

# Introduction and Orientation

This book describes a means of creating many strange and powerful experiences that can often only be described by words such as "magical," "surreal" or "impossible" for those who experience them as a participant, a witness, or a performer. These experiences can include invisible forces, unusual sensations, disembodied emotions, hallucinations in multiple senses, and apparent acts of mind reading, to name just a few. The methods to create these experiences grew out of some ideas that were researched in an academic setting and some first-hand observation of various kinds of practitioners, as well as experience from some pretty unscientific demonstrations that have been carried out in places ranging from university labs and classrooms to the stage, to the schoolyard, and to more than one rowdy bar.

I will start by making the wild claim that this book is about making real magic. Depending on how one defines what is "real" and what is "magic," that claim may or may not hold up by the end of the book, but if not will almost certainly become irrelevant in the face of what does become possible. For now, rather than try to argue about what is or is not magic, I will say what I would personally expect from a book on "real magic." If you agree with these general points, then we are in business:

- It feels right. The book should convey methods that look and feel like real magic and cause the astonishment, mystery and fascination that we associate with magic. For it to be real magic, the performer would have to feel this way too, and not just the audience.
- It works right. The demonstrations are consistent with the real methods used, and the performer's abilities with them. That also means that if a performer makes it look like he can fly on stage, then he would be able to fly when I see him at the bus stop later on. The performer is not separate from the audience and playing by different rules like a puppet master, ringleader or performing trick monkey, and is just as much a participant in the experience as anyone.
- It sits right. The book does not give false or patronizing explanations to the reader or to the eventual audience. It also does not crush the sense of mystery, wonder, and possibility inherent in anything that feels magical. It avoids narrow tropes and nominalizations surrounding "magic" and related ideas if those things limit our practical abilities or our capacity to think freshly about what we are doing ("it's unexplainable," "it's all in the mind," "it's suggestion," "it's a trick," "it must use 'energy,'" etc.). If the performer honestly talks about what his real methods are, it still feels like magic.

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On these very basic points, I think this book more than delivers. If you disagree, then from the bottom of my heart: Hunt me down, beat me up, and take back whatever money, bonds, shares, priceless heirlooms, beaded trinkets, Karmic deductions, children, livestock, simple gratitude or anything else you gave me in return for this book. And I will thank you for doing it.

### **On “Magic”**

The kind of authentic connections and experiences that we need to create cannot really happen until we who communicate them are able to genuinely experience that sense of magic ourselves. It is for this reason that the real thrust of this book will be changing the way in which we conceive of a performance. This reimagining not only makes possible the kind of magical experiences that would have seemed impossible before; it also makes them both genuine and inevitable.

"Magical," "surreal," "impossible" and the like can be difficult words. For some reason, we have different intuitive reactions and different definitions when a street magician causes money to appear or change denomination in his hands versus when a cubicle-bound employee at the Federal Reserve pulls a hundred million dollars out of nothing with a few keystrokes and then releases it into the world where others will eventually use it to buy food and cars and houses. We assume that there are qualitatively different phenomena at work when considering how one is affected viscerally—*physically*—by certain words that can be said from across the room or over a phone line as compared with how legendary martial arts masters are reputed

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to be able to physically affect others at a distance using "energy" techniques. The simple touch of a lover that sends a rush of sensations across the body is likely to be interpreted as primal or profane, while an equally powerful touch from a mystic is more easily interpreted as pure and spiritual. We are impressed because one athlete can jump a little bit higher than another, and not because the competition is between two sentient configurations of atoms on a tiny speck of matter drifting through the vastness of the universe.

This is all to say that the methods in this book need have nothing to do with things that are inherently magical in order to create the experience of magic. They are rather about dealing directly with that aspect of human nature that allows things to be experienced as possible or impossible, as real or surreal or imaginary, as moving or magical or mundane. The performer or practitioner is one who has no special ability other than to be positioned so that he or she can access that strange yet oddly familiar little something in everyone that can build worlds to live in, that can connect to the enchantment of anything, and that can both generate and revel in infinite mystery and wonder.

## **A Working Definition**

For years this book sat in a sort of dead zone, a twilight where it was essentially a book concerning magic that could not use the M word for fear of falling into the abyss of associations that the word carries with it. Yet it was also a book that described a way of creating what looks a lot like someone might expect of magic after seeing a fantasy movie, and which feels much like the kind of magic that someone might wish for after being told that there is no such thing as magic.

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As is often the case with non-literal abysses, finally jumping in proved that the abyss was not so deep and scary after all. The tangled mess of seemingly contradictory ideas that we come up with when we say the word "magic" actually speaks to something more fundamental than cards and fog machines, crystals and curses, miracles and truth, faulty logic and wild naiveté. And above all, none of the semantics of the word can take away from what we can accomplish in practice, regardless of what we choose to call what we do.

For now, we can talk about the kind of "magic" that we can make without getting lost in all the other baggage associated with the concept by thinking in simple terms of an idea and a relationship.

The idea of magic in any sense involves *something that seems to bend or break the everyday rules of the universe*. This fundamental aspect holds true regardless of your beliefs regarding magic or of what kind of magic you are speaking of. Something seeming to bend or break the everyday rules of the universe may mean that a higher or more fundamental set of rules could be invoked to override the everyday rules. Otherwise, the everyday rules simply appear to be defied either because the rules we had were incorrect or incomplete, or because there is some sort of trick or illusion that has caused us to perceive the rules being broken when they were not.

This fundamental idea of magic could therefore refer equally to chanting a spell that invokes hidden forces and to making a coin vanish by sleight of hand. It is an idea and definition of magic that might seem too broad to be of much use. Interestingly enough, the magic that we create satisfies all those examples above, even those that seem contradictory at first.

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Put simply, it is a process that allows us to bend or break the rules of the universe in slight but very significant ways. We are of course not bending or breaking laws that dictate the behaviour of atoms that are not in some way attached to a mind. Really, bending those laws are unnecessary because we as humans do not really live our daily lives in the world that we need electron microscopes or particle accelerators to see. We live in a world of senses and ideas, and ideas about senses and senses about ideas. We do not operate on the hard rules of the universe, but rather rules that we build over time, influenced by our personal histories, our idiosyncratic cultures, and our genetic libraries as the most clothed members of the ape family. In fact, our chief adaptation is a brain and body that seems to have a duty to actively obscure the idea that it makes any mistakes or has any limitations whatsoever, in spite of constantly making mistakes and meeting its limitations.

It would be tragic, though, to give in to the idea of ourselves as "limited" for having a brain that cannot see things like atoms or microwaves and that ignores evidence of most faulty perceptions. In fact, that nature is our greatest gift. That we can talk about atoms and microwaves and black holes is because we actually can "see" them even though our physical senses do not allow us to. We can imagine, pretend, sense, innovate, intuit, wonder, collaborate, and believe in a way that literally brings things from the world into the mind, and from the mind to the world in a reciprocal process that has been going on for millions of years. A caveman could not perceive microwaves. You and I can perceive them in hundreds of ways, and could even talk about that fact using microwaves by picking up a cell phone. We are not in essence "blind" to certain things as we are highly adapted to see the human world, which is made up of much,

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much more than the physical world around it. We are so highly adapted that our conscious perception of things is at all times several degrees of separation from the purely physical nature of a thing. In a very real sense, we actively construct and inhabit our own reality and the rules that we expect our world to follow.

As such, if this process of defining reality is influenced or altered, we experience it the same as if the laws of nature themselves were bent. Further still, it turns out that we are adaptable enough that when rules seem to be upset, we will create exceptions or new rules to take the place of old ones. It is in this way that magic for us will involve the unsettling of a perceived reality just enough for someone to be able to experience what before seemed impossible. Once the formerly impossible becomes natural and expected, it opens the door to further bending of rules. That may or may not seem abstract right now, but it will be demonstrated soon enough. For now, it is enough to give this as the idea of magic.

Our simple terms for discussing "magic" mentioned both an idea and a relationship. The relationship is how we react when the rules seem not to apply or when what we experience is beyond our abilities to fathom it. Magic is intrinsically associated with the sense of wonder and astonishment that we feel when we are exposed to the limits of what we can know, what we expect of the world, or what we believed to be possible. Lest we get hung up on the idea of the physical senses, "magical" moments include those where our expectations or our ability to handle stimulus are exceeded in a positive way, like when we experience the unexpected gift of a stranger, are overcome by beauty, affection or connection, or experience something wonderful like what a child can feel emanating from a comic

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book story but the CFO of Marvel might not. Magic will involve bending various boundaries that concern our sense of the physical but also the social, the emotional and the imaginative.

That said, we can have different types of relationships with the unfathomable. As often as one person will go to a traditional magic show and feel astonished, another person will smugly think (or obnoxiously shout) "it's magnets!" whether or not there are actually magnets involved. Almost any time something strange happens, you will hear a variation of the phrases "there has to be a scientific explanation," "the power of suggestion," or "there's some sort of trick involved." Often one of these extremely general and vague ideas will be right in a literal sense. But almost always, these are not actually attempts to understand or explain something so much as they are attempts to not engage with it. They are ways of discounting and removing the impact of astonishment, of neutralizing the effect of something that could have been moving, and of placing a potential source of wonder or uncertainty into a familiar, secure compartment where it cannot affect our world of experience. Of course this is not to pick on people of a materialist mindset; people with any belief or disbelief can do the same sort of thing.

It is for this reason that as important as it is to be able to have a method that opens one to experiencing something impossible, it is equally important to have a spirit that allows one to feel safe in feeling the excitement and sometimes discomfort involved in being led to the edge of the known world. To not just be exposed to something magical, but also to feel the magic of it. Of course this does not mean forcing anyone to feel anything, but instead making a space for it to happen naturally. With nothing but the right space, usually the magic will take form.

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In the end, we can take or leave the word "magic" so long as it is clear what we are doing. What we are doing is certainly not in the domain of religion; it claims nothing about the true nature of the world. Neither is it scientific; we will not isolate and incrementally throw out falsehoods in order to get closer to some ultimate understanding. At the minimum, we can safely say that what we do is, as the title of the book would imply, an art. It is an art that uses the beautiful and unfathomably complex process in all of us that organizes, understands and creates the world we inhabit. And though it can be said in a way that sounds impressive, in a sense all we are really doing is making that process perceptible. Like any art, all we are doing is taking very ordinary things and bending them in a way that is experienced, however fleetingly, as something enchanting. Call that what you will.

As much as possible, all of this work steers clear of relationships to other relatable theories and practices. Certainly parallels may be drawn to various mystical or quasi-mystical practices, concepts in psychology, to various sciences and pseudosciences, to hypnosis, to the wider paradigm of "suggestion" and more. While it will be worthwhile to do so at some point, these ideas also carry baggage in terms of the associations that we make with them, the particular zeitgeist from the time and place in which they were conceived, the latter-day relationship with that history, and the underlying character or spirit of the ideology from which the practice was derived, just to name a few. As well, each school of thought has its own underlying implications and therefore expectations about what is or is not possible, and what is or is not worth trying.

Aaron Alexander

I think that we would do well to leave this baggage for the time being, and to see what boundaries might be pushed, and what assumptions might be overturned as a result.

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The introduction to this book used to be a sort of allegory involving the dawning of the age of powered flight. I am not a poet or a historian, and the flight-inspired introduction was not as soaring and inspiring as I had intended. Reading it more carefully later on, I could not help but feel like I was actually telling people to read the book and then go jump off a cliff.

Sometimes, when you can't write something eloquent or poetic, you are forced to settle for something closer to home, and are better off for it.

One of the few clear memories I still have of my mother is something that happened many times over. She would tell me that her only wish for me was that I would be able to share my gifts with the world. She seemed to have no agenda or specific notion of what that meant or how to go about doing that, and I am not sure whether she lived long enough to see some potential forming or whether it was more of an encouragement, an act of blind faith, or a vague hope. All I really know is that she said her wish with an air of complete certainty of its fulfillment to a boy who was certain of almost nothing except that he had no gifts or potential at all.

When I finally felt worthy of sharing anything with the world, for whatever reason I ended up trying to do so in some places that could get pretty dark and hopeless. Part of magic may well be what happens when we are faced with something that overwhelms our comprehension in a wonderful way, but there is certainly no shortage of painful things in the world that can also overwhelm our senses and shape our realities. Even without overt pain or trauma, we tend to lose the sense of curiosity and potential that we were born with, gradually growing a barrier that numbs us to much of the small joys,

wonders, pains and uncertainties of life until only things that are amazing or terrible are able to pierce through.

Next to any of that, the ideas in this book are small. But they are small ideas that have an incredible power to touch people in spite of their barriers, and to stir a sense of wonder and possibility that most of us hardly even remember losing. To me they have been a disruptive gift that has done just that. Not a typical gift that a mother might imagine, like patience, intelligence, respect, diligence, a full hairline, and so forth. Rather it has been an off-balancing gift that has forced me to acknowledge that the absurdly, naively optimistic part of myself is often right in spirit in spite of everything heinous and crushing in the world that seems to say otherwise. It is a gift that can draw you into a moment with people whether they just came from a business meeting, stumbling from a frat party or from selling themselves on a street corner, because it connects on a level that is as universal and profound as it is buried and forgotten.

Some gifts that demand to be shared are too big for one person to pull off. And sometimes all you have time, ability, energy or life enough to share is a catalyst—a small idea or a wish about potential that you might not get to see fulfilled. The most any of us can do is give that potential some blind faith and a good start. This book is my best attempt to do just that.

In a way, I think my failed age-of-flight metaphor may have been honest in spite of itself in that it showed what I am not. I am not a writer, a poet, an academic, a philosopher, magician, a mystic or a motivational speaker. I hope this lack of authority is what makes me credible: Like anyone would, I know down to my core when I have stumbled into something truly magical.

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Play around with the ideas in this book. Bend some rules that need bending. And, above all, please do not jump off a cliff.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the last section, "The Fall: Final thoughts from 2019," for updated thinking regarding cliffs. But please read the book and other updates first. If you read the original *Pygmalion Effects* years ago, feel free to jump ahead and come back, but it's still best to read the updates sections first.