

Secular Women of the Triangle Book Club Discussion Questions

How Minds Change by David McRaney

Discussion Questions

1. In the Introduction, McRaney states that he used to think that there was no point trying to change people's minds about topics like politics or superstitions. Do you agree that it's pointless to try to change tightly held or controversial opinions? Did reading *How Minds Change* change your opinion on this?
2. *McRaney writes "I couldn't shake the idea that I, too, was probably one conversation away from changing my own mind about something, maybe a lot of things." After reading this book, does this statement resonate with you? Are there any topics that you feel you are "one conversation away" from changing your own mind about? What would it take to push you over the edge?
 - a. One technique for changing people's beliefs involves asking them to identify the belief and how certain they are of those beliefs. What are your core beliefs? How certain are you of them? What would it take to change your mind on these beliefs?
3. If you were previously religious, were there any parts of the book that resonated with you in particular with your deconstruction process?
 - a. McRaney notes that Zach and Megan, who grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church, left the church not because their beliefs changed, but that their beliefs changed when they left the church after it became intolerable for other reasons. How was your experience leaving religion similar or different to Zach's and Megan's?
4. What is something that you've changed your mind about recently? Are there times in your life when you have changed your mind on foundational beliefs? What was the belief? What caused you to change your mind?
5. Have you tried any of the persuasion techniques described in *How Minds Change*? Did you have any success in changing minds or even in just having a more productive conversation about controversial issues?
6. *McRaney cites a study from psychologist Dan Kahn where participants' opinions on the credibility of an expert change depending on whether or not they agreed with his stance on politicized issues. Kahn cites that this behavior is rational because "the average person will never be in a position where beliefs on gun control or climate change or the death penalty will affect their daily lives".
 - a. What do you think about the claim that most people are not directly impacted by politicized issues? Do you take steps to critically analyze information that you agree with? Have you found yourself "falling" for mis or disinformation that confirmed your opinions?
7. *McRaney subverts common misconceptions about the way we process information, including the statement: "The more intelligent you are, and the more educated, the more data at your disposal, the better you become at rationalizing and justifying your existing beliefs and attitudes, regardless of their accuracy or harmfulness".
 - a. After reading this book, how do you think about your own thinking differently? Do you believe it is important to question your beliefs?

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8. *McRaney writes about a powerful exchange with Nathan Fischer which led him to propose a “step zero” for all persuasion techniques: “Always start by asking yourself why you want to change the other person’s mind”.
 - a. What are the ethical implications of using the persuasive techniques discussed in this book? Does it make an ethical difference if the goal of the technique is to change how a person thinks, not what they believe? Are there any beliefs in others that you are not willing to attempt to change?
9. McRaney notes that public opinion on many issues such as same-sex marriage, smoking, and women’s voting rights underwent abrupt, rather than gradual, changes. Are there any other such abrupt changes you can remember in your life? Are there any abrupt changes in public opinion that you foresee in the near future? Any that you want to happen?
10. In Chapter 6: The Truth is Tribal, McRaney states “Humans value being good members of their groups much more than they value being right, so much so that as long as the group satisfies those needs, we will choose to be wrong if it keeps us in good standing with our peers.”
 - a. Are there times in your life when you’ve gone along with the group even when you knew it was wrong? What were the circumstances? Would you make the same decision today? Are you still a part of that group?
 - b. Do you think the desire to fit in with a group is contributing to the current political climate? Is there anything we can do to reduce this tribalism?
11. Psychologist Richard Petty said that many more issues are now tied to people’s self-concepts and group identities than they were 30 years ago? Do you think this is a good thing or a bad thing? What beliefs, if any, do you have that are tied to your identity?