



*Based on NPR's long-running radio show, THIS I BELIEVE, an eclectic group of City Congregation members offered their own reflections and joined this international conversation. Presentations were shared at Shabbat, Nov. 19, 2010.*

**I Believe Everything Is a Test Tile**  
Amy Goldin

When I agreed to write this, I honestly thought it would be easy. I “know what I know” and I am not one to prevaricate. In fact I have so many deeply held beliefs that writing this should have been a no-brainer. But the more I looked at these beliefs the less any one of them seemed to sum up my way of being, worthy of “This I Believe.” After rejecting half a dozen good topics, what I have ended up with is this:

Everything Is a Test Tile

All my life I have done a variety of crafts. For 37 years I was a weaver and spent countless hours focused on tiny threads and intricate patterns. I had an idea of the final product, but also let it emerge on its own. Recently I went back to doing pottery after a 30 year hiatus. On Thursdays from 10–12 you can find me at the studio with a group of “women of a certain age” and our teacher, a young dad. My classmates strive to create perfection in wheel thrown forms. They endlessly refine their skills and force their will on the clay, but in the end their work has a symmetry and a sameness. Rather than presume that I can have power over destiny, I try to let the clay express itself, building by hand and feeling my way along. I’m in the process but not completely in control.

Before glazing our work, my classmates and I are encouraged to create “test tiles” with the different glazes to get an idea of how the finished product will turn out. Some of my classmates, having invested so much time and energy in their creations, will make several test tiles until they are satisfied. But I don’t believe in that approach. Glaze does funny things in the kiln and no test tile will be the perfect prophet. The length of time a pot is dipped in glaze, the heat variation in the oven, even the placement in the kiln can make a difference. So I take a more open and unfettered approach and try glaze combinations as I go along. When my teacher expresses his amazement at my casual attitude and applauds my sometimes startling results, I can only reply: Everything is a test tile.

And that is how I live my life, by doing my best while not planning too far ahead, taking one step at a time and seeing how it goes. I am a lesbian artist and bookkeeper with a partner of 20 years, two kids, and an apartment full of pets, books, plants, and art supplies. Did I set out with this goal in mind? Of course not! I just took each path as it came and find myself here, looking at the forest and the trees and trying not to get lost in either.

This balance between letting go (wandering amongst the details) and running the show (keeping half of one eye on my goals) is the key to my happiness. Striving for the perfectly elegant vase or the predictably proper life is (for me) bound to fail. Exploring clay and allowing it to speak for itself, being open to all I hear and observe, keeps me centered. I am true to myself by being true to each moment. Though I allow myself to dream and desire more than I see in front of me, I am never quite planning the future, but building it up day by day.