

“Teddy-Bunnies”: The Case for Consequential “Life Magic”

by Geoffrey Grimes, PhD

As she entered *The Golden Corral* where I was performing “close-up” late one afternoon, Hannah wouldn’t look at me. She had dispensed with her usual, chirpy, “Well?”—her cue, always in the past, for me to begin my “sponge bunnies” routine. This time, her little spirit seemed subdued, and she was nervous. On the verge of crying, she was trying to avoid me seeing a raggedy, dilapidated duck, definitely not the fluffy, white plush bunny I had given to her some three years before. Since then, “Bunny,” as she had christened it, had always accompanied her and her family to the restaurant. This departure was a first and a revelation.

“Where’s ‘Bunny,’” I asked, triggering a stream of tears. Hannah turned her back to me.

“Well, Doc,” her mamma intervened, “it seems we’ve had a little problem with ‘Bunny’ this week. Hannah got into my makeup case, found my red lipstick, and applied a wide streak right across its mouth. After an hour or so, she tried to rub it off, but when that didn’t work, we took it to the dry cleaners... ‘Bunny’ came back pink!”

Giving Hannah the space and time she needed to compose herself, I said, “I have more bunnies in the car—would you like another?”

“NO!” she replied.

It’s funny now, looking back, but then, mamma’s explanation was only an adult’s attempt to cover for Hannah’s obvious embarrassment and humiliation. Clearly, what had happened to “Bunny” for Hannah was nothing short of the desecration of what child psychologists have

characterized as “transitional objects,” critical, theoretically, to every child’s normal social development. It is what I have come to call, in my world of close-up magical entertainment, the “teddy-bunny,” the first for many if not the only source of safety and security at a critical time in a disturbing, rapidly evolving illusion of “reality” in which young children must struggle to define their place.

For all the very serious implications suggested by the anecdote above, while almost all children immediately embrace and relate with such objects, the dark side of the experience, should the illusion collapse, can be as consequential as a coffin. At the end of Mark Twain’s *The Mysterious Stranger* (or *The Chronical of Young Satan*), the illusion of the human community has been “virtually” destroyed. Only one person has survived. Satan rematerializes before Theodor, the traumatized young fifteenth-century Austrian lad and that same, sole survivor, for the last time, not only to say goodbye, but also to share a confession and a horrific revelation: “Nothing exists,” he explains, “all is a dream... Strange! That you should not have suspected years ago... It is true, that which I have revealed to you: there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream—a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but you. And you are but a thought—a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wondering forlorn among the empty eternities!”

“He vanished, and left me appalled; for I knew, and realized,” concedes Theodor, “that all he had said was true” (*Mysterious Stranger* 103).

While textual scholars have long debated the authoritative edition of the several “stranger” manuscripts that Mark Twain composed but never completed between 1908 and his death two years later (Gibson 4-10), perhaps no darker, more pessimistic vision had been so imaginatively painted in all American literature before Mark Twain’s “No. 44, The Mysterious

Stranger.” To fret inordinately over the implications of Satan’s proclamation, however, is to miss the greater irony of Theodor’s acknowledgement, that, rather than grounds for a lament, his recognition is, conversely, an invitation for celebration in his own self-validation. Even if only a thought, Theodor, by Satan’s very confession, is at least “self-evident”—and the unique and “Universal Creator,” to boot! Or, to frame it in the popularized discourse on “parental authority,” from “The Cosby Show,” in admonishing his wayward, misbehaving sire, Cliff Huxtable insists, “I am your father... I brought you into this world, and I can take you out... and make another one just like you” (“Pilot Presentation”). Like that of Cosby’s character, Theodor’s creative potential is infinite, even if, in his case, only illusory.

The theme of “illusion vs. reality” courses its way through the whole canon of Western literature, dating at least to the classical Greek thinkers and authors as early as Homer in the 8th century BCE and, of course, more fully elaborated in 380 BCE, the date commonly assigned to Plato’s “Allegory of the Caves” in Book VII of *The Republic*. It also surfaces as a foundational principle in the evolution of both late 19th-century and 20th-century developmental psychology.

The theme of “illusion” is central to the current discourse over what Robert E. Neale in his *An Essay on Magic* (2015) defines as “metamagic,” or the “magic-behind-the-magic” (Neale 92-94; Grimes and Smith, *Celebrating Illusions*, “Metamagic”). For the “lay person” sitting in the audience of a magic show even to acknowledge the possibility of a “metamagic” should elevate the place of “mere” magical entertainment in popular appreciation. What the “onstage magician” performs in the magic show becomes nothing less than the reflection of the “magical thinking” of each member of an audience, a characteristic of the many “life magics” through which human beings take on the illusions of selfhood in childhood and, similarly, their equally illusory sense of place and roles of responsibility as adults (Neale 94).

Too caught up in the exigencies and superficialities of the moment, we often are blinded to the “meta-truths” that underlie life’s illusions and its myriad relationships. The wizard’s insights revealed in L. Frank Baum’s 1900 work, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, reflect the basic human needs for self-authentication and validation. However, Dorothy doesn’t mince words when she discovers Oz, the self-proclaimed “Great and Terrible,” cowering behind the collapsed screen in the Wizard’s Palace. After he confesses that he can’t keep his promises to the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion, Dorothy charges, “I think you are a very bad man!” Apologizing, the “humbug” protests, “Oh, no, my dear, I’m really a very good man, but I’m a very bad Wizard” (Baum 138). Quite by accident, the four sojourners have exposed, albeit at a superficial level, the Grand Illusionist of the Emerald City for the fraud that he is.

Ironically, in the revelation of “Oz-as-charlatan,” Dorothy and her companions discover what they would never have realized otherwise, that what they believe they want—a brain to think, a heart to feel, and courage to be—is residing already within themselves. In his own defense, the “false Wizard” unmask the real magic—the “metamagic”—that has always existed within his audiences. He tells the Scarecrow, “You don’t need [brains]. You are learning something every day.” To the Cowardly Lion’s plea for courage, he responds, “You have plenty of courage, I am sure. All you need is confidence in yourself.”

The fundamental message of Baum’s turn-of-the century classic is a prescient metaphor for Bob Neale’s insightful thesis a hundred and some years later. In *The Magic of Celebrating Illusion* (2013) Neale claims that “we are all magicians” and that “the role of the stage magician is to mirror the magic of the audience” (30, 42, 86, 166, 250) What magicians strive to reflect, in at least occasional performance pieces, illustrates what Neale describes as the “continuity” between various “stage magics” and “life magics” (*Essay* 54), and that’s what often makes

performances of magical entertainment meaningful in ways beyond what some contemporary audiences may be quick to dismiss as delightful but otherwise irrelevant diversion. My sense of that connection—that *continuity*, as a family magical entertainer for more than forty years, comes from my own experience over that time with what I call “teddy-bunnies.”

As suggested, the term, “teddy-bunnies,” refers to the fuzzy little stuffed rabbits I give away to youngsters at the end of my magical birthday party shows, in restaurants, and other performance venues. Kids latch onto them with all the enthusiasm other kids reserve for their teddy bears (or bear-substitutes). According to twentieth-century British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1896-1971), a proponent of “Object Relations Theory,” in his seminal essay, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,” the response from the children to these stuffed animals appears to be universal (89). In the case of my bunny productions, children embrace them immediately, pulling them under their arms and hugging them tightly, making them their own the very moment I pull them from my hat and hand them over. You might expect a similar response from any such experience of gifting. However, the responses from the parents, whom I often hear from later, suggest that the bunnies have become much more important to the children than the other abandoned stuffed critters that fill up their toy chests or clutter up their closets.

Most of the families I entertain in the restaurant have never before witnessed close-up magic or magic performed only for them. However, most are generally familiar with magical entertainment; most have seen contestants performing tricks on popular evening television programs. And most parents know the familiar cliché that “what comes out of every magician’s hat is [always!] a bunny.” They are quick to assist the kiddo who waves my “very magic wand”

(a hot-pink Crayola toothbrush!) over the hat, usually a little uncertain about the whole unfolding experience.

What I have just described, of course, is a *context*—and sometimes a very disturbing *context*—for the appearance of the bunny, the child’s first magical experience. Put it this way: the bunny wasn’t just sitting in her chair when she came back from the chocolate fountain or the restroom. And it wasn’t something that was “gifted” from mom, dad, or some stranger in the child’s absence. To the child, what has just happened is surprising and inexplicable—so, it must have been “magic.” And of course, the parents only reinforce the interpretation, “See what you just *did!*” they exclaim. “You waved the wand and made a *bunny!* You just did *magic!*” The child is rewarded and celebrated for something exciting that just happened, because, in some unexpected way, the child himself or herself has been the causal agent—the child did *something* to make *something else* happen.

This communal engagement, featuring, in this case, the seemingly benign role of the magician, the active participation of the child, and the parents’ applause and encouragement, constitute the *social* context, but while that context might be new, disturbing, or startling in a restaurant setting, what just happened in the mind of the child is not anything new or unexpected at all. In his or her world of “play-like” and “make believe,” the child has been performing such creative “magic” since toddler days. Most children know exactly what to do with the bunny and automatically assign its place and function in their very active and complex *imaginative* context. Often, the very first thing the child does is to *name* it, the first step in establishing some personal boundaries that will define the child’s new relationship with the bunny. Childhood developmental psychologists call the bunny a “transitional object.”

A “transitional object” functions first in the child’s experience as a “mother substitute.” Winnicott claims that children adopt an object, usually associated with the mother, as a first step in a developmental progression toward self-identity and helps the child to separate its identity from that of the mother, a critical formative transition that happens through play (*Playing and Reality* 1-25). In a discussion of the child’s application of the transitional object, David Straker, in *Changing Minds*, notes that personifying

the object is perhaps the first truly creative act of the child as it uses its imagination to create reality out of nothing. The transitional object is a tool that allows the child to let go of the mother and develop a more independent existence. It can take the object anywhere and receive a quick dose of comfort whenever it feels anxious. The object also facilitates the transition from a ‘magical sense’ of omnipotence to control through physical manipulation. (“Donald Winnicott”)

The children’s waving the magic wand in *The Golden Corral* will be only the first of many such imaginative, magical acts in creating a most complex world through play for a very long time! (To extrapolate from the Straker interpretation above, the self-satisfaction and reassurances acquired through the safety of play with the object will translate ultimately into self-confidence in applying the modes of reasoning and critical thinking as adults.)

The immediate response of the child in embracing the fuzzy creature is the first reaction into what will become an *interactive* relationship. Straker continues,

The object may... be the subject of the child’s [fantasies] for example where a teddy bear is spoken to, hugged, punished, etc. It thus becomes a tool for interaction with the external world. By giving the bear a will of its own, the child is also [fantasizing] that it is

not omnipotent and can yet survive this initially scary state. Play thus provides a pathway to independence. (Straker, “The Transition Object”)

To put it in the terms of “magic,” the child is becoming the magician, creating his or her own magical kingdom and populating it with its own fantastical creatures that behave (or *not!*) according to the child’s own set of rules and norms—all objectified in the “teddy-bunny” and the child’s relation to it.

Very much aligned with the “object-relations” theoretical principles of the “transitional object” outlined above, Neale explains the role of the “teddy bear” illusion in the developmental pathway of children from their identity with the “mother-as-first-magician” (*Celebrating Illusion* 266-269) and their flight from the “father-as-second-magician” (270-276). As the “first magician,” the mother is the giver of life, the nurturer, and the sustainer of life; the child is literally a manifestation of the mother’s “magic” and totally dependent upon her to live. The “magic” of the father, on the other hand, defines the rules and social boundaries that help the child to begin to realize the world of “not-me” (Winnicott, “Transitional Objects” 89).

As a way of adjusting to the conflicting roles of the “mother” and “father” magicians, children assign attributes to the transitional object, setting it apart from the mother-magician’s nurturing and against the father-magician’s unsympathetic and non-negotiable boundaries. Through imaginative play with the “TO,” children are able to disassociate themselves from both as they gradually and cautiously come to experience themselves as independent beings (Winnicott 89). Through the unlimited power of “make-believe” enacted in the arena of play, the child becomes what I characterize as the “third magician,” creating a rich, often complex illusory world with its ever-changing demographics, fantastic settings, and its own very fluid set of regulations and protocols.

This early play is essential to the child's ability to adjust later to the illusions of the adult world with its own rules, meanings, and values—illusions that he or she will be expected to facilitate (Donate-Bartfield, et al). The ability of children-as-magicians to “make believe” and “play like” prepares them for the illusions of the adult world in which they will assume the role of either a “mother-magician” or a “father-magician.” And so, the cycle of development and maturation continues in the illusory world of the mind.

Every arena of human experience is shaped and defined by illusions through which people relate to each other, usually in one and sometimes overlapping roles. Sometimes, the illusions are of our own making; sometimes they are ones we step into as we become of age or station. From Neale's perspective, each new generation of “mother-magicians” and “father-magicians” must learn and master the performance pieces of their society's illusions, until the new initiates they will serve, in time, become mature enough to understand and accept the differences between the illusory world in which they have unwittingly been raised, and the insistent “real” world of hard facts and common sense that, superficially, would seem to envelop it. But in the meantime, the child-as-the-maturing-magician, consciously orchestrates each illusion in a world of continuous play, a source of reassuring and renewable joy (*Celebrating Illusion* 269).

“Well?” said Hannah. Or, so much for the “bright side”! Truth be told, every social illusion will probably suffer the same fate as that of so many of the classical performance illusions of “onstage magic.” That is, there will always be a “masked magician” ready to expose each of the “trade secrets” that lie behind every public illusion. And while, especially as magic entertainers, we may groan, in life, however, that exposure has to happen! It simply has to be! Without the exposures, the “father-magician” is unable to reveal the deeper principles—the

“meta-truths,” if you will—that the illusions veil. From this perspective, Satan, in the *Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, is merely completing the role of the “father magician,” opening to Theodor, the realization of his infinite creativity and possibilities, an act replicated more playfully by Cliff Huxtable’s reminder to his insolent son. In time, parents will sit down with their children to respond to the inevitable question, “Is Santa real?” enabling the parents to clarify the abstract “meta-truths” that the illusion embodies. All “father-magicians” must expose secrets of the public or social illusions they create, maintain, and perform, because, as Neale insists, the deception of the illusion must be opened in order to reveal its enlightenment (*Celebrating Illusion* 270-271). Through its exposure to the “metamagic” (the “magic-behind the magic”), the “child-as-third magician” becomes educated in the valuable roles that illusions play and, in time, will become eligible for services as a mentor for the next generation, performing the illusions essential to the identity and well-being of the next generation of youngsters. Through them, as for their own mentors before, the cycle of the initiation hero of “death and rebirth” continues.

Mike Smith, a retired psychotherapist and wonderful friend and a colleague in our niche, little world of magical entertainment, suggested the parallel between the role of Oz as the ironic “very bad wizard” and Bob Neale’s clarification of our role as performing magical entertainers “to mirror the magic of our audience.” What I have come to realize is that magical performance begins for each member of our audiences at a very young age in the safe arena of play where the child is free to “play like” and “make believe.” As Hannah reminded me at *The Golden Corral*, now, so many years ago, the key prop in that play, absolutely essential for the child’s successful socialization and psychological integration, is the “teddy-bunny,” that furry, fluffy, little stuffed animal that the child imbues with robust imaginary life and relationships.

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