

Introduction

It's been over six years since I wrote the first "Rants Into Raves". It has been out of print for a while now. I am still surprised at how many people say that "Rants" did more for their performances than longer books they own. When someone comes up to me and tells me that if they had to leave their house with a single book only, it would be one of mine well, of course that makes me feel wonder-full. But when they mention it would be "Rants", I am overwhelmed. I am also more than a little bit in shock.

I almost didn't write the first "Rants Into Raves" and I didn't see this second set of "Rants" coming either. But here they are. These are excerpts from various columns I have written, interviews, letters and much brand new material, of course. If I repeat myself at times, it is due to my insistence on keeping intact the original writing, tone and intention.

In all my so-called "ranting" I hope you find what is underneath. There is plenty to be gleaned in these writings, even if they - as the first "Rants" - do not contain any tricks. The real trick is in rethinking your performances and our art. By daring to examine unpopular or rarely considered themes, these writings intend to change how you present yourself to the world. They mean to hint at uncovering your masks to get to something greater in you, so that you will bring this to your performances.

Along the way, I am sure to kick sand in your eyes. I don't mean to do that. I am not working hard at being bothersome. I am however quite serious concerning how we look at our presentation of magic and mentalism, and ourselves. Sometimes stripping off a mask is frightening and uncomfortable. You may want to lash out for a moment when reading some of this.

Save your energy. Turn it back and focus any passion like the sun being pinpointed through a magnifying glass. It may burn a little, but you'll get through the surface facade much more quickly this way.

What I wish truly for you is a better understanding of yourself as a mystery performer. I hope to get you to look at yourself from many angles, so you can later rearrange your own puzzle pieces and answers to fit. Even less than the first "Rants", this one gives few answers. But the questions it asks may lead you to where you need to get going.

I'll see you along the path then, for I never stop asking myself the same.

My best to you to be your best.

Kenton Knepper



It's ALL Michael Ammar's!

People think I have an attitude about learning from DVDs and such. I don't. I think learning by watching can be very valuable. True, too many watchers become robot-like clones of the performer they see on video. But right now that's not my main issue. Ignorance is.

You may not know this, but Michael Ammar created everything in magic.

I was at a magic meeting recently in Phoenix because a friend was lecturing in town. I like to support lecturers and I almost always buy something to support them – even from friends. I know that's how they can afford to be there. It's a Golden Rule thing.

As I was available to a few club members, a couple young guys asked to show me some things they were working on. As I had the time, I was happy to oblige. One showed me a card transposition. I asked whose it was. The young man said:

“It's Michael Ammar's”.

Now I like Michael. I first met him when he lived back in West Virginia I think it was. We're talking a long, long time ago. He had some very creative ideas and some entertaining presentations as well. I didn't recall this card effect being Michael's, but then I hardly recall everything he has ever done, anymore than he could name all I have created. The young man asked to show me something else.

He showed me something very much like what I had performed for him out of my close-up act many months before. “And... whose is that?” I asked.

“It's Michael Ammar's”, he replied.

“I don't think so. It's not really my version, but I do think it is not Ammar's. Anyone know?” I said to the gathering crowd.

“It's Paul Harris's” a friend said.

“No, it's Michael Ammar's”, said the young man.

Someone else offered to do something. It was a coin bit out of Bobo's Coin Magic. I asked, "Now where did that come from, I wonder"? The man replied:

"It's Michael Ammar's".

I laughed, as this was getting to be a pretty funny joke. I couldn't believe they had set this entire situation up with that sort of a punch line, no less. But then I noticed no one else was laughing. I looked back at the people who had performed for me.

"Why do you say these are all Michael Ammar's?" I queried.

"They are all on the Ammar DVDs, so we know they are his".

My heart sunk.

Far worse than creating mere clones of other performers, the compilation videos had taught students ignorance. Not that this is Ammar's fault. I am sure he gives credit where he can. He's a very knowledgeable student of the art, and I cannot imagine him forgoing all credit, especially when he knows the correct people to credit.

But there is fault with the marketing and the buyer. They do not try to teach or learn the history of our beloved art. They choose to provide ignorance and quick fixes over precision and passion. They refuse to teach even as they claim to teach.

I ask of you, dear student of the mystery arts, to ask around about the history of what you are doing. Not so you may fill your heads with facts and figures but so that you feel a part of a long heritage of incredible thinking and sharing. When you feel yourself to be a part of all those who have gone before, you know what you have to share is of great value. You bring to your audience a heritage and you choose to become part of that lineage.

With all due respect to Michael Ammar, it didn't all come from him – or any other single person. He'd be the first to tell you that.

If you asked.



I Take That Serious...

I recall thinking when I was a teenager that some of the names in magic took what they were doing far too seriously. They became very upset about whether a person believed a deck of cards in a color change should go from red to blue, or blue to red. There would be arguments on both sides of this issue – as if it were important at all. One performer would turn blue holding his breath while the other was red in the face from screaming.

As a younger person, I was much smarter and wiser than the older pros. That's one of the gifts of being younger – you always know more.

As you get older, you know that you know less. The more you know, the more you know that you don't know. It's weird that way. I take what I do seriously. It isn't all about tricks and fooling people just to make myself feel good about me. I have other ways of feeling good about who I am and what I do. Magic and mentalism is one part of that, of course. But as I go along this path, I find that I care more about what my audiences get, or do not get, from me.

Naturally I wish for them to have an enjoyable evening. I wish them to laugh and ponder and dream. But “ponder” and “dream” are larger things than “foolin’ ‘em”. I had begun drifting into that sea of deeper thought, where pros took themselves seriously.

It isn't so much how we take ourselves, but what we give of ourselves, and how we feel about our art. Yes, I said feel about our art – not just think about it.

Giving, not taking only, is a major adjustment for many mystery performers. Contrary to popular opinion, this was as true of me as it was for any other performer I know. Learning to look at what you do in a show (or even close-up) to evaluate what you *give to an audience* in each piece is a frightening matter. Most new performers opt for the “out” and say, “I give them entertainment” or “I make them laugh”. If they are sneakier about it they sometimes say, “I give them wonder or astonishment”. That's all fine and good, but what else do you give to your audiences? These are general, overall and subjective concepts. What precise things do your audiences leave with when they leave the theatre, restaurant or home?

My audiences now leave with such themes (the – ME s) as being different is okay, what once may have hurt you is now your strength, everyone felt uneasy in school, you're a different person and so is everyone else, you are a unique expression, your mind and heart both have incredible abilities if you begin to use them, etc.

These are heavy things – but I rarely present them in a heavy-handed manner. It is more serious than “pick a card, any card” yet it can be equally light-hearted. I don't preach, because that's sure to alienate someone. I suggest; because people like it better when they turn whatever you do into the beliefs that are already their own.

I will admit I was a little more serious than some performers early on. I was very tough on any students I happened to have, even in my teens. I was thirty or so when a student said he was going to stop taking lessons after that year – I was too serious. He liked magic and mentalism all right. He just wanted to perform and not have to study it all so deeply or fiercely. He felt he would be just fine as he was – he could always learn more at a shop or in books when he felt like doing that. Right now, he just wanted to hire himself out as a professional magician and go from there. He was correct in that you learn much by doing. But the truth is I don't think he wanted to have to work at getting better.

This young man's father was a surgeon. So I said in reply, “Your father is a doctor, isn't he? Imagine how his patients would feel if he said to them, ‘Look, I just hired myself out because I didn't want to take surgery so seriously. It was such a drag. But I am really good, so lay down on the table and I will open you up’. How do you think his audience would feel about that! They do call the room they do surgeries in ‘The Theatre’ still don't they”?

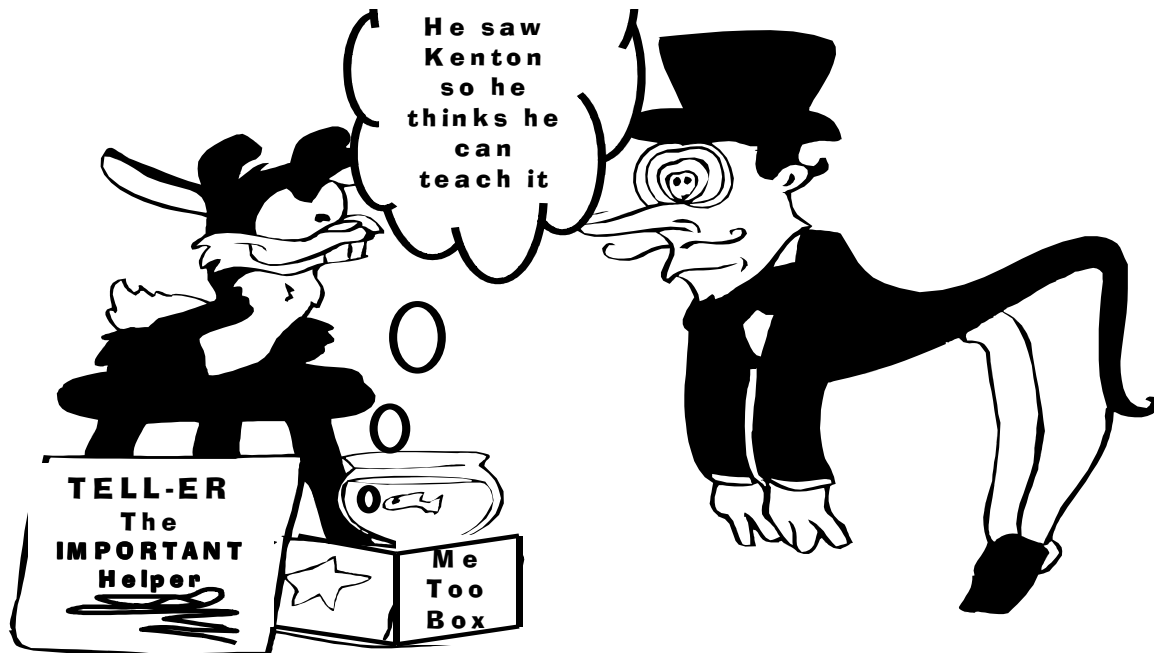
I could not believe this very intelligent young man did not want to have to study or take magic seriously, but did want to get paid for doing it.

What's wrong with this picture?

Apparently not as much I supposed. More and more people hire themselves out for less money than the performers whose real job it is to perform. They perform part time, which is fine. It is fine as long as they take what they do seriously enough to respect what they give, and what they may be taking away from full-time performers.

You may not want to have to study magic or mentalism. You may want to try and run quickly past the need to learn subtle principles and deeper thought on the art you profess to love. But don't be surprised when you, like this young man, find yourself no longer performing at all.

Because professionals take what they do seriously. Even when they have fun doing it.



Gross Misunderstanding

Recently a person in an Internet group felt it was a great idea to “share” how an effect of mine, and that of one of my famed friends, worked. He put what took the two of us pages upon pages to explain, and shared it all in a paragraph each. Did he actually explain the basic ideas in a single paragraph? Have my friends and I been too wordy?

Perhaps. This person did expose our methods in the most fundamental and crude manner possible. He’d say it was a bare bones approach.

Of course, he had no right whatsoever to “explain”, i.e. expose, our methods in whole or in part. He was taking protected material and hurting our profits of such work with his rudimentary explanations. But that aside, what’s the harm really?

Such people do not grasp in the least the subtle or the nuance. They cannot comprehend the real work that is behind the basest secret. They fall into the trap of thinking that the fundamental working is the true work. But the professional knows better.

Rank amateurs alone mistake the details written by professionals as needless pontificating. I am not saying we don’t need a few good editors here and there. For the most part however, the numerous details given in a manuscript are there to give you the true inner secrets and real work.

Believing that such manuscripts can be explained ala The Masked Magician or in any other forum is absurd. Only the non-performer would make such a flawed assumption.

Such “sharing” is the equivalent of saying that the secret to The Linking Rings is that there is a split in them, and a few of the others are previously linked. Now, armed with this basic information, how many would perform well The Linking Rings?

Amateurs miss that the real work is not in the basic workings of a trick or the “secret”. There is a simple, base secret to most effects, and then there are many more subtle secrets that comprise the true work.

The way this person explained away our material in a paragraph each was of no help to anyone reading his words. Apparently he felt like a big person for being able to say he knew what our secrets were, and then say them. He showed up at a lecture, after all.

But he also showed his own ignorance in the doing. He exposed himself as a rank amateur who did not grasp the importance of the subtle on which professionals primarily rely. Such a person cannot properly perform such material, for he cannot comprehend the real work involved in it.

Next time you read in a newsgroup, or see in web advertising “How To Do... (Blaine, Kenton, Banachek, Copperfield, etc.)” remember this. The person exposing the base methods doesn’t have a clue. He can’t. He cannot tip to you the real work. He is not capable. He can’t grasp it, so it is impossible for him to teach it or explain it away.

If you wish to be amateurish and think you avoid paying for secrets by listening to such base explanations, be my guest. But no professional would ever do so. They know this is not at all the actual secret. It is a rank exposure, and nothing more valuable than that.

Supporting in any way such people who expose is to demean our art. To support their “sharing” is to condemn future generations to the false idea that magic is about base secrets. There is no art or subtlety to it. There is no finer understanding or depth of thought required. Mere surface knowledge is enough, to be deemed a professional.

When that day arrives more fully, some of us will stop sharing secrets altogether. Not out of spite, but rather out of necessity. Ours is an art that demands subtle secrets and indirect undercurrents of psychology to be miraculous. That’s what the pros are willing to pay for and read.

Anyone who believes otherwise is likely among the rankest of ranks, the basest of the base, and the most fundamental of the mental mundane.

But learn from them if you wish.

You will receive accordingly.

Jimmy's Gotta Close-Up Pad and He Don't Care



Recently I was teaching sponge balls at a four corners style teach-in. In between one of the sessions, someone was kind enough to put a close-up mat on the table for me when I was not around.

It was a very nice gesture. I appreciated the sentiment. Being who I am, I turned this however into a lesson about magicians.

“Can anyone tell me what using a close-up pad is about? Anyone?”

“It keeps your cards and stuff clean”

“It makes it easier to steal coins”

“It’s easier to spread cards on”

“Close-up mats are professional”

“Well”, I said heading in a direction of torment, “Can anyone tell me what close-up pads do for your audience? Everything you have suggested is true, but the reasoning is all about you. The reason to use a close-up pad is because it is of benefit to YOU. But are you performing for yourself, or do you care about your audience? What good does a close-up pad do for THEM?”

“It makes a pretty picture”.

“It creates a stage area close-up”.

“And these benefit your audience how exactly?” I pressed.

“They like things that look nice and theatrical – or pretty”.

“Perhaps” I continued, “But how many of you have to move things around on a table to set your close-up pad down? Isn’t it a hassle to have to move all those drinks or coins or purses and things to make space for your so-called stage”?

“Naw, you just say ‘scuse me and shove it to one side. It’s no big deal”.

“Yes, you simply move things on the table around so there is room to lay the pad out”.

“I am tempted to lay you out, speaking as a layperson,” I said. I had done it again. I shocked a group of peers. “You think it’s of no consequence to move my personal items around, invade my personal space, squish me into a smaller area, touch my money, my keys or my drinks and food – which is why I am there, to enjoy those things – so you can lay out this cheesy looking thin carpet? I don’t think I like you so much. You had better be damn good to make all of this hassle to me, as your audience, worthwhile. You had better produce a damn elephant for all the trouble you just caused my friends and me”.

“But no one says things like that. They don’t mind” a fellow retorted.

“Just because your audience is secretly disgusted does not make it any less of an inconvenience. Remember, I asked you what putting a pad down on a table *gave to your audience*, not yourself. You certainly hassled me if you moved anything of mine whatsoever or gave me less of a table to enjoy using. I was using it just fine before you came along. I know you think you are God’s gift to my world, but it’s *my* world – not yours. I might think quite otherwise, in fact. Speaking as a real person – not as Kenton – you understand”.

Long silence.

“Shall we do sponge balls now?” I inquired.

“Oh, yes! That’s why we’re here!” was the response.

“Of course” I said slightly discouraged. “I love this routine too. But I think what I just said was more valuable to some of you if you’ll rethink it”.

“What was that? Did I miss it? No offense – I guess I was just spacing out”.

“No – nothing. Just hand me that close-up pad over there and we’ll begin”.

“Oh, and one other thing. Everyone stop doing the Ten Count out loud! The Ten Count was meant to teach you how to properly pace that sponge ball move – not something to say! That would be akin to showing everyone a thumb tip to make a silk vanish and then show everyone how cool it is that the silk looks really gone. The Ten Count is SILENT pacing...”

“Geeze, I just wanted to learn sponge balls the way Kenton does it,” whispers one guy to another. “This is going to be a long night...”

“Yeah, some guys think lessons are more valuable than tricks. Imagine that!” said another person wryly.

“I know. GOD. What a bore.”

And they want me to lecture more often.

Hmmm.

But it takes so little to make a big difference in the world of your audience. Bring several decks of cards with you when you perform if you are worried about them getting dirty or ruined. How difficult is that for you really? If you cannot hold an audience’s attention without a close-up pad as your “performance stage” then quit performing. If the only beautiful or interesting thing you do is have a close-up pad, do us all a favor and stop performing immediately. If a pad is the only way you can do some of your routines, then keep those routines for an appropriate time. Learn to adjust and do some of your routines differently. Learn to do a Zarrow Shuffle on a bar or flat table. Get used to it.

One night a woman took a card out as I had asked, and then for some reason known only to her – bit it. That’s right – she took one large chomp right out of the card. There was the saliva-soaked selected card, with a third of the card literally being eaten by the spectator. Now honestly, is a close-up pad going to fix that?

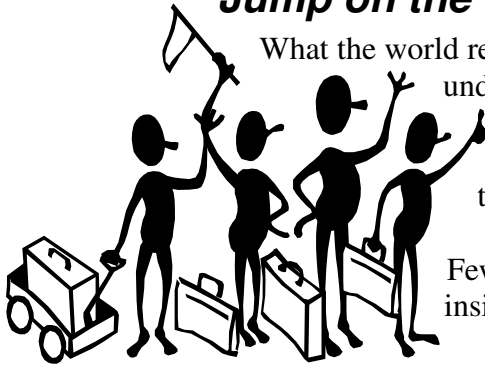
If you are going to be a performer, you must be enough of one to know how to continue on regardless of what happens. Obviously you cannot plan on everything that might happen. But you can plan on times where the unexpected will happen. An extra deck of cards, an “out” in your pocket, a few other just-in-case-items ought to be your norm. Then you are prepared. A close-up mat makes you think you are prepared, when you are not. It’s a false sense of security. Like a child with his favorite blanket.

I am not against close-up pads entirely. In a formal performance, they have their place. But most performers do not use such devices in actual formal performances. They attempt to impose their will upon their audience. They inconvenience their audiences, purposely or not, for their own selfish sake.

And then they expect their audiences to like them for it.

Perhaps now you’ve had enough of such close-up nitpicking. A great idea hits you. You ought to do “mentalism” instead. Yeah, that’s the way around all of this...

Jump on the Bandwagon – Be a Mentalist Too



What the world really needs right now is not compassion, tolerance, love or understanding. It needs not more wealth, personal growth or inner insight. What the world really must have are ten thousand more mentalists. Fortunately, most magicians these days seem willing to switch over and oblige.

Few magicians are stopping to ask themselves “WHY do I insist on becoming a ‘mentalist’?” Why ask why?

As a magician who became what our profession now incorrectly calls “a mentalist”, I have a few insights about this latest craze. Of course, I jumped on this bandwagon in the 1970’s, so I am a tad more aware of the caravan’s bumpy ride than some. Believe me, it is not at all meant for just anyone.

I recall when everyone wanted to be a “Comedy Magician”. Why? Why ask why? That’s what everyone thought in the 80’s. Comedy magic was IT. You had better switch over, or be left out. Gone were the days of boxes, flowers, ropes and stage effects. Walk into a comedy club and make ‘em laugh. Why? I will tell you: The comedy guys were saying that magic was dead and that *their* way was the only right way to do magic and make good money. Sheepish magicians looking for work and a quick fix, believed them.

So performers who were not naturally funny, or could not write their own jokes and refused to pay for comedy writers, began billing themselves as “Comedy Magician” and said witty things such as “No, the CLEAN hand” for the millionth time.

Where are all those “Comedy Magicians” today? A few are doing kid’s parties. Many “retired”. Some are still whining about getting the shaft when the Public gave up on comedy clubs. A very few, who learned to be comedic based upon their own feelings, thoughts, personality and beliefs; and developed magic accordingly; became “Mac King”. But very, very few worked hard enough, and paid their dues to become that.

There was a time when the only thing for a magician to be was “Close-Up Magician”. That was the Big Craze, and you had better get on the bus, or be lost in the dust. Now, thanks to a few people, close-up is something the Public likes again. They will walk across the street to see the Guy with Big Boxes however, but not so far to see “Close-Up Master Live”.

There are rare exceptions to everything, of course.

Lest you think you are the rare exception to the New Thang called “mentalism” let me remind you of a few hard facts:

Dunninger, Canasta, Kreskin, Koran, Berglas and Geller. They all caught the Public’s hearts and minds. Note please I said hearts as well as minds. Most mentalists miss that.

Many mentalists today are little more than pseudo-intellectual analytical mental-contortionists, as viewed by those with legitimately high intellect. Easily as bad, or worse, is the neo-mentalist trying once again to grab at the wheels of the Gravy Train and get rich... or at least get booked for a gig. If Geller on one extreme, or say Chan Canasta on the other, could not endear themselves to celebrities and their audiences, they would have failed utterly. But they were endearing, because of *who* they were.



That means that the latest spoon-bending gimmick – even if it is mine – won't do the trick for you. You have to put who and what you really are into the performance of mentalism, or look damn silly as a magician trying to do mentalism.

I am speaking from long-past and unpleasant experience.

When I began bending things in the 1970's the outer performance came from within me. I had dreams of bending things when I slept. That's not a savvy story – I truly dreamed such things. I also honestly believed it might be possible for the mind to accomplish miracles. I had seen my own mind do some pretty frightening things to myself – to the extent that some of you would doubt my stories should I ever tell them.

It is from such personal experience and beliefs that lead me to incorporate so-called mentalism into my magic. To me, these abilities seemed to be a natural outgrowth of my understanding of magic. I also understood there were others who hated such thoughts and feelings, and I would have to endure the wrath of such folks should I dare to continue performing in such a unique way.

I still do.

What does this mean to you and your desire to be a mentalist?

Ask yourself what most would hate to ask themselves. Dare to question your reasons for wanting to jump on the latest mentalism bandwagon of the new millennium. Are you bending things because "it gets a good response"? There is little difference between that reasoning and saying, "The Clean Hand joke may be old, but it always gets a laugh, and that makes me a Comedy Magician". Guess again. Think about it.

Do you think the latest set of magnets, information gathering methods, trick spoon or DVD will get you to be a real mentalist? Are there not literally thousands of other people, perhaps millions in the world, who believe this too?

Now ask yourself again how many names in mentalism since 1905 the Public knows. Your odds don't seem to be quite so much a sure thing now, do they?

Buying and performing mental tricks does not make one an endearing mentalist, any more than telling old or new jokes make one a comedian. Yes, you will get reactions. If getting reactions were all it took to be someone notable, the Bag Boy who dropped your groceries in the store would be a huge star.

Yes, it is easy to do certain types of tricks and get strong reactions. That does not indicate your worthiness as a performer. I know many performers think that is what it indicates, but it does not. Almost any person can buy a good trick and do it. That means the people you perform for could be mentalists too if they shop where you do.

So what does it take to honestly be a mentalist? It takes a love for the improbable yet hope for its possibility. It takes a desire to feed an audience their secret dreams. It takes heart, not just the intellectualization of life.

I know, you think you can do all of that perfectly so far.

But it also takes these horrid tools: The understanding of humanity and psychology. You must study psychology and the way the mind works. You must study the way the eyes see. You must learn how words create illusions. You must know how to make false impressions. You must understand suggestion and actually use it, not just make it part of your “patter”. You must, unlike many card performers, be willing to risk and risk big. Hell, you must be willing to go so far out that you may not recover and blow an effect entirely. Then you have to be enough of a performer to make the audience enjoy that.

Think not? Then study Geller, Canasta, Dunninger, Berglas, Kreskin, and Koran. You make the big impressions by taking giant risks. You don’t get that by playing twenty questions and manhandling cards. A few of these most famed performers got their information not by clipboard or the Internet, but by dropping gathered spectator billets on the floor, picking them up and stuffing them directly into their own jacket pockets. Right in front of everyone. Right in the middle of the audience and performance, no less.

That means you have to be outrageously bold. It means bending silverware while the heat is on you. It means glimpsing information by staring right at it while everyone is watching. It means keeping your own mental attitude so in check that you can pull off boldness greater than your audience can ever conceive, and thereby elude their critical mind. It means using real mentalism to perform “mentalism”.

So, jump on the mentalism bandwagon friends. We love company. After all, you have to be willing to get your knees constantly scraped; run over by the small wheel to grab the Big One as you ride it to the top of the wagon. No one likes to do that alone.

But don’t delude yourself into thinking that mentalism is the easy road to fame or public approval. Don’t fool yourself into thinking that mentalism is all about those tricks that are sold to you as “mentalism”. Do not think that getting a reaction using a mental trick is any better than getting a laugh with an old joke, or even a new one.

Now, all you close-up guys go ahead and become “a mentalist” because that’s what agents are booking these days anyway. You can always go back to doing card tricks without mental patter when this phase passes yet again.

I know you will, regardless of what I say.

Come to think of it, I know a few names in magic who did mentalism and who are now back doing card tricks.

Or out of performing entirely.

Mentalism isn’t so damn easy. No matter what the advertising tries to sell you.

Keep in mind, I still do card tricks too, and Dunninger did The Linking Rings and The Floating Light Bulb.

Tricks do not a mentalist make.

Daring, and attitude, does.

P.S. Yes, there are numerous other mentalists we all know and love which I did not name. I know, I know. Don’t be Punx and write me about who I did not mention here. That would be using your mental powers to distract you from the uneasy questions I dare you to ask yourself. You’ll be better served facing yourself rather than facing off with me.

But that is always a daunting task, facing one’s self, now isn’t it?

Welcome to Mentalism 101

Which reminds me. If tricks don’t make the mystery performer what does? If everything doesn’t boil down to magic versus mentalism, then what on earth does matter? What makes the Public care or care not one wit? There must be some sort of secret to this business of secrets. But as an old Hindi saying has it, “If God wanted to hide, He would hide within man”. What does that mean? It suggests that perhaps what is important and of value outside of ourselves must come from the one place we would never dare look – within ourselves.

But forget that! Let’s see if “clothes make the man” instead. That’s easier to think about, isn’t it? Let’s see...

Image – What Image?

As a friend of mine says, “image” can also be seen as “I – mage”. Far too often we forget that we need to pay attention to more than tricks, or even words.



“A picture is worth *ten-thousand* words” as the *original* phrase goes.

What you wear, and how you look says more than you imagine. In fact, I have learned it may say things more strongly than even I first envisioned.

The truth is, audiences if they like you will forgive a great deal. If they can relate to you, then they will forgive anything. It’s very much like the crush of young love. If you seem interesting as a person, that is what they will most treasure. What you do that reflects how interesting you are makes up your show. But who you are, that is foremost.

I recall seeing a performer who is very well known and respected around the world. Frankly, his illusions are horrid. His show for the most part is rather awful. Yet I would travel many miles again to see him. TO SEE HIM – the persona. I so enjoyed the person on stage, and his image, that I would love to see him perform again. “Love” to see him perform! Yet I say his material is fantastically bad for the most part.

Naturally I do not suggest that your act be terrible and your show pathetic. What I am saying is that the image of who you are and what you *represent* can make or break you. I know, it’s a risky thing. I get accused of being risky quite a lot. But to me, it’s just playing it safe, if I want to stand out and be considered important.

I recall being at an event and a fellow was having a picture taken of himself with Mark Wilson. Mark looked down off the stage and pointed to me as he said to this young man, “Why don’t we get our picture taken with Kenton – he LOOKS like a real magician”! I was amazed by this comment. But I knew what Mark was saying.

Today, most performers of magic and mentalism look like they are running for the cover of GQ, just fell off a pirate ship, or are applying for a normal job as three-piece-business-suit types. Most have no real image other than the image of someone else... nay, an entire league of someone else. I am what I am. I don’t get the calls to be any “body doing tricks” from agencies because I am Kenton, not just a generic some-body, any-body-will-do-if-they-are-cheap-enough body.

Ask yourself, what you represent. Begin now to work at portraying that in your dress, manner, style of grooming – everything. BE a symbol.

This came to mind recently again as our government allowed testing of a new concept: the idea of selling imagery on postage stamps. I applied to have stamps made of some images of myself. Wonder Wizards thought it would be nice if some of my fans got letters or packages with a stamp of me on them.

But three times I was turned down. When I pressed to find out the reasons for the rejection I was told flat out “We cannot, under government rules, allow any image that promotes a particular religion or philosophy”. I asked what the hell they were talking about. They replied that magic as I portrayed it seemed to be promoting magic as a point of view. Once again I was being told that I “looked like a real magician”. Even after other attempts at editing photos and dumbing down my image, they refused on these same grounds to allow the stamps to be made of me. I, the person, was “magic”.

When I am in costume and people see me, they know right away that I am different. They get a sense that I am into something unusual. When they learn that I am basically an affable fellow without much ill intent, they decide they like me for my image and approach. It is not at all how they see other magical performers. They see me through my imagery of costuming and overall appearance. I am a symbol of magic to them.



I am not a performer who is the generic person for every event, everywhere. I do not care to be. I’d prefer people can describe me and someone else will know it is I, and not another performer. I enjoy the fact that people like me, and not what I do only.

I bet you can conjure in your mind an image of Blackstone, and Blackstone Jr. I bet you can call up an image of Kellar. You can at least imagine what Okito looked like even if you never saw a picture of him before. These people had images that worked with the ideas they wished to portray to their audiences.

They also had posters that helped reinforce and create these images and concepts. Perhaps you think Houdini hardly appeared as anything special. But that is precisely his point. Houdini was a small man. His image represented the small guy who took on the big guys. He was the scrappy little fighter that could win no matter how many times authorities or giant companies or bullies tried to keep him down. His image was exactly right for what his performances suggested. He was a symbol for an entire generation, and more. His imagery reinforced his symbol, and his symbol was his performance.

Is the current popular controversial singer/songwriter Avril Lavigne really so different? Doesn’t she tell people to stand up, be themselves, not to take any flack from people telling you not to be different, to be popular but honest? In real life has not Avril done what most artists have never been able to do – tell the giant record company to let her be herself the way she is – or she’ll walk? In fact, I understand that when Avril went to her record company, the image person looked at her and said, “Oh, you *already are someone* – you already have an image. At least I don’t have to work on that for you”.

Are you in the same boat? Would Avril be where she is today by dressing like Diana Ross? The Four Tops? WHO? Would Cher be CHER without her image and insistence upon being herself and her own expressions? Does that mean that a celebrity never changes their style once they have it? No. As they grow and evolve and change so does their style and presentation of their image. Yet it is still somehow “them” isn’t it?

You may not agree with or enjoy Avril or any of the other performers I name. But I bet you have a sense of who they are when you see them. If these people have faded from memory, then look around. There are always current examples of how persona shines for such people to be popular performers. I can still look at pictures of Harlan Tarbell on a cover of the Tarbell Course, and think, “He’s into real magic or something”.

True, many of us take a lot of heat for being different. But we get that mainly from people who hope they will be famous for being the same old thing. They hope to make it by at least looking like, or sounding like, they are the same old thing.

I am not saying you need to dress outrageously or be anything other than YOU. But that is the trick – be YOU. Don’t be Robert Houdin. Don’t be Hermann. Don’t be Oktio, for that matter. Be YOU.

There are those who will say being unique is a fault. Let them say such things all they wish. They said the same thing of Doug Henning. They thought the same of Copperfield. Not now of course, but at the time – they didn’t think their images were “appropriate”.

You need to keep in mind your audience of course, and those who are going to pay you to perform. When you are unique, you cut some opportunities out of the loop. You cut some groups out of the loop. But to paraphrase Avril, you’ll be playing to your own right crowd, regardless of what others may think. And you’ll be happier for it.

Most successful companies have a “brand”. In magic and mentalism, YOU are it. You can adopt a manner of dress and style that helps define this brand. David Bowie was not known, but dressed wildly and acted as if he were someone important in New York, while he was secretly starving. Most people back then figured he must be someone important if he was dressing like that, and he caught the interest of those he needed.

How times have changed in New York! But then again, perhaps not so much.

Ask yourself what you are a symbol of. What do you represent? Then act now and begin to head in that direction. Yes, you will change as time goes on. Yes, your style and image may change too – but you will have a core symbol of yourself upon which you may build.

Are you a symbol of your uniqueness, or a slacker just trying to make a go of any job you can get? Don’t get me wrong – you must take a lot of odd working situations if you want to be a true pro. The best way to learn is to perform.

Just take yourself with you to your shows from now on. OK?

Or at the very least, begin to try in some small, safer way, to be you –

TODAY

It’s made a huge difference to many of the names history records.

Secrets of Art, Performance and Success



**Dear Friend, here is a reply to your letter,
and I thank you for it. You wrote in part the following:**

“I have recently discovered the world of mentalism with zero experience of this art and a very small interest in magic when I was very young. I am now becoming an obsessive about the subject...it's not really advice that I am seeking it's more something of guidance that I require. I have the dreams, and the passion and I feel the character to take this somewhere, but can't seem to work out how. Did you experience this when you first took the decision to live your ambitions”?

Here is my response, my friend:

“Faith without works is dead” as they say, and I think you know that. Dreams are most important. But you must clear your eyes of sleep and take action too if you want to make anything happen here. With that constantly in mind, then Desire, Passion and Character are of utmost importance.

A lack of Passion makes for a lack of clear Character, and this is what far too many miss. Some performers hope that by making up a character, they will appear to be passionate about something the way the character appears to be.

So, I would say you are on the right path for the most part. I can't tell you what to do with your life naturally, that is a choice only you can try to make. In my experience, I think it is I who make the choices, but I seem to be guided to do what I am “supposed” to do at any given time.

Take action, make decisions and be willing to see where they lead you.

“The conditions of conquest are always easy. We have but to toil awhile, endure awhile, believe always, and never turn back” - Marcus Annaeus Seneca

“What you can do, or dream you can do, begin it; boldness has genius, power and magic in it” - Johann von Goethe

Keep in mind that if you build a house on sand, it will not stand for long. Be sure to be well educated in your endeavors. This is another great flaw of the current trend towards “insta-mentalists”: lack of a foundation in the art. You cannot buy from an Internet discount dealer all you need to know about mentalism. You will need to read and study those who have gone before, wrap your mind inside strange old books, and imagine what you can do.

Then you must **do** it.

By performing you will learn ever more.

Dare to read and watch what Chan Canasta, Dunninger, Nelson, Punx, Corinda, Annemann and that school set out to do. Kreskin learned his boldness from all of these, as well as studying linguistics and psychology in general.

I came in to this life longing to live magic. I did crazy things by most people’s view to try and find that magic from elementary school on. I think I have a 3-year-old birthday card with a magician on it, in fact.

But choosing to live those desires and ambitions takes a lot more study and plain old hard work to get things accomplished.

“You can do anything with the help of Something Greater, as long as you are willing to work for it” - as one very famous person I know has said.

There is magic in magic, and you will experience that Something if you keep at it, and if it is yours to do. In my experience, I find what is mine to do by going out and trying to do it repeatedly. After a while it becomes clear to me whether what I want to do is mine to do or not, at least for that moment.

This may all sound very mysterious, but there does often seem to be a Hidden Force at work when you make such commitments. Ask anyone in the motivational field about this, or anyone who has made it to the top, and they will know of what you speak in this regard. They will call this “luck”, “God”, “fortune”, “destiny”, “Blessings” and all kinds of names. You can just call it “Magic”. There *is* a magic that supports those who truly cannot help but support magic. When you just can’t do anything else but what you are doing, then you are doing the right thing. You will find you have support and even when times are thin, you’ll be okay.

“As long as you are willing to work for it” that is.

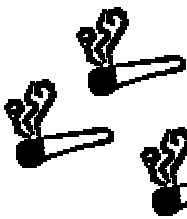
I used to hate that idea. I wanted everything to just happen for me. Work was a four-letter word. So is the phrase “Do it”. Now I know that action is as important as all the rest. There is magic in that too. Action and Daring are literally pillars of ancient magic.

As all Wizards, I do not give you the answers, you will surely notice. I simply tell you things I have experienced and that of others. What I say is a map of an island, but you must choose which way to live on it.

Am I being “in character”? Yes, but then this is my character truly. It comes from within me, not from television, for example.

Passion is a magical force. Untamed it can drive men wild. Harnessed you can take the same power and build monuments and reputations of the highest kind.

I will leave you with one last story.



A fellow came up to me after a magic event that included John Calvert’s gorgeous cigarette performance.

This man said to me “Kenton, you have such passion. At first I was watching John, but then I began to watch you instead”.

“Forever why would you watch me, when that fantastic work was going on before your eyes?” said I.

“Because I noticed that you had tears in your eyes as you watched John perform. You were tearing up over cigarette manipulations”, he said.

“Not over the cigarettes” I pointed out, “but for Beauty. There was real Beauty and Magic in his work. It was not well crafted only, though it was that. It was an act of art. Where there is Beauty and Magic, you will find me ecstatic”.

Later Andre Kole, myself, and a few other friends were sitting around. We were speaking about mentalism, magic and creativity. I have no idea what I was saying, but I caught a glimpse of a fellow shaking his head with a smile. I asked what he was smiling about - and he said, “You just have so much passion for what you do”.

Andre smiled knowingly, as we are all aware of how much he creates and performs.

You do not have to be passionate in the same way about the same things as I or anyone else. Andre and I differ greatly in some respects, that is certain. Yet our passion for our feelings about performing, creating and doing what we love is a common bond. It is what our peers see in us and admire, even when they disagree with us. Tarbell said the same, as did Houdini, Kellar, Blackstone Sr., Kreskin and so many others.

If you ever see Uri Geller do anything, like him or not, he has passion. That's how he enchanted the minds of the press and many, many people for so many years. He has that to this day.

No spoon bending sleight of hand DVD will give that to you.

Pick a path, any path you like. It may not turn out to be your final path. But it will be a path you need to take to get to your ultimate path. "Do it" and don't allow excuses to keep you from it. Have you any idea what kind of comments I have had to endure giving to magic and mentalism what I have? Criticism is easy and endless.

You will work it out if you insist on it, but not by yourself alone. You will have to stand on the shoulders of those passionate performers who have gone before you. You will need to be bolstered up by that Something that comes to your aid because you refuse to stop until you succeed.

When asked when I was much younger why I did what I did, I said what many have said. "It's the only thing I know to do". I had music on the side and that sort of thing, but I still cannot hammer a nail without bending it, or cut a straight line with a pair of scissors. This was all I could imagine really doing, so that is what I did.

I have learned you can imagine other things too and still succeed. But in time, one or the other will make itself clear what you are driven to BE. For in the end, it is not even what you do, but who you are and what that represents, that stays in the mind of the world and beyond.

Those are some of my feelings and experiences in this regard and how they have lead me to where I am now.

It is your turn to decide what paths to try next, and find your own magical journey.



Performing and discovering are eternally linked. Performing and discovering who you are is a process. It's a journey. Performing is not a place at which you arrive. It's a path you travel.

Many stumble along this path because they wait to be perfect before they perform. As we have discussed, you must DO - take action - to make any steps forward along this road. Some people forget this important but obvious fact.

But others make the mistake of doing just the opposite. They think the path is a clearing, through which they must hurry down to the end of fame and riches. These types of people are not prepared to face the dragons nor understand the basics enough to use a drawbridge to cross the moat. They fall into the waters and drown, blaming those who traverse with steady progress in a slightly slower, but more informed manner.

Either way, somewhere in the middle is the best way to walk along. You'll discover more of yourself as you think and do. You'll find along the waysides on the path of performance, parts of yourself you have ignored or forgotten. You will evaluate these anew, and they may be a new part of your artistic expression. Or, you may simply reintegrate them into your everyday life.

Above all, enjoy the journey. It's no good to travel any path begrudgingly. It's better to pick a new path if the one you are on does not suite you. But when you find a path and a road that is yours to travel, you'll care not so much where it leads. The pure joy of being on that particular path will be enough.

I am speaking from personal experience, of course.

Don't waste your time trying to go down another person's private path. Use the paths already made for you by others if you wish. You need not cut down a forest to make your way along the path of performance, when so many have clearings already cut. Use the paths of others to find the roads that inspire you personally. They will hint at the secret road that is all your own.

But do not take another's path entirely. There is no need to stomp into the dust what someone else has already carved out.

The Great Joy will happen to you when you uncover the road that is hidden by a thicket of thorns only you can see through to move. When you find your own road, the entire path is sacred. Just remember there is no need to rush to get there. There is no "there" to get. The journey along this path is the value. Where you end matters not as much as what you find along the way...your self. Happy discoveries of your self and your performances. Savor the journey, and do continue to move forward. That is important.

To borrow a phrase: "progress, not perfection". These are the secrets of being happy on the path of performance. May your journey be as filled with Wonder as mine has been and is to this day.



We Should Know, Should We Not?

Many years ago I addressed this issue, but as a layperson recently pointed it out again about another performer, I thought I ought to mention it once more.

If we play our performances in any way as to suggest perceiving the thoughts of others, why should we need to ask, “Are you finished yet?” “Have you done that?” “Did you close the lid?” or the offhanded comment, “Are you ready yet?”

As mentalists, *shouldn't we know* the answers to such questions? If not, wouldn't it be sensible to supply a reason why we cannot know such things?

Book tests have long been one of my examples of this problem. Instead of having a spectator tell me when to stop, I have them *think* about where they would like to stop, as I riffle through the pages of a book. I simply attempt to stop, using real intuition or subtle impressions, where I think they wish to stop. I open the page at this place and say:

“Take a look at the first word on that page, right where you decided to stop”.

If this goes off without question by anyone, it's a very bold, yet grand, force. Usually however someone in the audience will chuckle, or the spectator will look confused. That is when I firmly state:

“You and I know where you decided to stop, but they do not believe us. Because they do not read minds, they doubt that we stopped right where you thought about stopping. So that everyone else knows we are being fair and above board, and that we stop precisely where you choose, please call out the word ‘Stop’ loudly when you wish to stop. That way there shall be no question”.

I take the problem of having to *ask* a spectator where to stop, and made a feature of it instead. Note that the words suggest that I stopped where the spectator only thought of stopping. This is phrased in such a way as to not cause any form of rebuke from the spectator. The spectator is so thrown off track and unbalanced by all of these comments anyway, that your direction to “simply call out stop” is quickly followed.

The audience now may consider that you read his mind originally. At worst, you have provided an entertaining and sensible reason for why the spectator must call out to stop you.

If all of this has not turned your eyes away, then you will find another subtle bit here that I use. Too many performers miss the nuance here, but I think you will understand and grasp it. The beginning of a book test begins with my asking *a person to think of anything* at all. I frown quickly saying, “Let's use something a little less provocative as any thought... a safe thought... which is why I borrowed this book”.

I know, I know. It's an old bit to you to say, "Let's think of something *safe*", but if you are focusing on this, you have missed what I wanted you to miss. Surely audiences miss this in the flow of actual performance and it all passes right by them too.

The key part of the phrase is actually "...why I *borrowed* this book". From whom did I borrow the book? Where did the book come from exactly? Many in the audience assume the host or hostess may have lent the book, others consider a secret committee of some type, or perhaps the book was borrowed from a friend. But the assumption that goes unnoticed is that the *book is borrowed*. The truth is, the book is a gaffed one, which I brought along, and my wording alone made it seem otherwise.

Some may argue these are subtle issues not worth dwelling upon. I do believe that we theorize too much and think more than most of the Public on many conceptions. But these issues are the ones raised by laypeople, and my solutions those that have proved true in countless performances.

I hope many will find the real practical value in these apparently small notions.

Your Special Place

I have often referred to this as "vortices" as if we were to create an actual vortex on the stage. You may think of this concept as mere blocking. I believe in labeling it as something more powerful and meaningful to a performer, as you will see.

Here is the basic concept. Do certain *types* of things in *specific places* on the stage.

After several events, the audience is trained to expect that these areas indicate a specific event is likely to take place. The audience may or may not realize this consciously. It really doesn't matter, as audiences once trained, react to events more due to this expectation. It is an almost subconscious manner of building suspense. It works likewise to build expectation, or foreshadow what is to come.

Consider areas of your stage as places to create vortices or areas of certain mystical effect. "Predictions" are performed in one main area of the stage, "mind reading" in another, and "body language" in a different area still.

Another application of this might be as follows: You try and read a spectator's mind. You have no luck at this. Suddenly, a notion strikes you, and you ask the spectator to change places with you, and stand right where you stand. Soon you are able to read the spectator's mind. Trade places back again, and the spectator can now read *your* mind.



While not stated directly, *indirectly* the audience learns that one space on the stage is for reading minds, and that the other space is for having one's mind read. Later, when a spectator is asked to stand in a certain place, the audience expects his mind will also be read, as he stand in the "mind reading area" of the stage.

Milton Erickson could be more overt about placement, and so can you, if you choose.

You might say, "I see you are skeptical, there... you on that side of the stage. You are a little skeptical there, aren't you? Please, step over here instead. Come see my perspective. Just come over to the other side here instead". At the very least, this breaks the continuity of his skeptical thought (a pattern interrupt). At worst, you can "send him back to his corner" if his attitude stays skeptical, and you'll get a laugh out of it all.

It is a challenge, but one I have found worth considering from time to time. Where might I create special areas on my stage? What might these suggest? What might these areas induce?

If I do a certain type of Kentonism and seemingly cause a trance to occur, later putting someone in this same area suggests a trance may happen again. With very susceptible people it may be enough to say, "Step over here where we put people under". If you have ever been to a dentist or doctor and they told you that a specific room was meant to "put you under", you may have experienced this before any anesthesia hit you. The suggestion of *the place* set up a reaction in mind and body.

In Arizona we have places in a town called Sedona that is famed for its many vortex sites. Watching people react to the idea of traveling there – long before arriving – indicates the thought of a special area alone may be enough to cause a reaction.

But first you must establish special areas or vortices. A mystical sort might go so far as to put special symbols in circled areas on the stage flooring. But you need not be that overt. Even a living room can have mystical areas if you choose to indicate them.

Keep in mind it is generally better not to indicate these areas broadly or consciously. You do not want this to come across as a gag or joke. Never say something such as "Over here is the mind reading spot. Over there is the spot for spirits. Really. I will prove it". Say such things if you wish to take a lighthearted approach only.

Many believe that spirits leave cold spots in hallways, on the floor or walls, and such. Everything from equivoque to stage areas could be described as cold spots for a middle of the road presentation.

Now I will leave you to your own space to stop and think about the wonders of special places and what they demonstrate, at home and on stage.

Just don't fall into that invisible hole over there. It's a weird experience.

Words, Mentality and Their Power in Magic



(An Overview For Japanese Television)

Words are symbols. As symbols, they are representative only. Words are not of course the actual things they represent. Yet, we speak as though what is said is physical fact. Words have within them the essence of illusion. Magical performers understand the need to apply these word illusions from everyday life to their performances.

People often recall as truth something that has been said even after physical evidence of the opposite. A magician may pick up a deck of cards and palm a card away. But as he sets the deck back down on the table he might say, “I do not want to touch the cards at all. I won’t even come near the cards”. A few minutes later when the performer produces this palmed card, the audience will be stunned. They will insist that the performer NEVER touched the cards AT ALL. The illusion and power in the words spoken override the physical reality everyone has seen. A wise performer will repeat the words several times; to be sure this idea is firmly implanted as truth in the minds of his or her audience.

Another example of magic words is when a word is used to seemingly cancel out what has already taken place. This may be seen as an action that is excused as an “example”. Some languages have specific words for this, such as the word “but” in American English. The word “but” tends to cancel out whatever preceded it. For instance, a performer may palm a card and reach into his outer jacket pocket, secretly leaving the card there. The performer may say to a spectator, “Go ahead. Reach into my pocket ...” as he mimes this action and leaves the card behind. He continues on “**But** I don’t want to do it – YOU do it! Reach inside... what is really in there”? In the moment, some audience members may recall the performer reached into the pocket first, but later – due to the power of words – they will soon recall that an audience member found a signed card in the performer’s pocket. “He never touched the cards or his pocket at all. We held the cards the entire time and my friend that picked the card reached into the magician’s pocket himself”. The words “**BUT** I don’t want to do it” tends to minimize that the performer did this very thing. By combining the word-power with a natural pattern such as presenting a physical example, the maneuvers appear fair and above board.

Another example of the word “but” is as follows: A spectator believes the performer has his card secretly controlled to the top of the deck. The spectator yells out to the performer that this is the case, and that the performer should let the spectator shuffle the deck. This would be an embarrassing moment except for those well studied in mystery linguistics. The performer uses the word “but” and replies, “I would let you shuffle, but you see your card is long gone!” and reaches into his pocket to remove the chosen card. The truth is the card actually was on top of the deck as the spectator insisted. The performer did NOT argue with the spectator about his charge. Rather, he began agreeing that the spectator could do as he wished. He said as much remarking, “I would let you shuffle”. This took the spectator off his guard. This did not end the performer’s statement however. He continued on adding the word “but” to cancel out this option saying “...**but** you see your card is long gone”! This completely throws the skeptical person, allowing just enough time for the performer to palm away the card off the top of the deck and produce it from his pocket, as if to punctuate the end of his statement. A horrible situation becomes proof of the performer’s remarkable ability.

These are bold and simple examples, but they illustrate how words change the reality viewed by an audience at any given moment. Far more subtle and in-depth work can of course be found in my Wonder Words series.

Association is another mental trait mystery performers must use to their advantage as well. People do not comprehend an item or event in a void. We must bring our personal experiences and history to bear on that which we experience. We experience not so much with the ears or the eyes, but *through the mind*. Our experiences make for profound illusions. Our associations, while useful, are also the foundation of incorrect perceptions.

A performer may walk out on stage with a ceramic cup. Smoke rises from it and he sips from the cup as he speaks calmly and intimately. In nearly an instant our mind begins to wonder if he is merely chatting, or if the performer is about to do something with his cup of tea, sake or coffee. Suddenly the performer remarks he would prefer a smoke rather than a drink. In a flash, the cup is gone and the performer holds a lit cigarette. Without exposing how the performer has made the cup vanish, we can still examine closely what really has us amazed. It is only natural that a cup with smoke rising from it be seen as a hot liquid given our personal experiences and associations in everyday living. Yet the truth is far from this. The cup was empty save for a bit of glue that held a lit cigarette inside of the cup. The smoke rising seemed to be steam from a liquid. Especially is this true as the performer keeps the cup in motion a little as he speaks, dispersing any smoke that appears too dense. This combined with the performer putting his lips to the cup helps reinforce the associations we have made in our minds.

The vanish of the glass of steaming liquid is now easier to understand. Only the cup need be hidden away. The liquid never was and the lit cigarette was awaiting production the entire time. Our mental associations make wild leaps to assumptions about what we see, hear or feel. A hot poker shown and placed against the neck of an audience member will make them scream – although in truth a performer would never do such a thing.

In this case, the mystery performer touched the back of the person's neck with a bit of ice. The freezing sensation seemed to be extreme heat, due to the person's mental association. It is now an easy matter for the person to be "healed" by supposed mental powers.

The bottom line is this: *It is how we perceive that deceives.*

The Public has been made aware of what they know as "misdirection" but few know the real secret mystery performers call "indirection". As I have been a pioneer in this matter as well, I can give you a simple taste of how this psychological tool is applied. Mentally we know that any direct statement, verbal or nonverbal, is apt to be challenged. If not outwardly, then in the mind only of the audience will such things be debated.

A performer holds an object between his hands. He asks a spectator to hold their hands palm up to receive it. As the performer approaches the spectator, the object vanishes. The spectator is startled and the performer shakes his hand thanking him for his help. Everyone is amazed. But what if this same thing happened and the performer did **not** shake the spectator's hand? In a second or two, attention would have focused on the hand that concealed the small object. One of the performer's hands is clearly seen empty, yet we see the back only of his other hand. This hand would be suspicious and the vanish obvious, save for the use of indirection. Shaking the spectator's hand with a possible suspicious hand **indirectly says** this suspicious hand is empty. It would be absurd to vocalize or directly claim this hand is empty. But by shaking hands with the spectator, the audience *is indirectly being told* the other hand is empty too, and so the vanish impresses all who see it.

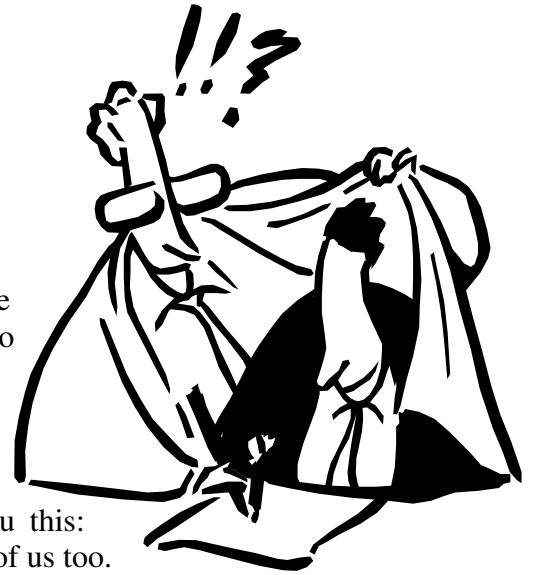
A bow may be used in a similar manner. The secret transfer of the object from one hand to another is performed as the hands are brought together. This transfer is made back and forth twice. In the process, the audience happens to see out of their periphery view each hand empty. The hands are not directly shown empty, as this would cause direct attention and possible suspicion. But as the hands are seen empty from time to time as the performer bows, the hands are indirectly perceived to be empty.

I have used this bowing transfer to fool many well-known magicians and mentalists.

Due to such principles as indirection, suggestion, linguistics and mental influence, mystery performers create what appears to be everything from magic to mind reading. Those of us on the cutting edge have made these once obscure principles the new mark of excellence in any mystery performer's act. Less honest types apply these means to guide others into debt, war, defeat, sickness and ruin. Mystery performers however use the power of their principles to bring wonder and hope back to the world of man.

Opposing Poles

Recently a friend asked what to do when two or more performers he admired seemed to be saying he should do opposite things. I realized this is a point of confusion for most of us, be it in the books we read, the articles we see, or the newsgroups we sling thoughts in. While some of you may be tempted to blow by this article because it doesn't teach you any tricks or methods – I will tell you this: What is hidden here is MAGIC, and a great relief for some of us too.



When it comes to opinions, take MY advice: Do what YOU wish to do, because that is what you “should” be doing. On the other hand, doing what you want to do is probably what you will do anyway - if you are like many of us. That doesn't mean you cannot learn from others. You can and will.

No one person's opinion should be YOUR defining idea of life. Frankly, you may find ways to blend two opposing things, if you like them both, no matter how at odds they may first seem. So often we read, or have been taught, that such-and-such a method is the CORRECT way to do something - period. “This is the proper way to do a Svengali Count,” raves one author. Who says so? It may well be the correct way for the author to do this sleight, but that doesn't mean YOU should do it his way. Maybe you should. IF it works well for you. You can do some of Larry Jennings sleights, for instance, but when I met Mr. Jennings, I understood how he could palm half a deck of cards. His hands were larger than any poker deck created. It was an easy matter for him to palm a deck.

Do not rush to find excuses for lack of practice however. Many things take more than a day or two of work. Don't throw the work of others away because you find it takes work to master them. Try not to dismiss cutting-edge notions because you find them cutting. On the other hand, think for yourself as to whether or not this is the best way for YOU to accomplish the effect intended. Maybe you can find a better way – FOR YOU. Then, try not to run out to the streets and scream to the world your way is the right way either. That's when you'll learn it isn't as easy as it sounds. Ego is easy. Humility is tough to get, and even tougher to keep.

Today, many younger performers think their radical ideas are novel and that all that has gone before them should be dismissed. What some of these people fail to realize is that the old timers once had brash, scolding egos and said identical things. Fear or slander does not impress experience; so older performers may evaluate such comments based upon their own experience. Personal experience means a slanted opinion, of course. Experiences vary. So do opinions. Temper all you hear, and all you say. Learn, read, and think too. Nothing is mutually exclusive.

Concerning opposing views and spoken thoughts on “acting” and “character”, I say “character” comes from what we are inside. The outer display of our inner character creates our outward “character”. But this is more an artist point of view, and not an actor’s one - to make simply one distinction. Many actors say they are playing a PART. That may mean that they are only partially this, or not at all this character - but momentarily pretend to be that. Or not.

Everyone has opinions. What is most important is that you follow the ones you like, in part or in whole, in the ways that you like. You can always change your mind later too - so don’t worry about making a decision “for now”. Too many times performers over-think and the result is they do nothing - for fear of being wrong. The one way you will find your path and your definitions is to do what you want to do - knowing that life is change, and you will. But you cannot second-guess yourself - unless you second-guess yourself into death or inaction.

What’s the old saw? “Opinions are like asses - everyone has one”? Sometimes we become the ass when trying to make our opinions clear. But they are still our opinions - not Universal Fact. It is good that we are passionate about are opinions - we need be to live them. But we often mistake our passions for what needs be the passions of others. So, find what is YOU and what is YOURS - knowing these may change sometimes. God knows mine has and does!

S.H. Sharpe said “It is though one took some sulfuric acid and poured it over various substances such as metal, wood, fabric and so on. In each case, the reaction would be different. Sometimes no reaction would be noticeable. Now if we imagine these substances as human minds, we realize how impossible it is to produce similar impressions on everybody” This goes for opinions, beliefs, and magical or mental effects.

Some of us may seem caustic at times, while others may feel this is just the solvent required. Our perceptions, which come out as our opinions, may or may not be the right mixture for YOU. But you are the Alchemist of your life. Others mean to guide you in what they have found and discovered, but it may not work in your own process - only you can decide that.

Choose, and keep observing the chemical reactions (audience reactions, and your internal life reactions) and then you may evaluate best which chemicals to add or displace. In time, the mixture is bound to change. You know, one definition of magic IS “The Art of Transformation”. So pick your path, have fun, observe, and adjust as you watch what happens. If you get enough soda and vinegar explosions, in time, you may use sugar instead – or at least in part. Those are my opinions. Some based on other’s opinions. But not entirely based upon one person or the other - so I call them “mine”.

Mainly a little experience, in my experience, goes a long way to solving such riddles and fixing them into useful measure. Just be open to learning, willing to consider different ideas than your own, and then keep what you love most. Eventually, you will think differently. That much I can guarantee.

What is Intimacy Anyway?



While my reference to this is close-up magic, this does not exclude “mentalism”. In fact, I believe part of the draw to an audience about mentalism is the very notion of intimate relationship. How much more intimate might we be involved than copulating with the mind of another? How much more invasive can we be than stealthily entering another person’s secret thoughts? So, mentalism should be regarded as intimate, right out of hand. But it is rarely. Why would that be? Let’s think about it.

While I first wrote the following in response to a debate about touching people in a performer’s close-up magic performance, please put any prejudices aside to see the similarities for us in mentalistic endeavors as well. I think you will view how what we touch and how we feel – inwardly and outwardly – makes a great difference.

My notion about intimacy in close-up and most performing is much more about **RELATIONSHIPS** than anything else. I did not have people build what they called “miniature altars” with sponge balls and kitchen utensils solely because “I fooled them good”. It is absolutely my relationships – yes, actual relationships - I have had and still have with audiences large and small that make for the magical quotient described.

Magicians mention “touching” and how some say this is an absolute no-no. That is not a rule. In truth, we as people need touch to survive. Studies show this. It is a human need. So not doing it can hardly be a rule. Still so many have touched inappropriately or incorrectly that it has been said, “Never touch a spectator”. Our tricks though that are in-the-hands-effects are great in part because of the **INTIMACY** and **TOUCH** involved.

This should not be construed of course as a license to fondle, hit upon, take advantage of or hit a spectator. Maybe you think such things ludicrous, but I have seen these happen far too often, and the audience is always sickened by it. Some spectators will not smack you back in front of your face. That doesn’t mean it is OK.

I recall working with some other magicians at a Harrah’s casino here in Phoenix. By the time I got to my shift, I spent the first few **HOURS** re-teaching the crowds that a magician approaching them didn’t mean they had to run away or duck down and hit the floor, flinch, etc. These are not exaggerations. Those magicians before me would **RACE** their hand to behind the ear of the spectator out of fear that their palming would be seen. To a spectator, this action was simply a punch thrown and fortunately avoided. These same performers would pull things out from the spectator’s person. But spectators **FELT** that this was “pulling on me and slapping me around and beating on me”. Imagine trying to undo that sort of damage to other people’s psyches because someone else before me was not aware of their responsibility in this performing **RELATIONSHIP**.

If these so-called magicians stopped thinking about their selves only and stepped outside themselves to look at what this was doing to their relationship with others, they would have stopped doing it. They didn't. They were eventually fired. If you think that just because these people were magicians and not mentalists that you are immune – think again.

Some performers think that relationship in performing means “what an audience gives to you because you perform for them”. No, that is selfishness.

Relationships are both giving and taking on both sides, and both sides feeling fulfilled and satisfied most of the time. Does your act do that?

If you consider that last notion as a working definition for performing relationships, then you can see why music and other arts may be thought “art” while magic is so often considered merely “tricks”.

One night at dinner a performer was bemoaning others who did “readings” and he asked me why so many were doing that successfully now. In places where he could not get work, there would be “those reader people”. I reached over and stroked his hand and said, “Let me see your palm”. I didn't even do a reading really. I just sat there stroking the palm of his hand for about twenty seconds as I said; “You're doing all right” in different ways. Then I stopped abruptly. I whipped out a deck of cards and said boldly, “Pick a card! Any caaaarrrd”! He pulled back away from me.

“See? THAT is why readings are often better than card tricks. Which of these made YOU feel better”?

He didn't like much to admit it, but he understood what the issue was – feelings and establishing a relationship with others took precedence in readings.

Less performer ego, more performer *involvement*.

I went on to say that it really isn't about whether we do readings or card tricks. But readings have relationship and intimacy built into them from the start. These are the real, lasting things of a performance. Use them or ignore them and lose audiences.

And jobs.

But we are both working steadily and neither one of us should complain. If someone had the right to complain, it was this next fellow. But he didn't complain either. It's a magical story, of the old-school-Welsh-myth-frightening-and-enlightening kind. Except this is true. Just perhaps a little Grimm you may think, but not grim in the least. Not with this attitude and thinking.

It Could Be Worse...And You Could USE IT



Recently I received a letter from a performer, friend and fan. He had been misdiagnosed for a physical ailment and was now in the horrid situation of having to work at performing with all manner of pain and ills. After three long years, he had come to grips with the idea that he may never get physically better.

Don't expect some sort of sob story from him, or in my response. This performer would not stand for such a thing. But his situation reminded me of something Jack LaWain told me when I was young. I felt it had a much broader meaning now, and so I shared this with my friend, and with you.

You may wonder what on earth this has to do with "mentalism". I suggest it has everything to do with it.

Here is my letter to my performer friend with such a critical illness:

It's good you are working at being what is uniquely you and making that be your performance. That way no one can truly copy YOU. Yes, you are in a very special predicament – not shared with many – but with some.

I recall a story I was told by a cherished magician teacher and dealer I knew growing up – Jack LaWain. He told me he recalled seeing the most incredible version of a so-called "Jap Box" (what this type of production box was called back then) in a carnival tent. Without any apparent steals, this Tent Performer produced YARDS of silk streamer out of this blessed box - when the trap can only hold a few silks at most.

LaWain said he stayed to watch this show over and over. He could never figure out just from where this huge production was really coming. It was the Greatest Mystery - no one else had been able to do anything like it. He was just a boy watching this production, so he hounded and pestered the Tent Performer for the secret.

The performer would say only "You don't want to know my secret".

But he did want to know. He was relentless.

"Even if you know, you'll not want to do it".

“Oh but I DO want to do it!” said LaWain insistently.

“No, you don’t. Only I am able to do it. Even if I teach you, you cannot do it - you will not want to steal it from me”.

“I want to do it, but with your permission”.

“I do not wish that on you” said the Tent Performer.

The performer finally gave in and showed LaWain the trick. The performer had lost his arm in a war, and was fitted with a wooden replacement. While at first this depressed him, he decided to take full advantage of the situation. He drilled a hole near the wrist, and shoved yards and yards of silk inside his hollow wooden arm. He covered the hole with a watch he wore. He could now pull the silks through the hole in the bottom of the Jap Box, right out of his arm! He was right. No one could duplicate it. No one would want to try. But while the performer did not do the trick because *he wanted* to be in his situation, he created it because he wanted to *make the best use out of his unique situation*. He used what he had to be the best HE could be, and that few others could ever aspire or desire to achieve.

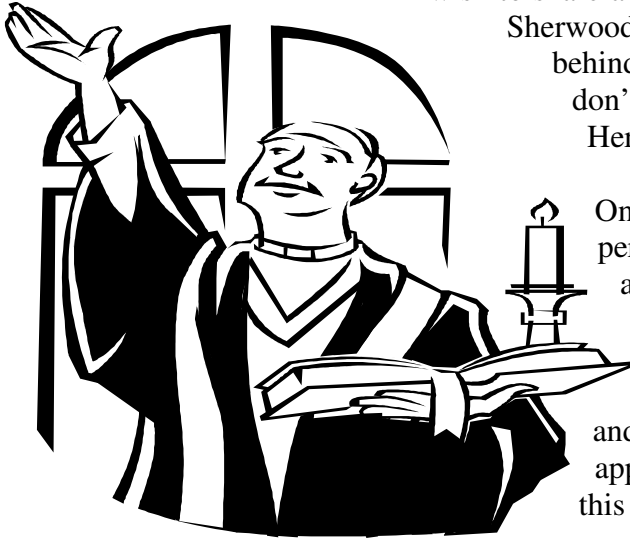
In your situation, you are working at being the best YOU can be, of course. It is those who are less handicapped physically that sometime have the biggest handicap of all. At least you know you need to do something special. To BE something special. Far more blind are those with 20/20 vision. If only a mentalist could put on a blindfold and see more truly. But alas most mentalists are intent upon getting sneaky glimpses without catching a glimpse, peeking as a ruse rather than daring to peek into themselves. Mentalists bend silverware, but keep their thoughts and minds rigid in rules. They can show an audience member what is inside that person’s mind and heart, but they will not share similar information about their own hearts and minds with their audience.

I do not see a magic story as strictly about magic, or comments about mentalism solely about mentalism. It matters not one wit whether we feel such stories are schmaltz or overly sentimental. What matters to me is what we can learn, and more vital still, what we will do based upon such accounts. The real trick is never the trick. It is who we are, and dare to show. That’s the trick to it all.

You serve now as a fine reminder to many, my friend. We need not let our flaws keep us from trying and being who we desire to be. We should not fall into the ever so easy trap of not doing by focusing on what we have not, rather than expanding on what we do have. Few can say they are in your place, yet they have more reasons why they cannot do all that you do. Our fear keeps us down, and in that sense we lose and it wins.

You remind us to face our situation honestly, but then use that assessment to lift us up – rather than tear ourselves down to the point of inaction. You remind us and inspire us to use what we do have, not stop ourselves because of what we do not. Yours is a true gift.

Father of Intention



I wish to share a funny story with you that my friend John Sherwood shared with me. There is a good reason behind why I wish you to read this little story. I don't ask that you do so without purpose. Here is the short tale:

One priest phrased a question "Is it permissible to smoke while praying?" to his authorities and was told it is not, since prayer should be the focus of one's whole attention. Another priest asked if it is permissible to pray while smoking and was told that it is, "since it is always appropriate to pray". The original source of this is: Neil Postman, "Technopoly"

While the story is very humorous, it also points out the importance of INTENTION. In the examples given, one priest had the INTENTION of treating his prayers lightly - as he wanted to smoke while he had to pray. The other priest seemingly had the INTENTION that prayer was always IMPORTANT, and therefore even as he smoked, he willed to pray. Therefore, it is not the physical act that determines the importance or lack thereof. It is the INTENTION behind the act, which conveys it's meaning.

For performers, as well as the most esoteric student, this is vital knowledge.

While not everyone in an audience can grasp what something means to the performer, they often have a sense of whether something is held in importance, reverence, or awe, or whether this same action or prop is a goof, a joke, or a trick.

Two metal bowls may be nothing more than props that allow a performer to do the Rice Bowl trick. But, speaking from personal experience on the other hand, two metal bowls may be some of the most sacred and magical stuff you own.

S.H. Sharpe used to say you could read about symbols, but unless one was "steeped in symbols" the use of them was not at all the same. The INTENTION of what such symbols (also known at times as "props") mean, change what others feel these symbols mean.

INTENTION of an action, the THOUGHT behind the thing ("mentalism") is what determines its value.

As performers, this is a challenge. Can our own intentions change how we relate to props, and how our audiences feel about such props?

In my experience - absolutely.

Pick up a metal tube or bowl you have around your home. Pick it up, as if you are showing it is empty to an audience. Now, do it again, as if this were the urn that your favorite person's ashes from the crematoria are stored. Did you treat it any differently?

This is a gross, not subtle or sublime, example. But trying this out should make the point of how your mental intentions can change how the physical appears to you and others.

If you believe in something greater than yourself, or can imagine such an idea, then try this sometimes-powerful notion:

Imagine that the air you are breathing in is actually the breath of God (insert your favorite deity here). Imagine that as you breathe out, your breath is what God breathes in. Breathe this way for just a minute. Does such mental intention change the way you feel?

Don't misunderstand, as I am not trying to make you believe in anything whatsoever. You are free to believe or disbelieve, as you will. Such INTENTION changes how you relate to physical matters and other people. That is the point. If you have a violent reaction to any of these examples, then that tells you about your own intentions too.

My intention is to say to you that your mental experience will transform your physical experience, even in performance.

Odd that "magicians" and "mentalists" should often dismiss such near mystical powers of mind isn't it? Perhaps not so strange if your intention of "magician" or "mentalist" means, "trick person". But otherwise...

Some might say that I have many levels at work in much of what I teach, and that my intention is not solely about trickery. But trying to figure out another person's intention is a blind. Far more important is to examine and assume one's own intentions, knowing you are free to change them as you wish. By considering your own intention, you can see more than what patter to use with each trick you do. You can pierce the veil enough to choose more important, deeper meanings, without preaching or blatantly saying much of anything. Your mental focus will determine your outer presentation. This is as true in real life as it is in performance.

Discovering and exploring this for yourself is a gift that keeps on giving. To others, as well as you. Happy Choices (Intentions)!

You may read through these letters and rants and agree with some or disagree completely. But thinking about these issues help define who you are. Even your disagreements show your intentions. Your intentions are the magic that make your performance and your character unique and worth attention. Give your attention to such issues, and your audiences will return it to you many fold. That is the intention of these writings. What you intend to do with that, is up to you.



Sweetening The Deal

Since you stayed with me through my current ranting, and have your head perhaps full of thoughts, here is a little item just for fun. Maybe it will help ground you back into your own way of thinking and being. Then, once you relax, you can consider integrating all we have discussed.

You're out to eat with friends, and you mention the different kinds of sweetener now available. You gather a packet of real sugar, a packet of Sweet and Low and another packet of Splenda, for instance (use what your locale has available, naturally).

“Each is different in taste, and each is in a different color package. That means that each of these packets vibrates at different energy levels. With practice, you can feel this difference. I'll show you”.

A friend mixes up the packets behind your back so you cannot see them. Although you cannot see the packets, you claim to know each one and remove a packet one at a time proving you can feel which one is which. You are always correct. There is no set-up required of any kind, and no peeks either. You do what you say – almost.

There are two methods to this presentation. But after you present the effect, you tell your friends how it is done. Take a handful of each of the packets. Put a handful of the Splenda packets in someone's right hand, and a similar handful of real sugar in their left hand. Expose the trick: If they pay very close attention, they will feel that the sugar packets are heavier than the Splenda packets. They can actually feel the difference in weight between the two types of packets in their hands.

“Now, if I remove one packet of each kind from your two hands, you can still feel that the sugar is heavier. It's a little more difficult to notice the weight, but you can still feel the difference. Now if I remove another packet each, it is far more difficult to feel which hand holds the sugar and which the Splenda without looking. But with practice you can feel that too”.

“I just keep practicing until I am so sensitive that I can feel the difference between one packet of each. Then I can feel the variance in weight between sugar, Splenda and Sweet and Low. That’s how the trick is done. Once you teach yourself to feel that, and be more sensitive to your surroundings, all sorts of things are possible”.

This supposedly explains everything from mind reading to why you can feel the aces in a deck of cards. “I can find your card now that it has a slight bit of oil on it from your fingers, that the other cards do not have”, for instance.

If you try and weigh these packets yourself, you will find that this explanation is true. It isn’t the truth, but it is true. The method I most often use is a simple physical reality. Most sugar packets are sized and sealed in a certain manner. Sugar substitutes are often different sizes than sugar packets. Splenda for instance is about as long as Equal or Sweet and Low, but is nowhere near as wide as a Sweet and Low packet. Splenda packets are folded at one long side, with a prominent ridge to feel on the opposing long side. Sugar packets are often folded and sealed this way too, but they are distinctly shorter in length and wider. Quite a big difference in how they feel. Sweet and Low packets are as wide as a sugar pack and as long as a Splenda pack. But they also have ridges on every side of the packet – even on the ends. That makes Sweet and Low rather obvious. Such unique characteristics can be said of Equal and many other packets you will find at a coffee shop, bar or dining establishment. The other way to handle this is to prepare ahead of time three duplicate packets placed under your belt or in your back pocket so you can produce any pack you wish. Ditch the unknown set in your other back pocket as you do.

What throws everyone off is the outrageous claim that you will use the differences in energy to know which type is which. This is less outrageous with some groups, especially if you use a raw or natural sugar packet versus altered sugar or a chemical sugar. Then it may seem rather believable to some. But for many the claim that you can feel the energies of the packets makes them interested yet suspicious. So, just as you bring out the last pack you say, “I’ll teach you how I do it”. Now the focus shifts, and everyone is very interested, and yet curiously their suspicion is also *relaxed*.

Give a spectator six or ten packets of Splenda in one hand and about the same number of real sugar in the other. Physical reality is now at work on a few levels. Splenda really is lighter in weight than real sugar. You have to hold enough of it to feel this, but it is true. That’s why you give the spectator multiple packets of each type to hold and weigh. You also have *suggestion* at work. One type is heavier as you suggest that it is! If they cannot feel the difference, have them hold out their arms and try to feel how the sugar packet is heavier. This suggestion and the fact that their arms will tire quickly now do the trick. But most people can feel, or say they can feel, the difference between these right away.

To reinforce this notion, you remove a packet of each type from their hands. You ask them to try and feel the difference now. At some point they will usually say they cannot tell anymore, and that is when you make your pitch for your practice and sensitivity. Of course, if they can tell right down to one packet in each hand, that makes your point too.

The explanation seems practical and forthright. That allows you to branch into other effects using an expansion of this same explanation. Now what would have seemed to be obvious trickery instead are special talents and abilities you have apparently developed. It can make even a “pick a card” trick seem real. That’s a pretty big trick.

Basing an explanation on physical reality makes for a believable story. Once this reality is established (even if it is false), it may be expanded upon and stretched to such an extent that it is nearly impossible, yet still somehow believable. That should give you something to think about.

I hope you will have fun with this and learn some of the lessons it teaches as well. Besides all I have mentioned, this effect will train you to be more observant and aware of your surroundings. This simple principle alone – awareness – has lead me to many discoveries and to such effects and methods as “Five Bill Miracle”.

My wishes are that the writings and effects mentioned here will lead you to many of your own discoveries and create a new awareness that serves you too.

~Until Next We Meet~

Kenton Knepper



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