

Conversation with a Non-Believer



Thom Rutledge

Author of Embracing Fear

"I don't believe in therapy."

Most of us have heard that one. It is an interesting position to take --- an extreme statement that can never be based on fact. It is just an arbitrary position. One might instead say, "I don't think therapy is all that it is cracked up to be," or "I don't think I need therapy," or "I have known people who went to therapy and they just got worse," or "I think therapy is for weaklings," or "I have not one clue what really happens in therapy so I plan to avoid it," or "I don't want to be accountable for my opinions and actions," etc.

It's almost impossible for me to resist a conversation with the non-believers --- a conversation like this one:

John: I don't believe in therapy

Thom: You mean you don't think therapy exists like you don't believe in Santa Claus?

John: No, I mean I don't think therapy does anybody any good.

Thom: You think therapy has never done anybody any good? Ever?

John: Well, no, I suppose that some kind of therapy somewhere might have helped somebody at least a little.

Thom: So it's not entirely true that you don't believe in therapy, right?

John: Well --- [pause] --- I guess that's right. But I don't believe therapy is really that helpful.

Thom: How helpful?

John: What?

Thom: You said that you don't think that therapy is *that* helpful. I'm wondering what that means. You don't believe therapy is helpful in what specific way?

John: [visibly frustrated] You are playing with my words.

Thom: That's not my intention. I am just trying to understand more specifically what you meant when you said, "I don't believe in therapy."

John: The truth is I have known some people who went to therapy and they didn't get any better and I just think that a person should be able to solve their own problems.

Thom: That helps me understand more. Your experience with people you have known in the past give you examples of therapy not being effective, right?

John: Yes.

Thom: And you don't think people should get help to solve their problems. Is that what you mean?

John: No. [Noticeably frustrated] I just don't think therapy works.

Thom: Ever?

John: No, not ever. I already said that I suppose that therapy can be helpful for some people.

Thom: Do you know any of those people?

John: [pause] Yes, I guess I do. But no, not really. I know someone who claims therapy helped her, but I think it just made her overly analytical --- and to tell you the truth, more high maintenance.

Thom: So in that case, she says therapy helped, but you think it made her worse?

John: Yes.

Thom: But she thinks she is better? Is that right?

John: Yes.

Thom: She thinks she is better but in your opinion she is wrong about that?

John: [pause, apparently considering the question] I guess that's what I think.

Thom: May I go back to something you said earlier?

John: Yeah, sure. Why not?

Thom: You said that you don't think people should need help to solve their problems. Now, I'm pretty sure you can't mean that across the board. I mean, if I have a problem with my plumbing or my roof is leaking or I'm not good at preparing my taxes, it would make sense for me to get help, right? It would even make sense for me to pay for it.

John: Well, of course --- but that's different.

Thom: How specifically is it different?

John: [another pause, another sigh] It's different because people should be able to deal with their own *personal* problems.

Thom: Well, to me a leaky roof is a personal problem, but I know that's not what you mean. I think I'm getting clearer about this now. Let me see if I get this right: When you say you don't believe in therapy, you mean that you think people should be able to solve all their personal problems without getting help --- or at least without getting help that you pay for. And you think that therapy in some cases can actually make people worse, even when they think they are better. And you actually do have a limited belief in therapy in that you believe it can be helpful to some people sometimes.

John: [John listens, taking in my summary] Yes, I guess that's right.

Thom: Did you know all this before we started talking?

John: Of course I did.

Thom: I'm confused then, because if you knew all this before, why did you make the blanket statement --- that you tell me is not entirely true --- that you don't believe in therapy?

John: [Another sigh, this time, rolling his eyes] Okay, okay. I guess I had just not thought about it that much.

Thom: So you are telling me that you decided that you don't believe in something that you had not thought about very much?

John: Please don't start this again.

Thom: Okay. Can I just ask you one more question --- something I'm wondering about your disbelief in therapy?

John: Okay, one more question. Then I have to go.

Thom: I'm wondering in instead of not believing in therapy, you actually believe that therapy is for weak people. More specifically, that you would never go to therapy because you think that would make you seem weak. Do you think there is some truth to that?

John: Yes I think there is some truth to that. I don't know if it is entirely true though.

Thom: Great. I really appreciate your hanging in with me for this conversation.

John: Well, I didn't like it so much.

Thom: [standing and moving toward the door] I know you didn't. Therapy is not always comfortable.

Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist and author of
Embracing Fear: How to Turn What Scares Us into Our Greatest Gift
For more information: <http://www.thomrutledge.com>.