



# **The Skeptical Believer: Telling Stories to Your Inner Atheist**

*Daniel Taylor*

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## **The Skeptical Believer: Telling Stories to Your Inner Atheist** Daniel Taylor

When it comes to God, there are believers and there are skeptics. But there are also Skeptical Believers, a particular kind of believer who lives with an Inner Atheist that is constantly raising objections. The Skeptical Believer is a book about making peace with your Inner Atheist, and about working out useful responses to questions that have no definitive answers. It steers a middle course between the modernist conviction that faith is agreement with a set of statements about God and the postmodernist assertion that religious faith is just one story among many, no more or less true than any other. The Skeptical Believer proposes that one can live a rich and meaningful life of faith without proof (and despite the weaknesses of the church) by seeing oneself as a character within an ancient story. As believers, skeptical or otherwise, always have.

## **The Skeptical Believer: Telling Stories to Your Inner Atheist Details**

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# From Reader Review The Skeptical Believer: Telling Stories to Your Inner Atheist for online ebook

## Paul says

My name is Paul ... and I am a Skeptical Believer.

I've been savoring this book. Its short chapters and conversational style make that a good way to read it. This isn't a book about apologetics, except maybe where one's own faith is concerned. It's more about epistemology--how we know what we know--where it comes to the really important matters upon which our most important commitments rest. The author's musings are interrupted occasionally by the snarky, sarcastic comments of his "Inner Atheist." I've heard them all before and found them more annoying than anything else. My inner atheist is a bit more subtle.

I had been an intentional Christian for about 13 years when, in 1987, I read Daniel Taylor's book, *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian and Risk of Commitment*. I felt like the author had somehow gotten inside my head and knew very well the questions and doubts about my faith with which I had been wrestling for some time. I was rather awestruck by this. What I read in that book greatly helped make my faith intellectually and reflectively sustainable and growing through many years of wrestling and inquiry.

With this book, Daniel Taylor has done it to me again, discussing in much greater detail how faith and the doubts of a skeptical nature can reinforce and balance each other in crucial ways. Taylor understands the importance of doctrinal belief and propositional truth but sets them in the context of relational truths that are what support anyone's most important beliefs; whether he or she be a "religious" person or not. We are all characters living out a life story. Reflection on the nature of that story and the meaning it gives to one's life is a frequent concern for many people; even some Christians who may fit the Taylor's description of himself as a "skeptical believer." For most of my life, I've had a part in the most compelling story I know. Daniel Taylor has articulated the thinking behind the living of such a life for someone like me better than any one that I know of. It's been quite a journey. I look forward to where it all leads.

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## David Gregg says

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“Disbelief is wasted on atheists.”

Richard Rodriguez

The first time I can remember doubting God was when I first heard about sex. I was seven and it sounded so disgusting that I shouted to the kid who told me as he walked away, “God would never let that happen!” But inside a little voice wondered if God had

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## **Aleah says**

Loved this. Would have been 5 star, but went a bit long. With the right editor I think this could be streamlined into a best seller.

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## **Autumn Kotsiuba says**

I saw the title and something in me went, "Oh, so that's what I am." And I've always hated it. I'm skeptical about everything. I question...well, all the time. I wrestle with my beliefs and with contradictions. It sort of sucks, especially when some (well-meaning) people consider this "weak faith."

But. I'm lucky enough to have good friends who 1) share my "ailment," as well as 2) those who don't, but put up with me anyways. I found (some) answers to my questions in books and personal study. Which is good. But I don't think I've been necessarily looking for answers alone, so much as justification for asking the questions in the first place.

This book was exhilarating and humbling at the same time. The former because I needed to know that the way I'm wired isn't wrong, and the latter because it showed that those who don't doubt the way I do aren't necessarily "following blindly," they're just different. I mean, I get it. Some of my friends can endure existential crises with me for hours; others lose interest by the first question..

I could go on about this for a long time, but let it suffice to say that this is great for anyone who's ever felt like an outsider within their own faith. The author's premise boils down to the belief that, while "truth" in the abstract certainly exists, it honestly doesn't matter until it's in the context of reality. Philosophy vs. life, you know?

Anyways, enough from me. I just want to save some of my favorite quotes:

"All arguments, all attempts to make meaning out of the human experience, leak." - author

"They cannot scare me with their empty spaces / Between stars--on stars where no human race is. / I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places." - R. Frost

"Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd." - Voltaire

"The existence of twilight is not an argument against the distinction between night and day." - Samuel Johnson

"Why do I believe in God?...the answer is never the same." - author

"Not everything has a name." - Alex Solzhenitsyn

"Perhaps the first danger of the theologian is being able to write without being astonished." - Belden Lane

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## **Richard Heyduck says**

As one who is a firmly committed follower of Christ yet with a high doubt tolerance, I have found Taylor's work congenial. His short, pithy chapters confront the nature of believing (and non-believing) skepticism.

Taylor's major premise is that the truth of faith is best encountered and understood in the form of story, not propositions abstracted from that story. As those who have read my book know, I am very much in line with such a view.

If you are a "skeptical believer" or interact with people who are, this would be well worth your consideration.

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## **Luke Paulsen says**

This is a tricky book to review. It isn't really a work of apologetics-- thus the "Believer" part of the title. But it isn't really a work of devotion either, because devotion assumes the truths of faith, and there's that "Skeptical" in the title. It isn't making a well-defined argument, per se, because one central thesis of *The Skeptical Believer*-- so far as it can even be said to have one-- seems to be that arguments are less relevant to day-to-day belief than stories are. But it doesn't seem to be a unified story either-- it's broken up into a series of short and more or less independent reflections. Reflections on what? Taylor never says exactly, but I would roughly state the topic as "the life of faith as story rather than argument".

This can all be a bit frustrating at times, especially for the book's intended audience-- Christian believers (including Taylor and myself) who like to be rational / skeptical / argumentative and are bothered by having an "Inner Atheist" who likes to attack faith from that perspective. Taylor's answer-- though it's a little misleading to even call it an answer-- asks us to give up this focus on rationality. Not in the sense of ceasing to be skeptical, or in the sense of ceasing to believe that Christianity is logically true, but simply in the sense of not making it the basis for one's spiritual life. In the place of argument, Taylor proposes story as a foundation. This is annoyingly (perhaps intentionally) vague, but it seems to entail a shift from "conclusion" to "choice" as the mover of faith, and from understanding to imagination or empathy as its dominant mode of thought.

This is asking a lot of a Skeptical Believer, and what really makes the book work is how Taylor shows-- not describes-- how it works from his own perspective. This book really clicked when I stopped trying to read it as a series of claims and started thinking of it more like a face-to-face conversation with the author. He's an older guy who has seen a lot of life and faith, and his writing style is wonderfully conversational (if a tiny bit stilted and awkward in spots). One striking feature of the book is the peppering of parenthetical interjections from Taylor's "Inner Atheist", which Taylor-- in a good demonstration of his approach-- usually opts to move past rather than refute.

I read this book in small doses over a long period of time, which seems like how it's meant to be read. Those looking for striking insights or bold claims should look elsewhere; it's more like the book is teaching a particular way of thinking about (and, eventually, living) one's faith. I also wouldn't recommend it to anyone besides the intended audience: Christians, including "former"/"maybe"/"sort-of" Christians, who feel left out by all this talk of faith and who see skepticism as an obstacle to their spiritual life. But for those who fit that description, this book is capable of seriously changing the way you think about belief.

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## Ann says

If it hadn't been for the author's irreverent "inner atheist" who kept interrupting his thoughtful discourse with sarcastic remarks, I would have given this book five stars. (It was the sarcasm that annoyed me, not the atheism. *My* inner atheist is more polite.) It was a very enjoyable read nevertheless. I was gratified to see healthy skepticism (not cynicism) presented in a positive light. No thinking person can honestly claim to be 100% certain about matters of faith. For certainty obviates any need for faith. But neither is it a prerequisite for commitment. Taylor shows how one can "live a rich and meaningful life of faith without proof (and despite the weaknesses of the church) by seeing oneself as a character within an ancient story." While the chapters are short and the style light and witty, the ruminations presented are profound and could perhaps even be life-changing for anyone trapped in a meaningless life of inaction for fear of commitment to a story that might not be true.

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## Joel says

*The Skeptical Believer* makes the case that it makes sense to live a life of (Christian) belief even if you are skeptical of religious doctrines. This is not an apologetic work. Dan Taylor is not trying to give you arguments about why Christianity is true or other belief systems must be false. Instead, *The Skeptical Believer* re-casts the question of religious belief as a question of commitment to a story that can make sense of life. More than make sense, he asserts that the Christian story can make life meaningful and rich and ethically challenging.

While he defends skepticism as useful and (for a certain set of people) unavoidable, he argues that committing to Christianity is more like deciding to marry someone than figuring out a calculus problem. Certainty is not possible; too much skepticism and questioning can kill the relationship. Standing back and refusing to participate in a story is itself a choice of a story, a choice that separates you from an essential part of life.

Dan Taylor fleshes out this point with story and metaphor, more than rigorous logical argument. Indeed, the book is at its weakest when it strays into traditional logical reasoning. However, when it is comparing truth to stew or expanding on a Flannery O'Connor quote, it brings a new and helpful context to old questions. (Let me just mention here that this book has fantastic chapter epigraphs.)

The book could easily feel preachy if Dan Taylor did not convincingly identify himself as an incurable skeptic as well as a faithful believer. It does not feel preachy though for Dan Taylor does so identify.

There is a lot more that I could talk about here. There are the sometimes annoying, sometimes hilarious, always sarcastic insertions by Taylor's "Inner Atheist." There is the argument that logic can never get us very far in questions of faith. There is intriguing comparison of uncertainty in life to suspense in a novel. There is the acknowledgement that Taylor's whole approach could be used to argue for just about any religious commitment. But I'm just going to mention it. If you really want to know, ask me. Or read the book yourself.

*The Skeptical Believer* will not appeal to the confirmed believer or the confirmed atheist. This book speaks to those who find themselves perpetually on the fringes of belief. It offers comfort and affirmation, but also a challenge. I can't think of what else you would want it to do.

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### **Kristen says**

I gave this book five stars even though I found the tone annoying at times and I agree with other reviewers that it could have benefited from more editing because this book in many ways pulled me from the depths of an existential crisis. I needed to hear Taylor's arguments about there being a place for doubters in the story of faith and I needed to hear a committed Christian author verbalize doubts and questions that I wrestle with constantly. I also am willing to bear with the meandering writing style because I think it works with his argument that you cannot rationalize your way to a clear understanding of God; instead, He can be glimpsed through art, story, meditation, worship, etc.

I found this book to be reassuring, inspirational, and just the right amount of convicting. I appreciate his conception of God and Jesus as both known and unknown, near and far, personal and mysterious. His worldview resonates with mine more so than any other religious author I have read. I also liked that he was constantly referencing other kindred spirits, both literary (Graham Greene, Flannery O'Connor, Marilynne Robinson) and philosophical (CS Lewis, Soren Kierkegaard) because it directed me towards further reading. I also found his suggestion to think of faith as story and his reliance on literary examples to be persuasive, though that is not surprising since Taylor and I share a graduate education in literature.

I would recommend this book to anyone who was raised in the church and felt distanced from it for any of the following reasons: you did not agree with the politics being espoused by the church, you were turned off by the racist/homophobic/sexist views of church members, you simply did not "feel" the presence of God that so many of your fellow church goers claimed to feel, or you struggled with not being able to rationally understand the nature of God, death, the afterlife, hell, or eternity. I don't think this book would be as helpful for those who have never had any sort of faith and are not interested in it, but I highly recommend it to anyone who had faith once and has since fell away from it or those who are reconciling their adulthood selves with their childhood faith and trying to decide what to keep and what to throw out.

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### **Clayton Keenon says**

A little repetitive, but chock full of good nuggets and turns of phrase. Also, it resonated with this skeptical believer's experience.

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### **Harley says**

Good content, but I just found it too long.

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## **John Martindale says**

I love this book! Taylor has a refreshing perspective and a good sense of humor. It was affirming and encouraging to come across another Christian who has similar reasons for remaining in the faith despite of a skeptical disposition and being inundated by a plethora of uncertainties and doubts. For us it all ultimately comes down to Story. Both me and Taylor feel the Christian story is the best one out there--both of us are familiar with the myth of certainty--both of us know we need to commit and become part of the story rather than sitting on the fence. Both of us see no convincing reason to reject the Christian story unless there is a better story out there to embrace and as of yet, we can't find any and its not because we've not looked.

The alternatives to the Christian story are just as speculative and filled with problems as our own story. With Pascal we feel that if we're wrong, well, when we die, we won't exist, so who the hell cares. If we're right, we got eternal bliss with the most Amazing Being, who just happened to speak the universe into existence. If we put our faith in the grand myth of the materialist (so popular among the academics of our age), we have no true basis for morality, hope, truth or for goodness. instead we thrown into the existential angst where we must seek to create our own meaning (while knowing its meaningless) in a cruel and indifference world, all this while knowing that in end it will not matter a wit what we believe.

This Christian story on which we've placed out bet, is an Epic Story; as well as a Quest, a Pilgrimage and a love story filled with wonderful characters. It's a rich, complex, comprehensive and full of mystery. If embraced, we be can believe that at the bottom of everything is love and grace, instead of pointlessness, chaos and death. Also, we have a firm foundation for hope, virtue, meaning and purpose. Yeah, even if I am deluded, thank goodness for it! But heck, the materialist of our day might be deluded too, heck maybe both of us are wrong and we are all brains in vats on Zoyamironova.

I read the book on my kindle and I underlined an absurd amount of this long book. I wanted to put down here some of my favorite quotes, but it would be quite the job looking for them. Maybe I'll add'em later. But yeah, for all the skeptical believers out there, read the book, I think it will enjoy it.

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## **Ed Wojniak says**

Great book! Written with humor, insight, compassion and balance. Highly recommended, even if you have less an atheist and more a skeptic as your alter-ego.

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## **Adam says**

A thought provoking book that gives validity (and Challenge) to those in the Christian walk who sometimes struggle with faith. The "inner Athiest voice" throughout the book seems more gimmick than anything and it's longer than it needs to be. That said, the ideas are important, genuine, and generally well thought out. Reccomended.

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**Moses Operandi says**

Life-changing.

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