

Secret Agenda

by
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HERMETIC PRESS, INC.
Seattle, Washington

Preface

First Things First

I almost didn't write a preface, wanting only to place on the page customarily used for that purpose this quote by Francis Bacon:

Prefaces are the labor of lost hours and hide the author's vanity beneath false modesty.

He is right—in a sense. In another sense he is not. (He should have liked that, being a philosopher.) I vividly remember reading my first magic books and wanting so much to know a little more about their authors, about their motives, about their personal thoughts on the books it had taken them years to write; but I was disappointed to find very little in this regard.

It is said everything made by hand carries something of him who made it. This might be true as well for the author of a book. I think it impossible to write something, even a technical text, without putting some part of oneself into it. The question then becomes: Why should anyone care about the author? One could easily read this book and appreciate (it would be hoped) its content, without knowing anything in advance about the book or its author, much as you might enjoy a painting in a museum without foreknowledge of the artist who did it. If, however, you know something about painting, about the painter's life and philosophy, about the period and culture he lived in, about some of his other paintings, then you will be able to expand your appreciation into other dimensions. Whether you want to do this is quite another matter. So, for some readers, that was the preface and you can now proceed to the main body of the book. The others are cordially invited to stay with me a little longer before attacking the more pragmatic parts of this work.

About the Book

In the introduction to his third volume of that wonderful series of books, the *Tarbell Course in Magic*, Dr. Harlan Tarbell writes, "If I give you a dollar and you give me a dollar, we each still have a dollar; but let me give you an idea and you give me an idea, then we each have two ideas."

This is a typically Western way of expressing what is essentially a beautiful thought; and it concisely, plainly and perfectly explains what this book is about.

Secret Agenda, whatever its intrinsic value, offers two services. First, it represents a body of knowledge, and everyone can, from this point of view, usefully refer to it. There are ready-made ideas that

you will find of immediate use: tricks, techniques, presentations and words of professional advice; some lost within the annals of conjuring and unearthed here for your edification, some original and hitherto unpublished. This is information you will be able to add almost instantly to your active repertoire, or at least use to expand your conceptual mastery of magic. The latter is quite important, for the sheer pleasure of it; but this information might also come in handy at a later date, when problems have to be solved that require you to have a backpack of knowledge and a toolbox of skills to which you can refer.

The second service provided by this book is escape. It is an open door to adventure, even if it is not the most audacious. A work of art is always an adventure. A piece of magic does not escape this rule. I have therefore included items intended to make you stop and think, to reconsider some of the things you thought were true, to find out if they still are—or maybe to find they are only half true, which is worse than being false. Some of the items included may just make you smile as you look at something you’ve always known, but from a different viewpoint. Still other things are interesting problems you’ll want to solve for yourself.

If one felt the need to categorize this book, it would most probably fit into the genre of notebooks. In magic we do not have an overwhelming number of contributions to this branch of literature, but I wouldn’t want to miss them; such as *Jacob Daley’s Notebooks*, *The Fred Braue Notebooks* and *Bruce Cerven’s Castle Notebooks*. Of course, notebooks are also a literary genre. Among my favorites are *A Writer’s Notebook* by W. Somerset Maugham; and maybe best of all, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg’s *Waste Books*. In his preface, Lichtenberg writes:

The merchants have their waste book; there they record from day to day everything they have bought and sold, one after the other, without organization. From there the entries are transferred to the journal, where everything is arranged more systematically; and finally it goes to the ledger, using double entry in the Italian style of bookkeeping. This practice should be imitated by scholars. First a book in which I write everything just as I see it or as my thinking guides me. This then can be copied to another, where subjects are separated and better arranged; and the ledger could then contain the various subjects in a connected fashion and, from this ensues an elucidation, expressed in an orderly way.*

* A Small-World Note: The double-entry system mentioned by Lichtenberg was invented by the Italian Luca Pacioli, who in his 1496 work *De Viribus Quantitatis* gave us what presently is considered the earliest description of a card trick!

When I read that, I immediately thought: “Wonderful! I want to write a book like that for magicians.” And here it is.

When I started this work several years ago, I was reminded of a story Dai Vernon told about himself. When he was still a child he set himself the challenge of gathering a dozen tricks, all using a piece of string. It took him some time—but he eventually assembled more than a hundred! I had a similar experience when I started thinking of and gathering material for this book. I thought I would never find 365 interesting items. But after several months I had material for almost two years! What you are reading here is what I think is the best of the lot.

If I had to sum up this book in one sentence, that sentence would be: This is the kind of book I would like to read myself. This is, I fear, a cliché, but it is more meaningful than you might think. The hundreds of items assembled here were written over several years. When I reread the entire work before sending it to press, I rediscovered many items *I had forgotten since writing them!* And I found them of such value and practicality, I reincorporated them into my repertoire (having used them years ago and somehow forgotten them). So I can truthfully say this is a book I would like to read myself.

How to Read SECRET AGENDA

This has turned out to be quite a large book, in both size and scope. If you look at it with the intention of reading it in one breath, it would be like looking at the menu of a gourmet restaurant and wanting to eat every item at one sitting—impossible. But if you were to go to the same restaurant once a week and each time order a three-course meal, after a year you might easily become the happiest person on earth. *Secret Agenda* was conceived to share with you one item per day. I seriously suggest that you adopt this reading diet. Read just one item each day, perhaps as you’re having breakfast at home. (We decline all responsibility for our friends who are consuming their donut and “commuter coffee” in the car and reading *Secret Agenda* at the same time.) Or read an item during your lunch break; or (second to) last thing before you fall asleep. It’s nice to make a habit of it. If you find this doesn’t work for you, do it anyway you like. (That must be the Italian in me speaking.)

A Few More Thoughts

One of the greatest challenges an author faces is to condense his knowledge of a highly complex subject into seemingly simple concepts, so that an interested reader—that’s a prerequisite—receives an enjoyable and concise synopsis. For to understand something is difficult enough, but to be able to say or write

it succinctly is even more demanding. This is especially true if you are like me, and become fascinated by the depth and breadth of a topic and want to tell it all. I certainly did my share of that in my other books, the *Card College* and *Card College Light* series, so here I am attempting something else. I admit I have not succeeded with every entry, as the complexity of some topics demands that their discussions be longer; but I hope you will still find them worth your while.

This book may even make you a happier person, through the satisfaction of improving or learning or even just remembering one thing in your magical life for every day of the coming year. Good things attract other good things. So reading one good thing each day not only gets you that thing, it also builds your attitude for doing good things. In a sort of “butterfly effect”, it will lead to more good things for you and for those around you. Excellent, isn’t it? Even if this wasn’t true, it does have the undeniable advantage that at least one good thing has happened.

Max Maven, a friend and mentor of many years, in a documentary on Dai Vernon called *Spirit of Magic*, says, “Nothing he ever did was trivial.” I’ve tried to make that the guiding principle of this book. I hope I have succeeded. In those cases where I might not have, I ask your indulgence and hope to be judged on what I did well and not on what exceeded my reach.

On My Own Account

As you work through *Secret Agenda*, you will find some entries whose connection with magic isn’t immediately obvious, such as lists of favorite quotes, books and films; things outside the boundaries of conjuring. Some readers may perceive these items as padding. Nothing could be further from the truth, as I didn’t have to fight with myself over what to put into this book, but rather what to leave out of it.

A car is not just the engine, and magic is not just tricks and techniques. After being involved in magic for over forty years, twenty-two of them as a full-time professional, I’ve come to believe the most important part in a conjurer’s performance is his or her personality. But it isn’t easy to pinpoint what constitutes a personality. Despite this difficulty, I will dare to submit that it has to do with what one *believes* and with what one *knows* and *says* and *does*, and the way all this happens. This is *one* of the reasons I have included certain items. They are very much a reflection of my personality and are given here to share, but most of all to inspire my readers—especially those still open to being influenced—to find other interests than magic and to see how these interests relate to magic; and to become aware of the importance of the interests you already have. Such characteristics are as much a part of a performing personality as tricks and techniques. Even more so! And they are quite simply wonderful things, things that uplift the mind and heart.

I must also address the issue of self-referencing, a practice I generally find irritating in works of others. Therefore, I have given it careful consideration while writing this book. You will find a number of references to *Card College*. These have been kept to a bare minimum within the main text. Those that appear there were felt crucial for a clear understanding of the topic addressed. All other references to *Card College*, and to works by other authors, that are not of immediate necessity, yet contribute importantly to interesting side issues, have been placed in endnotes, where interested readers may pursue them. These notes also include sources for descriptions of those sleights that were felt likely to be familiar to many readers of a book of this nature, and therefore needn't be thrust into the main work. They are given to guide those unfamiliar with these moves and concepts. Citations for *Card College* in these notes are numerous, not because I am the author of those books, but because they are a single, and therefore convenient, source for locating a great deal of the information referenced, and are also books my readers are likely to have in their libraries.

Last But Not Least

I apologize if you occasionally find that I sound immodest in expressing a thought here and there; but if one is to achieve all that is demanded in such an ambitious and multifaceted project as this, one must sometimes regard oneself as greater than reality can support. I can truthfully state this book has items I would gladly have paid a considerable amount for, if I had been aware of how enormously helpful they would sooner or later become. I will also tell you, in all humbleness but with the strength of facts to support me, that to learn many of the items described in *Secret Agenda* it has taken me years of thinking, searching, discussing and sessioning. I've bought and read literally thousands of books; and I have traveled hundreds of thousands of miles, spent great sums on food, invitations, hotels, conventions and tuitions of all sorts. This is no exaggeration. You are getting much of that harvested knowledge and experience in a single book, for the cost of movie tickets and a pizza for two. I take some pride in that; which has led me to this incautious statement, and the risk of seeming conceited.

Since I've mentioned pride, which I try to allow in only tiny doses in my life, I will tell you I don't consider *Secret Agenda* to be a mere accumulation of tips from a professional. It is more a conversation with you, my reader, whom I hope to gain as a friend. You will discover many of my beliefs, criteria and preferences, and also a few of my dislikes. You are getting a book that is more personal than anything I've ever published.

I don't intend this to be a pragmatic how-to book. I mean it to reflect my humanistic beliefs and probably a typical European lifestyle that focuses on the enjoyment of life rather than on a search for

profit and fame. With this I hope to convey the idea that the pursuit of magic is not just an occupation, but a way of life, an expression of oneself as a part of humanity. I do not wish to preach or to convert, but simply to convey to you the enthusiasm I have for magic, and to encourage you to respect what has come before your involvement with it, while you find and assert your own identity in our mutual art. When you have come that far, don't forget to share your work, knowledge and insights with those around you whom you feel worthy. Only then will it become a true labor of love. I have learned from my principal teacher, Juan Tamariz, who learned in turn from his teacher, José Frakson, that what you do is only worth doing if there is passion and love and sharing involved. Everyone has to do it within the limitations he has been given by providence, and then has been able to amplify through his own effort.

I hope that by the end of the year, when you have read through these offerings, you will feel I have succeeded—at least in my way. I have done it with the highest demands on myself and with the deepest sincerity. I now wish, above all, that you enjoy yourself, and I want to express all my gratitude to you for allowing me to be your companion for an entire year.

Best Wishes,

Roberto Pisch

January 3~An Archive for Special Decks

Here's the best way I know to store special decks. It is described in Leo Behnke's *The Conservation of Magic*, along with many other ideas for archiving magic. Take a file card and trim it to the width of a deck, so that you can slip it between the closed flap and the front of the card case. Do so and trim off the top of the index card, leaving about half an inch protruding. This acts as index tab. Write the type of deck on the left side of the tab (for example, *All Jokers*), and the color and brand on the right side (say, *red* and *505*). You can also use red file cards for red decks and blue file cards for blue decks, or use any other color-coding system that suits your needs.



This photo shows one of my drawers where special decks are stored.

February 7 ~ Geometry Versus Art

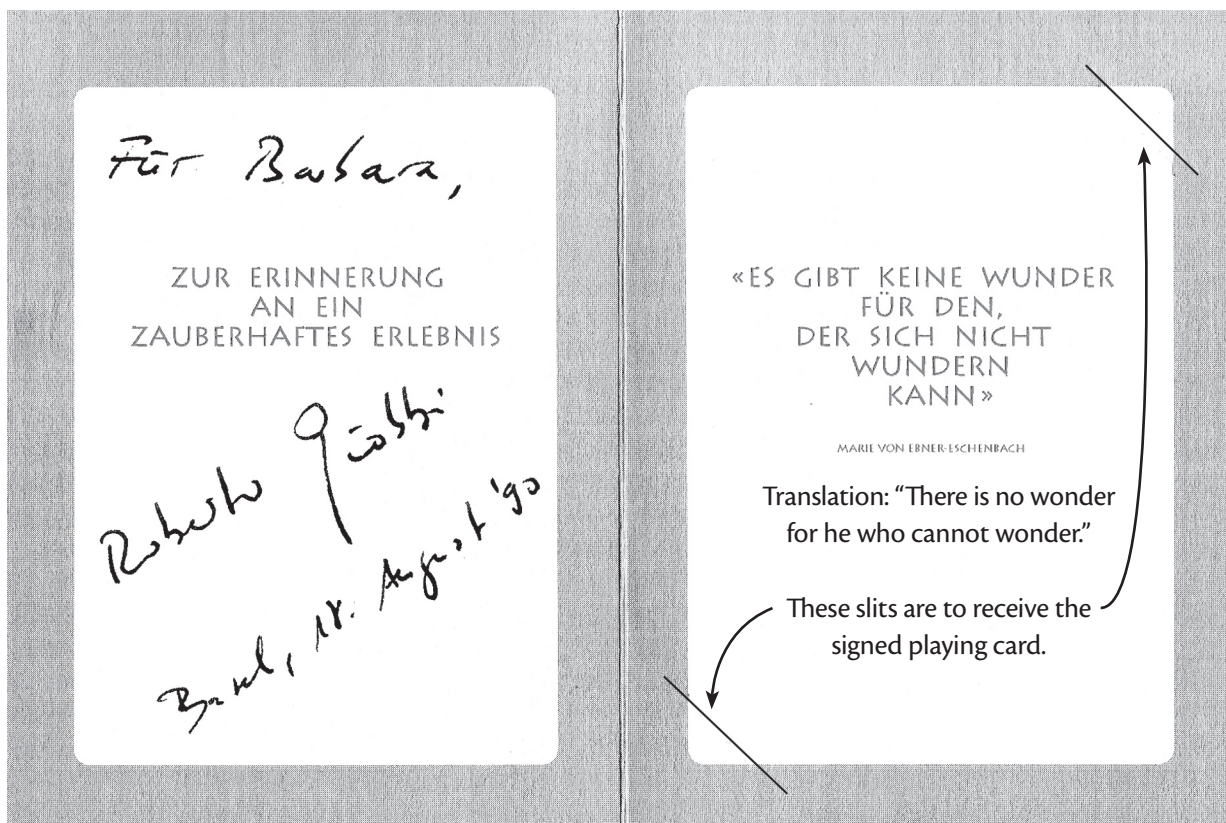
Picasso was once asked what he thought was the difference between geometry and art. He took a pencil and drew a perfect circle on a sheet of paper, but at the very end he made a little slip.

“You see, if I had finished the circle perfectly, it would have been geometry—now it is art.”



February 10~Souvenir Card

This is an idea my dear friend Vanni Bossi told me years ago. The two photos tell the story. You bring out a card that folds in half, in which you place a signed playing card that played a role in one of the effects in your act. Two diagonally opposite slits hold the card securely. Printed underneath is a short poem that relates to magic. It is a very pretty give-away and the nicest way I know to hand out a business card.



Inside of the souvenir card

The funny thing is that, although Vanni had the idea, he hadn't made up the card. A few months after he told me about it, I showed him the card I had produced, and this motivated him to make up his own. What a nice way to help each other. Vanni Bossi (1952–2008) was one of the most important and influential magicians Italy ever had, and a close friend. He is sorely missed.

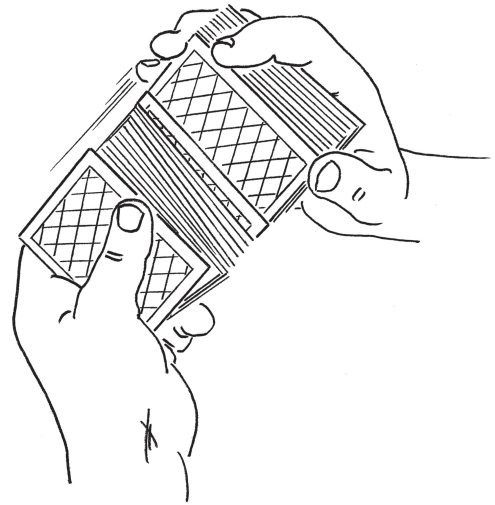
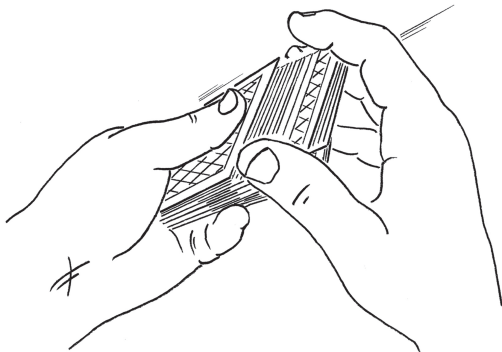


Outside of the souvenir card

March 16~Cyclic False Shuffle

For lay audiences, here's one of the easiest, safest and best-looking false shuffles around.¹⁹ First, the Gestalt of the ordinary shuffle: Hold the deck in position for an overhand shuffle. Undercut about half the cards and put the bottom side of the right hand's packet against the top side of the left hand's packet. Then, using a back-and-forth action of the abutting sides, mix the cards by making the sides weave into each other. This style of shuffling is common in Europe, but it can be seen all over the world in family games.

Here's how the shuffle is made deceptively false: Hold the deck in position for an overhand shuffle. With your right hand, undercut about half the deck, but when doing this, drag the bottom cards of the left hand's portion up for at least half their width and, with pressure from the left fingers, fix the raised cards in this position.



Release the right hand's cards onto the left's, but keep back the bottom few, holding them upjogged for about an inch above the released portion.

April 5~Out of Proportion

This astonishing puzzle bet was conceived by Finland's Matti Linkola. Place seven coins, arranged in size from largest to smallest, in a row. Coins of the same size are allowed, but you need as many sizes as you can manage. Nearly every country has five to seven coins of different sizes. Here are seven such Swiss coins.



Ask someone, “Which of these coins, if stood on edge, matches the height of all the other coins when they are stacked up?” Make sure to explain this clearly but *briefly*, illustrating your meaning by standing one of the larger coins on edge and then pantomiming piling the other coins up to form an imaginary pile much higher than that really achievable. These actions and your words will normally cause your victim to choose a coin that is far too large. Try it yourself before you read further.

It's quite amazing, but the correct solution is the smallest coin. The mind's eye is incredibly inaccurate when it comes to comparing horizontal and vertical distances—and other things too, but that's another story, a long one. I will on occasion build the sense of the impossible in this stunt even further by adding as many as fifteen playing cards under the stack of coins. The combined height is still less than that of the standing small coin!



Mel Stover and Ron Wohl have some shrewd touches that add to the deceptiveness of this puzzle. One by one, carefully stack ten U.S. quarters on the table. This emphasizes their number and height. Several inches away from this stack (to make comparison harder), form a line of a silver dollar, a half dollar, a Susan B. Anthony or golden dollar, a quarter, a nickel, a penny and a dime. Then pose the question of which coin, when on edge, matches the height of the stack. It is the dime, but almost no one chooses it.

Ron Wohl also suggests putting the necessary coins into a small purse, so that you have all the coins you need, whenever you want to present this deceptive puzzle. This avoids your having to look for the proper coins or trying to borrow them. In the purse you can carry a few more coins or props for other puzzles and tricks, making it a “multipurpose puzzle purse”.

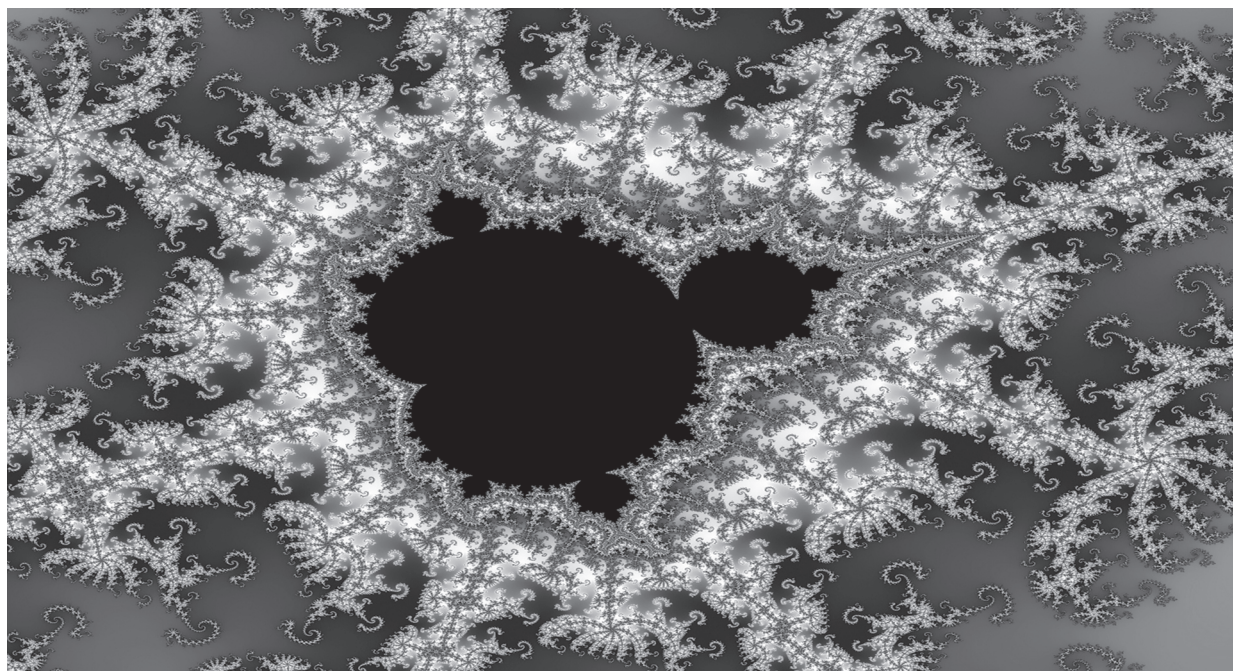
April 13~Complex Conjuring

In the fractal you see below (also called a Mandelbrot set, after its creator, French mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot), the design of the whole is repeated in the partial, which in its turn consists of other partials that repeat the whole, and so on, ad infinitum. Long before Mandelbrot created fractals as a basis for chaos theory, the Chinese seemed to have known this, as they said, “In every small world, there is a big world.”

I look at magic as a faceted diamond, every facet having a connection to a discipline of life. Magic has a rich history and fascinating biographies. It relates to all arts, but especially to surrealism, theater and film. It contains presentation and communication, science and mathematics, psychology and philosophy, creation and interpretation.

Since magic needs to deceive the way we think, every subject in which the thinking of man is studied and expressed connects to magic—you name it and you’ll find it in magic.

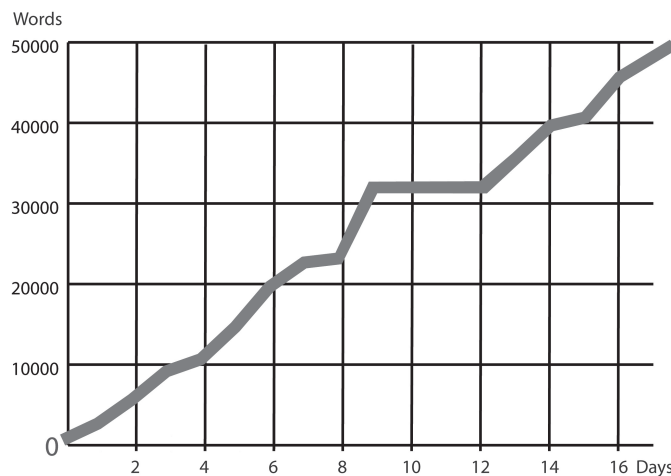
I believe that if you study and understand magic thoroughly, or any one subject of life for that matter, you will also be able to understand disciplines you haven’t studied; sometimes better than those who claim to understand them. And the study of subjects outside magic will lead to more insights into magic.



May 9 ~ Writer's Motivation I

I'm often asked how I achieved the discipline to write *Card College*.

The graph shows days on the x-axis and the number of words in increments of 10,000 on the y-axis.



Example: If on the first day I wrote 5000 words, the graph would go from 0 to 5000. If on the next day I wrote 2500 words, the graph would climb to an accumulated 7500 words. If one day I didn't write anything, the graph would stay on the same horizontal line.

The secret is to use a *cumulative* graph rather than an *absolute* graph. Whereas an absolute graph would go up and down, psychologically discouraging you, the cumulative graph rises and never falls, always showing the result of your work in a positive and encouraging way. This constant rise in the graph motivated me from the very start to make it rise a little further every day.

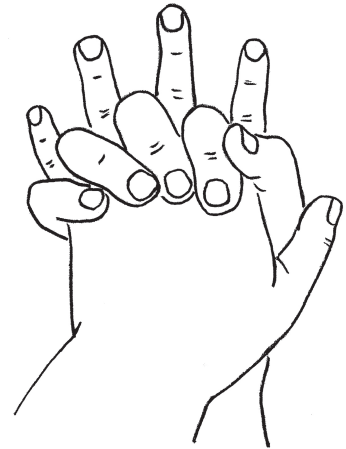
With Microsoft Word's "Word Count" function, it is easy to count words in an instant and to write the result at the bottom of the document. Every day this figure is updated, and the result made visible on the graph.

Such a graph can be adapted to many uses and is one of the greatest motivational aids I've ever encountered.

May 11~Ultimate Magic of the Hands

This is my favorite stunt using just the hands.

Interlock the fingers of your hands, with your right fingers curled over the back of your left hand, your left fingers extended and the back of your left hand turned up.

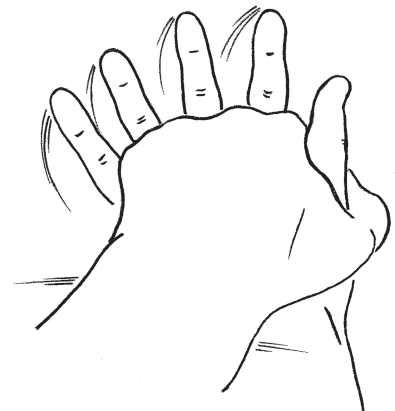


Explain that you have fingernails on both sides of your hands, and turn the clasped hands at the wrist to bring the back of your right hand into view. Simultaneously curl your left fingers closed and extend your right fingers. The movement of the fingers must start and stop at the same time the hands begin and finish their turning. This looks great. Do it a few times, back and forth, showing “all fingernails”.

Then stop and shake the hands sideways—and within this movement curl in the extended fingers of one hand and straighten out those of the other. Suddenly all your fingernails disappear.

As before, turn the hands at the wrists several times, curling in and straightening out the fingers simultaneously to show only the pads of the fingers on both sides. Eventually separate your hands and say, “*With hands like that I can’t do a thing.*”

This is a very nice bit for small children, but is also useful when an adult asks you to do a trick at a time you aren’t in the mood, yet you wish to accommodate him with something more than just giving him your business card.



August 13~Pocket-Calculator Magic

Ask someone to name any number between one and ten. Assume he answers five.

Mentally multiply his number by nine. Enter the result, forty-five, into a pocket calculator and immediately press the multiplication key. If you do this quickly, it should look as if you have simply turned on the calculator. Don't let anyone see the display yet.

Now openly enter 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9—skipping the number 8.

Hold the calculator with your thumb close to the equals key and let him see the numbers on the display.

Ask your helper to name his number in a loud voice. When he does so, blow on the calculator—it's an ancient magical ceremony—and imperceptibly hit the equals key. You needn't move your thumb to do this. Simply give the calculator a very light, almost imperceptible flip toward yourself as you blow on the display. When it settles again, its own weight will cause the lower edge of the equals key to lightly hit the thumb between its tip and pad. As a result, the display fills with a string of his chosen number!

Instead of having the person name a number, you can ask him to take any card and think of its value. Simply glimpse the card taken, or force a known one.



September 5~Any Wallet a Himber Wallet

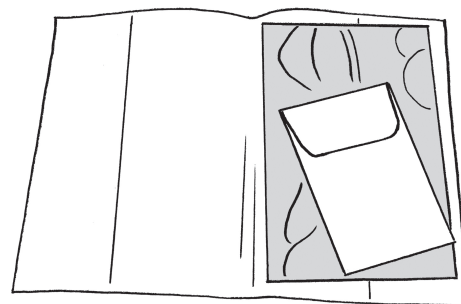
I found the basic idea here in a 1962 publication by Marvillo (stage name of Arnold Liebertz of Germany, 1927–1989) titled *How Do You Do It Yourself? Magic for You*.⁷⁵ I've never seen anyone use this and would hazard a substantial sum you've not heard of it.

Take two identical postcards and glue them back to back, but with the images in reverse orientation to each other, top to bottom, and bottom to top. This creates a double-faced postcard. You may also glue them similarly face to face, leaving the address sides exposed; but if you do this, first write identical messages and your address on both cards, apply identical stamps and mail them separately to yourself on the same day. When you receive them, glue the picture sides together.

Put this prepared postcard inside your wallet (but not inside a compartment of it), along with whatever item you wish to switch in (a playing card, a pay envelope, etc.), under it.

During performance, you place the matching item, that which you wish to switch out, on top of the postcard and close the wallet.

As you set the wallet on the table, turn it lengthwise, end over end. When you reopen the wallet, the audience sees



October 13~Puzzle of the Nine Letters

Draw a three-by-three square and fill it in with the letters O-T-T, F-F-S, S— —, leaving the last two squares of the bottom row empty. The puzzle is to figure out what letters go into these two squares.

O	T	T
F	F	S
S	?	?

The two letters that answer the puzzle are “E” and “N”.

Why? Because the other letters are the first letters of the numbers from one to seven. That’s O for One, T for Two, T for Three, F for Four, F for Five, S for Six, and S for Seven. Therefore, E is for Eight, and N is for Nine.

This is a nice item for an emcee, or to draw on the back of your business card, as suggested in the idea yesterday.

October 20~Calendar Prediction

This is one of the best applications I know for Mel Stover’s wonderful “Days of Force”.⁸² Use it to introduce a corporate kick-off or similar event, at which you speak about the forecast of the business year or a particular project scheduled to be completed. Then use this prediction effect to imply that you are predicting a successful outcome for the company’s plans.

You may use PowerPoint to project the calendar for the applicable year on a screen, or you may simply use a flip chart, an overhead projector or a large printed sheet of paper. Have a month freely selected, or use a month that has a special bearing on your talk or the company’s project. Have someone decide on any four-by-four square of days within the determined month. Point out to the group that many other four-by-four combinations of numbers might have been chosen, each containing a different array of numbers.

OCTOBER						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

Reproduce the selected array on a flip chart. (If you have used a predetermined month drawn on a flip chart, simply draw a frame around the four-by-four selection.) As you are doing this, you have enough time to add the first and last numbers and double the result. Using the dates illustrated here, you would add 3 and 27, giving you 30. This multiplied by 2 produces 60. Write “I predict 60” on a piece of paper and place this into an envelope. Draw a question mark on the envelope, or write “Our Future” or anything that fits your presentation. Then hand the envelope to someone to hold.

Ask another person to select any number from the array. Circle it, jot it down next to the selected square of dates and strike out the rest of the numbers in the row and column in which the chosen number lies. Repeat this procedure with three other people, one after the other, letting each pick any of the remaining numbers. When you add the four circled numbers, they will total 60.

3	4	5	6
10	11	12	13
17	18	19	20
24	25	26	27

6
10
18
26
60

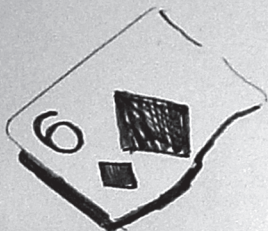
Ask the person holding the envelope to open it and read your prediction to the group. After the audience reacts, use the receptive atmosphere you've just created to deliver your message or introduce your talk; something like: *"My prediction was correct. And I also predict we will reach our goal for the year. This meeting is about our strategies to do so."* That's a fine start.

Additional ideas:

If you print a calendar on the back of your business card, you'll be set to perform this piece anywhere, anytime, and give it away.

If your presentation is about a specific number (the sixtieth anniversary of a colleague, a forty per cent increase in profit, business, production, etc.), you can construct a grid that forces this number.

Du bist wirklich
sensationsvoll.
Goldmund.



wie alles von Dir
Angie

in der 10 fahrer
seit id dich kennst
Hauke

KASSE!

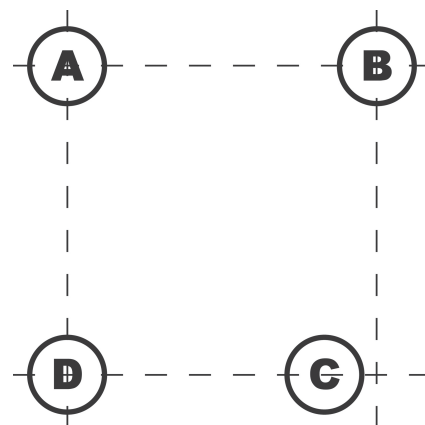
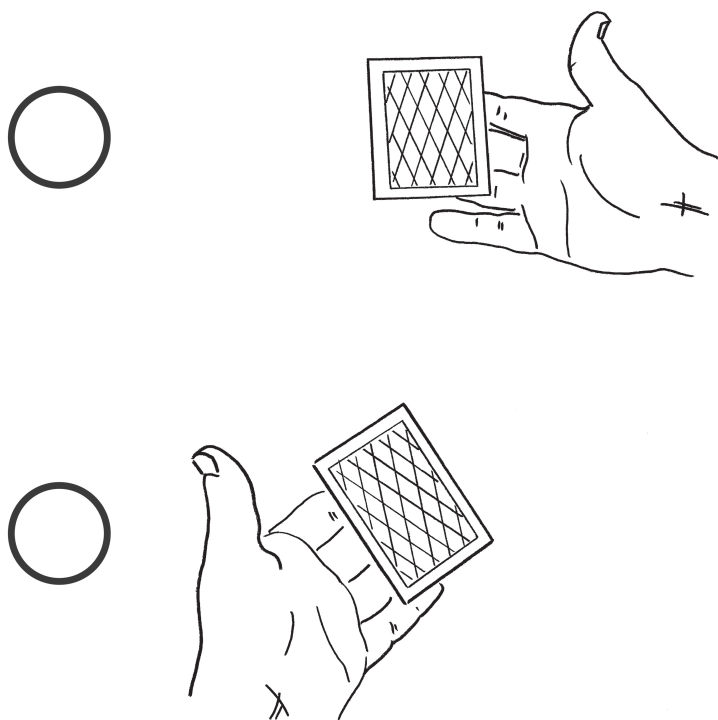
MARIO



December 6~Ascanio's Subtlety for Stealing a Coin

This move is perfect to get into position for Ross Bertram's "Coin Assembly" from *Stars of Magic* (1951, p. 136) or Dr. Daley's "Motile" from *Bobo's New Modern Coin Magic* (1966, p. 383).

Four coins are laid out in what looks like a square configuration. However, the coin at the inner right (C) lies out of alignment, about an inch to the left of B.



Take two cards in hand and explain that with them two coins can be covered in different combinations. You now show three "guileless" examples. Start by covering the coins at A and B, then those at D and C, followed by those at B and C. Note that the left hand's card lies over the coin at C, and therefore a bit to the left of that corner of the square.

December 18~Mind Map of CARD COLLEGE, VOLUMES 3 and 4

I've often been asked how I wrote *Card College*. The mind map below is for *Volumes 3 and 4*. It took me about a year to complete. I then considered the main work done. Now I only had to write it. That took nearly another year. It might have been a bit more complex than that, but that is the essence of what happened.

