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The Benefits of Practicing Magic

In this essay I would like to examine a question which does not seem to have received the attention it deserves, namely to what extent the practice of magic, *especially magic based on sleight-of-hand*, influences the mind, soul and body of the person who exercises it.

Early Inspirations

In the introduction to the first edition of *Sleight of Hand* (1877), the author Edwin T. Sachs writes, «Besides its power of amusing, conjuring affords an immense amount of instruction to its student, and is useful in inculcating coolness, precision, *and an endless amount of resources*, which will always stand one in good stead on the world's wide and ever-changing stage.» (Emphasis mine.)

This was the first time I came across a mention of the benefits magic could have, and it is at least 30 years ago. After that it was Juan Tamariz who asked Arturo de Ascanio, in an interview for the *Circular* (the monthly journal of the Escuela Magica de Madrid), what he thought a student of magic would learn from cultivating a hobby or a profession such as conjuring. Ascanio's answers opened quite a few doors in the world of magic to the young Giobbi. (You can find the English translation of this important interview on p.87 of Jesus Etcheverry's *The Magic of Ascanio—The Structural Conception of Magic*; I consider this required reading). Other than that I cannot remember ever having read or heard this question discussed.

Complex World of Magic

I like to look at magic as being similar to a cut diamond: every facet has a connection with a discipline in life, be it to natural sciences, psychology, philosophy, mathematics, communication, other arts (theater, literature, film, painting), gastronomy, management, human resources, gardening, surgery, or coffee making. You name it and somehow it connects to magic.

Fractals, as created by French mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot, are an excellent metaphor to understand why this is so. In a fractal every individual part reflects the design of the whole. And if you blow up any individual part, it consists of individual parts that reflect the whole, and so on ad infinitum.

I believe that the small world of magic reflects, at least essentially, the structure of other larger worlds of which magic is only a tiny part. To understand the complex structures of magic and be able to explain it in simple words, however, will also allow us to understand disciplines other than magic, if not in detail at least in general terms.

This is the most beautiful analogy I've come up with to date for describing what it means to get fully immersed in a specialty; to try to study, understand, and practice it in as many ways and approaches one can, with complete devotion and dedication. If it is done with talent, intelligence, and passion whether with single-mindedness or learned idiocy, it is a beautiful way to live and try to understand life by constantly growing and at the same time contributing to the universe and its people.

So let's look at how being «single-minded» in magic can benefit us in more ways than we might think, provided that we are very good at it and are aware that every piece is part of the whole.

List of Benefits with Comments

We need no particular reason to do what we enjoy doing, and what feels good and brings satisfaction; but if you have ever wondered what the benefits of practicing magic as a hobby or profession might be, here is a (certainly incomplete) list with comments.

It develops fine-motor skills. This seems to be one of the more obvious benefits, but there is much more to it as Dr. Frank R. Wilson states in his classic book *The Hand—How its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture* (recommended reading for any sleight-of-hand magician!). There he explains that the hand is as much at the core of human life as the brain. This is a thought with far-reaching consequences.

I can hardly think of any other activity where the interaction between mind, hand, and instrument—the «artist's trinity»—is so complex as with sleight-of-hand magic. Although other artists such as painters, sculptors, and musicians also operate under a similar matrix, they don't have to hide a series of secrets at the same time they are creating another reality in the spectator's mind (you are allowed to see how the pianist hits the keys); they don't need to arouse and maintain interest at the very same time they create their work of art (a painting is created in a studio and only later put in a gallery); and they are not directly and interactively communicating with an audience. There is an incredible complexity to the art of the magician which has not yet been fully understood, let alone codified and explained.

Again Wilson: «When personal desire prompts anyone to learn to do something well with the hands, an extremely complicated process is initiated that endows the work with a powerful emotional charge. People are changed significantly and irreversibly it seems, when movement, thought, and feeling fuse during the active, long-term pursuit of personal goals.»

Although we understand what is meant conventionally by the simple anatomic term, we can no longer say with certainty where the hand itself, or its control or influence, begins or ends in the body.»

It stimulates creativity in a playful environment. Every human activity requires creativity, some less, some more. However, it is hard to be creative in a situation where there is pressure. Creativity needs a playful environment to foster the confidence of creativity, which is the awareness that one can be creative. Especially since doing magic as a hobby allows one to experience creativity in a safe, playful environment. The positive experience is then transformed into a permanent skill that can be applied to everyday situations where there is usually more stress.

It arouses curiosity as the basis for knowledge. Magic touches many subjects that any intelligent person practicing it will want to know more about. Where do playing cards come from? Why does a simple trick fool such a complex thing as the human mind? What have film and conjuring in common? Who was Dai Vernon and in what way did he change the way we look at magic today?

Looking for answers to these and thousands of other questions give us a playful access to the cultural history of humankind, and bring us closer to the important questions about life and the universe.

It improves problem-solving skills. There is no question that any magic trick is full of problems that need to be identified and require elegant solutions if we want to become better magicians. Whether it is a problem of method, infrastructure, logistics, presentation, communication, or something else, we must come up with a pool of solutions and the *criteria* to then choose the one most fitting. This forces us to develop lateral-thinking skills as well as an aesthetic taste.

Multi-tasking. The study and eventually the performance of magic require multi-tasking skills. We might have to step forward, at the same time execute a sleight, look at a spectator and say something meaningful, while already thinking what to do and say next. This activity triggers and trains a full range of brain functions, which will be useful in many daily tasks.

Social competence and self-knowledge. Any performance, whether it's just for a few friends or for a larger audience, engages us in interpersonal communication and social interaction, giving us an insight into human nature and ultimately into ourselves. Dai Vernon used to say, «In magic you get insight into how people think by the way they react. Character comes out when people watch magic.» This issue alone is worth another essay.

Self-confidence. Every successful moment while practicing or performing magic establishes self-confidence. It leads to achievements, such as mastering a sleight and coming up with a presentation, that create true personal satisfaction and build character.

The two realities. The practice of magic trains us to look at a situation from the other's point of view.

One of the great difficulties in magic is to distinguish between our own reality and that of the spectator. We are so love with methods that we fail to see the effect we want to produce in the audience's mind. It is necessary to look at every procedure and ask ourselves how the audience perceives it. Why do we move that coin near the edge of the table (because we need to lap it)? Why do we deal the deck into two packets instead of just cutting it (because Gilbreath is at work)? These and many other procedural activities are logical for us, but how do they look to the innocent onlooker? If we want our magic to be artistic, we need to logically frame each action and integrate it within the whole so that it makes sense. By recognizing these discrepancies we learn how to think and feel like the «other,» an immensely *useful and necessary* skill in life.

Practical and Conceptual Thinking. Whenever we learn and practice a trick, we are confronted with very practical issues, such as what type of sleight to use to solve a specific problem, or what to say when we do something. But we also need to take into

consideration in what position we put a specific trick into our performance, how we can find a good dramatic and emotional hook for why a card placed in the middle of the deck suddenly comes to the top, or how to orchestrate and vary phenomena within a routine or act. These are conceptual questions that require a different approach.

Using various types of intelligence ideally balances rationality, intuition, and creativity, all equally required when conceiving, practicing, and performing. This in turn stimulates different and important cerebral areas. There are no rules to this, and the proportions vary depending on the problem and the circumstances, and we need to learn how to get comfortable with this situation. The fact that there is *no truth is the truth*.

Stress management. Scientific research has found that the two most stressful activities for a human being are those of a pilot during a test-flight and that of an actor on stage. Another study has revealed that the greatest fear we have is not to walk through a dark street in an unknown city at night, or to go to a cemetery at midnight, but standing in front of a group of people and giving a presentation. Any performance of magic encompasses *both of these elements* and is therefore an excellent training for coping with fear and pressure.

Unique reward. Any good performance leads to receiving positive feedback from those we perform for and even applause if the group is big enough. This is an experience uncommon in most other human endeavors and builds self-confidence based on true achievement.

For all ages. Conjuring can be picked up at any point in life and at any age, since many good tricks require communicative and interpretative skills, intelligence, and psychological know-how, rather than difficult sleight-of-hand.

Comaraderie. At conventions, lectures, and even online you meet people from all walks of life (young-old, male-female, rich-poor, rough-refined, uneducated-academic) who have one passion in common with you. My best friends are (almost) all connected in some way to magic, and they are all over the world.

Learning skills and creativity. Learning, especially from books, teaches us how to transform abstract instructions into actions, and it automatically stimulates personal interpretation. This means we can be creative without being inventors simply by interpreting what others have come up with, very much like a pianist who plays Beethoven (provided it is done with some degree of talent and provided the creator whose work we are interpreting is not only inspired by making money).

Resources. In almost every performance there are bound to be unexpected situations, mistakes, and sometimes even people who are difficult to handle. The serious study of magic teaches us to foresee such situations and to think of preventative measures. This results in the creation of resources for coping with difficult and unexpected situations, a basic skill of survival in today's world.

Principles and tolerance. Groucho Marx used to say, «I have my principles, but if they don't fit, I have others.» To successfully practice magic we need to follow rules, as in any other discipline of life, but occasionally we are required to twist or even change them without losing our integrity. This also teaches us how to organize our emotions and to discipline our thoughts and ideas.

Overcome your limits. Practicing magic is an excellent exercise in overcoming one's limits. Since we are moving in a safe environment where we do not need to reach a specific goal, we can try to overcome apparent barriers. For instance, we might try to master a difficult sleight, such as the Pass. If we don't succeed nothing happens—we can still control a card by other means. But if we *do* succeed, then we have cemented the belief that

we can do something we did not think we could do, and can then proceed to tackle the next difficult task. On the other hand, if we fail, we can either change the approach or change the goal, then try again.

Serious play. The world of play in general, and the world of magic in particular, are a reflection of the real world. The better we can play, the better our chances to succeed effortlessly and deftly in the real world.

Pleasure of achievement. Mastering difficult tricks and sleights gives gratification and happiness. Dai Vernon maintained that to achieve anything is one of the greatest pleasures we can experience.

You are what you do. Performing a magic trick is an original means of self-expression. It has the attraction of practicing a nonconformist hobby and thus can become a way to define ourselves.

Closing Remarks

As I'm writing this essay I realize that this subject warrants a book—and it would be a book of equal interest to magicians and everybody who works in any type of educational system. Alas, we need to come to an end for reasons of space and budget. Therefore, I would like to round off this essay on the benefits of practicing magic with a short narrative, which is fairly well known in the German speaking parts of Europe, but probably not so in the New World. In 1830, the famous German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) gave his nephews a magic book and a magic set at Christmas. In a letter to his contemporary, Eckermann (1792-1854) he wrote: «I don't mind the boys fooling around with such things in their free time. Particularly in the presence of a small audience, conjuring is a wonderful means to practice public speaking and to acquire physical and mental skills.» (Original: «Das Taschenspiel ist besonders in Gegenwart eines kleinen Publikums ein herrliches Mittel zur Übung in freier Rede und zur Erlangung einiger körperlicher und geistiger Gewandtheit.»)