Editors’ Note
At a time in life meant for personal exploration, it is often difficult for college students to state what they believe to be true. This year Davidson’s Lilly Program hosted several workshops in the spirit of NPR’s “This I Believe” series to help students examine and articulate their core beliefs. While daily interactions stretch minds and challenge hearts, reflection on external experiences and internal values has offered perspective for identifying guiding principles.

After a year of such programs, “This I Believe” was the obvious choice for this year’s *Availing* theme. Here we have collected creative demonstrations of spiritual discovery. In addition to direct “This I Believe” statements, students have communicated their beliefs through various media from essay to painting. Davidson students have outlined and refined their beliefs through a range of experiences from conversations over a cup of Summit coffee to tucking in an orphan boy in Bolivia. The editors would like to thank Emily Killough, Rob Spach, and the members of the Religious Life Council for their support and encouragement, as well as all the students who so willingly shared their insights with the community. We hope that the creativity of expression in the following pages will encourage you and help guide you to discover “This I Believe.”

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COSQUILLAS, TEARS, and the CHRISTIAN VISION
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This I Believe
Lauren Armstrong

I believe that when God says He created us in His image, He isn’t lying.
I believe that every person reveals a unique, significant aspect of God’s character. No matter what they believe or their life story, ever person’s journey illustrates something distinctive about the creator of the universe.

People have asked me why I love coffee dates, why I give up many hours a week to hang out with high school students, why I ask people how they’re doing and actually want to know. Until I came to Davidson, I had no answer that question. I knew that God called me to be relational and throw myself into community and human life, but I had no idea why. As I have dived into the complex world of human relationships, a beautiful transformation has begun within me. Grace, love, loving people, loving on people, mercy, tenderness, glory, redemption; all these words that I once glanced over, words I once labeled “Christianese,” have come alive. They have become an overwhelming, glorious reality. I submerge myself deeper into this web of listening, learning, understanding, and loving daily. With each deep conversation I learn more of what I consider to be my purpose: I live to lose myself in community with the God of the universe, that I might know Him and by extension, His people. I live that I might love.

So if I ask how you’re doing, please don’t consider it merely a formality. I desire to know you because I believe that you, like every part of God’s creation, have something dramatically important to reveal about the Divine. When we live in close emotional and spiritual proximity to each other, we become more like the God who exists in perpetual community within Himself. And it is in this loss of boundaries of self and the entrance into the all-encompassing, unconditional love of people and the Divine that we most reflect the God who made us. This I believe.
Our Journey to Nicaragua was prefaced with the goal of "encountering the body of Christ in Nicaragua." I must say I was a bit taken aback by this overtly religious language, and particularly avoided it when talking to my family about what we planned to do on the trip. In my mind and in my conversations, I modified the purpose to "learning about how Nicaraguans live, given their religious, historical, political and economic context."

I had forgotten about that phrase, until the last night in Nicaragua. Our leaders asked us when we had experienced the body of Christ during our days there. I paused, but instead of shying away from the language, I realized how appropriate it was. Images flooded my mind, and even more were articulated by my fellow group members. When had we not encountered Christ in Nicaragua? He has never felt closer than in the tiny living room of Mr. Mendelssohn’s house church where we shared a beautiful service filled with music, love, Spanish and English. Daniel, his mentally handicapped son wandered amongst us, resting his head in our laps or a hand on our arms. God was in the tin-roofed, dirt floored house in Samulali as we prayed in English and Spanish with Don Fernando and his family. God was in the Moravian choir, singing with all their hearts; God was dodging traffic with the elementary-aged fruit vendors; God was dancing with the street children at the shelter, Inhijambria. God was even there in la Chureca, the city dump. At first I couldn’t see Him. Surely He had abandoned this smoky Hell of combusting trash, monstrous dump trucks, and apocalyptic donkey carts piled high with rubbish. But He was unmistakable in the smiles of the children who held our hands, there in the community that clung to the fringes of the dump.

It took the disorientation of a third world country for me to value God at home. I have taken Him for granted here, where I have more than I could ever need or want. We Americans fill our days with “important” things like work and study and grocery shopping and meetings and clothes and cars. We pile these things around us and effectively guard ourselves from raw human inter-
action. Schedules separate us from our brothers and sisters, stuff clutters our lives. Nicaraguans, unable to choose these distractions, value the real, constant human connections that life presents. No matter that they have known you for ten minutes, they tell you their life story and ask profound questions. They listen.

So, what did we do in Nicaragua? We did not give out clothes or food like the missionary team with their 18 suitcases that we stood behind in customs. We did, however, meet our Nicaraguan brothers and sisters. God is where his people are; everywhere.
Woman
Joy Jiang
I Believe in Tsahaq
Sara-Kay Knicely

When she laughed for the first time it was inwardly –
at the promise of the strangers that she would bear a child –
because she knew she was shriveled, unable to receive pleasure.

When she laughed the second time it was inwardly –
Isaac: laughter in the form of a child growing in her womb –
because God knew she was not so shriveled, not wholly unable to receive pleasure.

1 cf. Genesis 18:12, 21:6
Here in Leicester Village we are far from the hurried and crowded streets of the capital Freetown. Nestled half way up Mount Aureol, Leicester Village gets a cool breeze in the early morning and late afternoons that keep the mosquitoes at bay. I watched as the families, dressed in their Sunday best, made their way down the red dusty dirt road to the garden just outside the church. Under the watchful eye of parents and grandparents, a dozen or so kids run through the church’s small garden in an effort to exhaust their nearly limitless energy.

A bit farther down the road I see a young man slowly making his way towards the church. He seems to be in his early twenties and is tall with powerful arms that show that he must work in the fields. As he approaches I see that he has a timid expression, not fitting for his strong and muscular features. Although I only saw him for a moment, I noticed that next to his left eye there was a deep vertical scar about an inch long. This scar, which I have noticed on other young men here, is evidence of his time in the RUF.

The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was a gang of rebels that for nearly a decade fought with the government forces in a heinous and brutal war for control of Sierra Leone’s rich diamond mines. There were reports of horrors – of young boys killing or raping family members, people cutting off hands and feet, and even cannibalism. The use of child soldiers, many no older than seven or eight was widespread and much of the fighting was done under a cloud of cocaine and marijuana. Many of the young boys were addicted to a drug called “brown brown,” a mixture of cocaine and gunpowder that they would put onto an open cut made on their temple so that the drug would enter their bloodstream quickly.

Now, years after the war, when the aid agencies have begun to pack up
and move onto new crisis, these young men still bear the scars of the war. After
the Lome Peace Accords were signed in 2002, many of the rebels were put
through brief periods of drug detox and then reintegrated into society.

After the church service I learned form one of my neighbors that the
young man who stood at the back of the church, Brima Kamara, had been part
of the RUF during the war. He was a teen when he was taken by the rebels and
was initiated by being forced to kill someone from his village. He left Freetown
with the rebels and only returned at the end of the war when the RUF briefly
took over the city.

It wasn't until a few years after the war that he came back to Leicester
once again. However this time he was not there to kill and rob as he had been
previously, but he was there to ask for forgiveness. When Brima returned to
Leicester, he was not immediately welcomed with open arms. However when
he asked for forgiveness from his family and friends, they hugged him and wel-
comed him home. My neighbor told me that before the war Brima would rarely
go to church with his family, but now every Sunday, and most weeknights, he
can be found standing at the back of the church with his head hung in prayer.

In the years after the war, there have been very few stories of retribu-
tion. The only one that I have heard is of a village that tied three rebel children
to stakes in the river at low tide and left them there until the high waters
drowned them. Afterwards the villagers claimed that they had not done any-
thing, but that it was the river. Some rebels did not want to return home after
the war; for fear that they would not be forgiven for their crimes. These young
men wander the streets of Freetown and often return to lives of crime and
debauchery.

However many have sought forgiveness, either in the church or with
their family members, and I have yet to hear of one case in which someone who
asked for forgiveness was not granted it. I believe that the strength and power
that the people have to forgive is rooted in their religiosity and faith in God.
While the decade of war taught me that man is capable of horrible things, the
years after the war have showed me the love and forgiveness that rests in each
person's heart.
Grandmother
Claire Asbury

July 17, 2008—9:50 pm:
eighty years old, grandmother in bubblegum pink nightgown
stands watching her second oldest son help her with her computer
talking in her Southern Alabama Georgia lilt, the most beautiful melody
about to become a grandmother twice over tomorrow, twin boys for her youngest boy—
nine times a grandmother, plus these two more, thirty-four years in the making
five children, fifty eight married years
youngest, only daughter of five—daughter of Ireland and China
daughter of Atlanta
daughter begat son begat son begat daughter begat son begat son
1951-53-57-60-66
I watch them and hum a Sufjan Stevens song to myself singing loudly
as they debate how to move files to different folders
I fell in love again
All things go all things go
Drove to Chicago
All things know all things know
Two little boys are not alive tonight;
in eleven hours they will live in this world
What a thing! To know of future existence
and yet not know so much
she is so calm
so lovely
her voice makes her, as I said, forms her
her bubble-yum gown hangs contentedly down her body.
flowing into sleep—almost, after she gets this figured out
computer questions about files about ancestry
she is the genealogy queen and I am her heiress.
But tonight I just sit on the guest bed, my old bed, the softest bed in the world
I gaze around at the bookshelves packed with old and new papers novels photos
information on family never known and never met yet significant
and the portraits of family mother great-aunt second cousins once removed and a box of letters one hundred years old that helped bring her life, my father life, and me.

I drove to New York
In a van with my friend
We slept in parking lots
I don’t mind I don’t mind
Letters sit serenely on a rickety wooden tray, their part done but never done: the family they began still moves, grows, goes…
I listen to them spar back and forth, familiar son and mother, son her father’s namesake
dangling my legs enjoying the bright pink, a summer night south sleep pink of a woman who has met many people on the day of their birth watched them be, become
tonight blurs new and old—did her youngest son have hair when he was born? Does she remember it, forty-two years ago? Will his boys have hair in twelve hours?
Her eyes are piercing, smooth, calm—
Serenity weathered in her smile but I still see it, don’t think I imagine it—like she knows something will happen tomorrow but right now it’s so quiet.
Her husband is asleep.
The big house creaks like it has for nearly fifty years, hundreds of nights.
When I hug her goodbye and kiss her soft skin and wispy hair I think Daughter/little sister/wife/mother/grandmother/great-grandmother/friend.
Grandmother again.
A grandmother to two little boys the night before they are born.
This is she, vision in pink.
Goodnight.
You came to save us
All things go all things go
To recreate us
All things grow all things grow

-July 17, 2008
11:09 pm
Creek
Emily Hassell
Reflection
Carrie Boyle

I had heard it described to me before I traveled to Nicaragua the sensation of having a full heart. On a few occasions prior to my trip I even believed I had reached this state when overwhelmed by gratitude or love, anger or grief. But within a few days of arriving in Managua, I realized that I had never before understood the true sensation of a full heart. It is a wonderfully gratifying, terribly painful, gloriously messy, full five-senses experience that hit me full on in Nicaragua and fundamentally altered the shape of my heart forever.

My first experience with my newly filled heart came late on a Monday evening after a long day in Managua. My heart was saturated with anger after visiting La Chureca, the Managua City Dump, anger that I voiced so hard and fast into my journal that the pages are filled with nearly illegible scribbles peppered by rips and tears in the page from my blinding rage. One page is almost incomprehensible — words sprawling outside the lines, no punctuation to speak of, no line of thought to trace. another little boy along the way whose image will probably stick with me forever — he was dirty and clearly malnourished but he had on a t-shirt that said “future leader” with the seal of the president of the united states emblazoned on the front it was so sickeningly ironic OUR ACTIONS OUR SICKENING CONSUMER HABITS OUR GROSS EXCESSES OUR GREED MASKED AS FEAR OF COMMUNISM literally rolled the dice for this little boy before he was born and yet he wears the cast-aside shirt from some pseudo-guilty american just like me — there are so many children in the dump I was struck by the utter sense of hopelessness that faces those kids how the hell do you get up every morning knowing that most likely for the rest of your life you’ll be living in the middle of smoke and filth with no way out HOW THE HELL DO WE LIVE WITH THIS

I remember lying on the bed, gasping for breath from tears and exhaustion after scribbling nearly five pages of my incomprehensible anger and realizing that beneath the rage that I poured out and that I thought had filled my very being was a wellspring of heart-wrenching love deeper than I had ever felt. I thought back to our walk through La Chureca with Herson, a twenty-six-year-old father of five girls who took us to his own home in the neighborhoods of the
dump. As soon as we neared his home, one of his daughters ran up to me and grabbed my hand, pulling me along the path and giggling with excitement. Another daughter met us along the way and hurled herself at me, clinging to my legs as we walked with surprising strength. We didn’t exchange any words, only smiles, but I fell in love with their shrieks of laughter, their tiny hands in mine, their esperanza, those little girls that will keep my heart forever anchored in La Chureca.

Beneath this still lay something else entirely, I discovered, a reservoir of emotions heretofore untapped. I reported in my journal feeling distinctly like I was watching a magician pull an infinitely long chain of silk scarves out of his mouth, knowing that he could not possibly stuff them all in there, that there must be something else at work that I was yet to understand. Along with a raging anger and an equally violent love I felt a powerful sense of attachment to, oneness with, and compassion for the people of La Chureca. Upon our return from the dump, we arrived at the sanctuary of Batahola Norte shell-shocked and hollow and had begun a tour of the church grounds when, one by one, many of my team members dropped back from the group and collapsed on the pews in the sanctuary, overcome by the emotions of our experience. As the rest of the tour left, we stayed in the sanctuary in front of a mural of the new birth of Christ, a birth that the artists depicted to be attended by so many faces of so many revolutions — Oscar Romero, Che Guevara, Carlos Fonseca, Augusto Sandino — and cried for Herson and his daughters, for the people of La Chureca, and for Nicaragua. We sat, arms wrapped around each other, tears falling on each other’s faces, for what seemed like hours, suffering both with each other in our mutual grief and anger and with the people of Nicaragua, and I felt that as we sat, we slowly became a part of the beauty and the colors of the Batahola mural, standing side by side with each other and our Nicaraguan neighbors, sharing grief for the past and hope for the future.

This fullness of my heart is the most powerful gift I received in Nicaragua — no, it is Nicaragua, through and through. If a country can be said to have a heart, Nicaragua’s would be full to bursting. As North Americans, we tend to be afraid of feeling too much at once, closing the gates to our heart and crystallizing its shape and contours long before it has reached its full capacity; the Nicaraguans I met feel no such restraint. They embrace the complexity of their anger toward injustice and simultaneous pride in their country’s history as they take to the streets in mass protests full of fury, passion and joie de vivre, as
we saw countless times on our trip. They meet head-on the conflict of their nervousness at hosting a group of North Americans for the first time and their deeply powerful commitment to hospitality toward their brothers and sisters in Christ and sacrifice their time, their labor, and their own beds to host them, as
my host family did for us. They acknowledge the reality of the tremendous injustices hopelessly entrenched in the political system and, at the same time, the reality of a little girl finding the only path to survival through prostitution on the Callecon de la Muerte, the Alleyway of Death, as Mirna Sánchez García saw in the eyes of the girls she houses and mentors in Managua. In short, they live life with a full heart.

I have a professor who likens one’s experience after a deep reading of a book to a paper that has gotten wet – once it is wet, it can never be un-wet. It will still hold the telltale wrinkles of water stains long after it dries. I feel the same phenomenon applies to my post-Nicaragua heart- once it has been filled, it can never be the same. Life with a full heart is a markedly different experience – relationships are stronger, pain is deeper, colors are brighter, love is fiercer, God is nearer, faith is richer. God made our hearts pliant enough that they can stretch to include every child that holds our hand, every place that breaks our spirit, and every emotion that overcomes us once we learn how to let them in, and it is this that I learned in Nicaragua.
What I learned during my week in Nicaragua is that some things have to be experienced to become real. I started thinking that something might be wrong with the world’s political and economic systems around eighth grade. I started believing that my faith had an effect on the way I interact with those systems near the end of high school. But the world’s injustice, God’s love for the poor, and my own responsibility to live in a just way did not become real for me until after I met a man who lives in the Managua city dump and saw other people scavenging through piles of trash for recyclables to sell.

I was struck by the view walking into La Chureca. We walked downhill into the dump, which gave us a view of piles of trash as far as the eye could see. This view backed up into the mountain, so the immediate visual impression I had was that the trash actually did go on forever, that the piles eventually became mountains of refuse and filth. That impression was metaphorically borne out by Herson, our guide for the afternoon, who lives in La Chureca and spoke of his own hopelessness that he could escape the life he lived under his own power. For him La Chureca does go on forever.

Perhaps “hopelessness” is too strong a word though. Despite the intensity of the day-to-day struggle that the people who live there experience, human dignity and caring still blossom in the garbage dump. I was struck by the fact that one could hear music while in the dump. I was even more struck when another member of our group pointed out that although Herson and his family live thirty feet from a standing lagoon where mosquitoes breed, their yard is still kept immaculate. These are people who live the beatitudes, who know that theirs is the Kingdom of God.
Cosquillas, Tears, and the Christian Vision

Kennedy Catton

What is the Christian vision? In the abstract, it is to spread the gospel and the tangible love of Jesus across cultural barriers and to revel in the ways that the peoples of the world reflect God and worship him differently. In the specific, it is delivering clothes and Bibles to a poor village in the Andes mountains; watching three teenage orphan boys translate from Quechua to Spanish so that poor villagers can receive free medical treatment from North American nurses; pursuing a twelve-year old who has run away though dark streets and political rallies so that he knows someone loves him enough to follow him; tucking a toddler into bed and whispering “te quiero mucho!” because he will never experience his own mother’s love.

I spent June and July in Cochabamba, Bolivia, working with eighty boys given into the care and custody of the Bolivia Life Center. Faith has always been central to my life, but working at the BLC was about the faith in my hands, not just the faith in my head. James 1:27 says, “Pure and undefiled religion is this: to visit the orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.” This summer, I visited those orphans. I saw the physical hurts of street children, and the emotional distress of little boys whose parents had abandoned and rejected them. In Bolivia, the brokenness of our world is clear. One night, while doing evangelism in the central plaza of Cochabamba, a teenaged street child begged from us. We bought him food, but my heart grieved over the unmistakable signs that he sniffed glue. His behavior was erratic: he cried when he dropped his food on the ground, then wiped it on his sweater and ran back to his pimp, sitting on the side of the square, drinking. The street boy another staff member from Davidson, Kim, that he was fifteen and his name was Roberto. Kim told me, “Look at him, then look at our Roberto,” referencing a young teenager who had skipped three grades in one year of living at the BLC. She couldn’t have said anything to make the desper-
ation of his situation plainer. Looking at this Roberto, I felt his need for redemption and, even more, the barriers that prevented it. I knew very well that the Life Center didn’t take boys over the age of twelve, that the government had to give them to the BLC for us to have legal custody over them—that, even if these things weren’t true, Roberto had already sustained significant brain damage from drugs that would always make life harder for him.
I don’t know what happened to Roberto. A member of the local church was talking with him when we left, presumably to offer him hope—shelter from physical cold and the spiritual darkness of his life. We prayed for Roberto on the bus back to the Life Center that night. As I cried over him and over my own inability to help him, I remembered that it was out of another man’s feeling of helplessness that the Bolivia Life Center, now home to eighty children with histories of abandonment and abuse, began. I also realized that if I, who witnessed Roberto’s plight for an hour, cared enough to cry for him and provide him with a meal, how much more did God, who knew Roberto for the whole of his fifteen years and has an infinitely deeper capacity to love, care for him and provide for him? After this summer, I have no interest in religion composed only of belief in God and church attendance. In that, God is dead. True Christianity is to be the hands and feet of Jesus, to visit the widows and orphans, to live with a passion not to leave the world unchanged.
I believe in the power of an open mouth, cheek raising, teeth showing smile because I know what it feels like to not get one. This fall during my first semester at college I experienced homelessness. For forty-eight hours I wore all my belongings (baggy T-shirt, second-hand sweatpants, tattered windbreaker, worn-out sneakers and dirty blanket) on my back, panhandled for money from the people passing on the street, scrounged for food out of trashcans, begged to use public restrooms, slept on the freezing concrete throughout the night, attempted to get job applications from disgusted employers and most depressingly I was ignored and humiliated by everyone. During those two days I learned what it felt like to not only be insignificant, but more painfully I learned what it meant to be completely invisible. I stood in front of the Smithsonian National History Museum in Washington D.C as crowds walked by for thirty minutes and not a single person acknowledged that I was a human being. Instead the general public put the greatest physical and emotional distance between themselves and me as they could.

It is said that the most charitable thing one can do is to give someone a smile. Whoever says that must have felt the immense pain that comes from not receiving one. The homeless, otherwise known as the loud, the vulgar, the lazy, the drug or alcohol addicted, and the worthless were the only people who took the time to talk to me. The homeless, who are too often forgotten, were the only people who stopped their lives to acknowledge me. This might not seem like an altruistic endeavor but it is when you consider that the homeless population is forced to fight for survival every day. Like the rest of society they must keep a job, eat food, and maintain a relationship with their family; however, they must do all that without the stability of a permanent home. The business class and the politicians on the other hand, whose monuments surrounded me for those forty-eight hours, did not even notice me. I can recall many businessmen who caught sight of me and instantly looked away or even changed walking paths.
How ironic, that those whom our country praises for their wisdom and meticulous care towards the growth and success of our fatherland, in fact, not only ignore but also are disgusted by a significant part of our nation’s community, the homeless.

Smiles come with no expense but yet they enrich those who receive them. They take only a moment but yet the memory can last a lifetime. I vividly remember the only man outside of the homeless population who looked me in my eyes and smiled. At that particular moment I was taking one of his free samples of yogurt with no intent of buying any of his merchandise, I smelled and my fingers were covered in dirt, but he still smiled at me. That small gesture was enough to change my down trotted mood towards society and realize the impact of his generosity.

Something as simple as a smile can be all it takes to change a person’s life or attitude. A smile symbolizes the recognition of a person’s existence. Smiling at someone communicates that that person’s life has meaning; and no matter who that person is or what that person does they have a purpose. Smiles are an equalizer; unlike society they do not discriminate. The young and old, big and small, poor and rich, sheltered and non-sheltered all share the ability to smile. No matter what person of race, nationality or economic status smiles at you, that smile is worth the same. I believe that smiles have the power to change the world because I’ve experienced them changing mine.
Psalm 93:4
Sara-Kay Knicely

Mightier than the thunder of the great waters,
mightier than the breakers of the sea—
the LORD on high is mighty.
Distance
Matt Lotz
Theology over Coffee
Thomas Noel

I join a friend for coffee
At the corner of 4th and Main,
She points to the morning’s headline,
The list of all those slain.
    She asks me
What I believe,
How I believe,
Why I believe,
In dark times such as these.
    “Give me a reason,” she says
“for this thing that you call faith.
You kneel, and pray, and sing,
    But I just call it waste.”
I ponder for a moment,
Sip my coffee, black and hot;
Then I rub my chin and ask,
    “Can you tell me why not?”
    “Why not what?” she cries,
With a scowl upon her face,
    “Why not believe in God
With death all over the place?”
I want to tell her everything,
About everything I believe;
I’d like to give her some sentiment,
Though I know she’d think it naïve.

“I can’t explain it all away,”
I reply and sit up straight,
“Some things don’t fit into words,
For some answers we must wait.”

I can tell that she’s unsatisfied,
By the look that she’s shooting back,
I set my coffee down and ask,

“Can you tell me why the night sky’s black?
For in my mind I know it’s true
That I’ve been touched by the sea;
And in my heart I know it’s true,
That spring’s grass will always grow;
And in my soul I know for sure,
From somewhere the wind will blow.
And all I can tell you about it is
That I know it is not by me.”
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Marybeth Campeau
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