like sticking with the beliefs, rather than seeing contradicting scenery. We do this over and over again, until real grabs ahold of us, and takes over. Then we react, if we can, and if it’s not too late.

On the other hand, and it seems almost incomprehensible, despite our overriding sometimes muddleheaded reliance on beliefs, or make-believe, we refute our own selves daily by our actions. We put beliefs aside and assume a singular dedication to the real when it comes to our own individual personal worlds. We measure everything about us to decimal points in dollars, and we account for our lives, our identities, and our successes, failures, and self-worth as detailed dollar amounts. Dollars are not beliefs. They are real, and they obtain for us real things. They determine who we are to others and how we live and what we do. Beliefs are how we deal with obligations, but real dollars are how we deal with our own personal daily actions. We live dual lives, like in hypocrisy.

As is often found in religions, our economics religion also centers itself on trading beliefs for dollars. The end game is for any one citizen or group of citizens to gain or retain dollars by giving only beliefs to others in return. We express desires for righteous policies and laudatory principles that appear to have historical roots. But behind it all there are dollar amounts and power awards that benefit certain individuals collectively while enforcing dollar shortages for others. We have beliefs that explain why this selfish and greedy realism is acceptable and even ethical, moral, and right. Our beliefs take us up to that point, and then they stop short, because we can’t prove anything. Going beyond, those beliefs could be troublesome, and our religion might come into question. Most people would rather not go there.