

Metamagic – The “Deep Meaning” of Magic, or the “Magic behind the Magic”

Beyond what we do as entertainers, as human beings, why do we “do magic”? What do we find about it that compels many of us to a lifetime fascination and to the few who even make it their profession? Why is magical entertainment—or its practices found in the cultural history of every civilization—so varied and complex? What is “magical thinking,” and why do some find even the idea of it offensive and threatening? Is there a basis, a foundation beneath the tricks and props, and behind our audiences’ simple pleasures that magical entertainment exudes that can help us better understand what magic is and why magic seems to be a factor in what makes us “human”? Is there such a thing we might call a “metamagic”—a magic *behind* the magic?

My experiences as a performer for many years have triggered my own inquiry. At the restaurant one evening, I noticed a middle-aged lady at an adjoining table rise and return to the serving line at the buffet. When she was out of sight, her husband motioned for me to approach his table. He had been amused at my magical performance with a family across the aisle. He and his wife were celebrating their 37th wedding anniversary that evening. He asked me if I would “do something special” for his wife when she returned. I told him that I would be happy to perform something just for the two of them.

As they were finishing dessert, I approached their table. With a smile and a wink, the husband introduced me. I complimented them both on their anniversary and offered to perform a routine of “gift magic.” I chose the “Anniversary Waltz,” a piece I have learned always to have “at the ready” during my evenings at the restaurant. Over and over, couples have thrilled to its “message” that makes it uniquely their own. This time, however, the “surprise” ending elicited a response that neither I nor the lady’s husband might have expected. For a few moments, she stared at the signed “cards” until the meaning for her sank in. Suddenly, she just erupted. “That is the first time in all our years together,” she protested angrily, “that you have ever forced me to do ‘magic!’” [*Curtain!*]

Unanticipated reactions to our work, like the one above, can unnerve us. Like other professionals, magical entertainers work hard to make their art a source of joy and celebration. Many devote years of work and study to perfecting their routines. Many take courses and attend countless lectures to gain new performance insights. They spend hours in consultation with their compeers in magic clubs and associations. Most care deeply about their relationships with their audiences and the effects they hope to achieve. They hone their scripts and sharpen their timing in practice and rehearsal to those ends. They continuously analyze their performances for what works and doesn’t work in their quest to better amuse, delight, and astonish their audiences. So, beyond the tips and applause, it would be helpful to know just what audiences really think about our magic and their attitudes toward magical entertainment in general.

At best, we know very little about what our audiences “take away” from our shows outside of what we hope will be “call backs” and referrals for future gigs. Over the years of

performing, however, most of us glean a few hints or clues that can be helpful. On other occasions, though, an audience's reactions serve as warnings that cause us to "back off" and to reassess who we are and what we do as entertainers.

It would seem that an audience's reactions to magical entertainment—at least as we approach it from our First World orientation—are culturally-bound experiences that are filtered irrevocably through the various lenses of attitudes, belief systems, social and familial relationships and expectations, and the nuances that define discrete cultural heritages very different from our own. From just an analysis of various reactions to magical entertainment, a study that would explore the fundamentals or the foundation of all magical experience might be a futile inquiry. Yet, we have at least to ask, is there a "ground of being" that undergirds all magic, a foundation in human experience that accounts for the universality of magic?

In the eighteenth century, just months before he died, the erasable Benjamin Franklin in his renowned "Letter to Ezra Stiles," professed a faith in the "fundamental points of all sound religion"—the "universal principles," what today we might call "meta-religion." In 1957, MIT's Noam Chomsky upended the linguistic world with *Syntactic Structures*, his introduction of the "phrase-structure rules" of language that govern, more generally, how the mind works—what we might call today a "meta-linguistics." In *An Essay on Magic* (2015), Robert E. Neale alludes to the probability of a "metamagic," the magic behind magic.

As a serious disclaimer to any such inquiry, it's tempting to offer up the familiar admonition, "Never ask a fish about water? It has nothing to say." The fish can never survive as a "dispassionate observer"! So, we might extrapolate, "Never ask a human about magic (or magical thinking). It has nothing to say." Unless, like the fish, to remove a human from its context where the questions might be raised more objectively, we know all too well the complex and often deft defenses erected that would seem to belie human experiences grounded firmly in the principles of magic and magical thinking.

I plan to publish a volume of collected "reflections" on the subject of "metamagic." The purpose of this work is to encourage a dialogue about the foundations of magic in human experience. To that end, I am inviting you and others of our colleagues in the magic community who come to the subject from a wide range of both related and unrelated professional experience and expertise. All are thinkers. All are writers. Many are performers. Others are "married to magic"—whatever that means—and even some to magical entertainers! All care deeply about people and contribute in discrete but nonetheless remarkable and meaningful ways to their various communities and circles of responsibility. And all are friends of magic.

We are asking each contributor to explore the meaning of "metamagic" as Robert Neale has alluded to it in *An Essay on Magic* (Theory and Art of Magic Press, 2015). If you are interested, please limit your reflections to something between 500 and 1,500 words. As a collection, these short "pieces" should draw upon the strengths and insights from your respective training and expertise to help create a more holistic approach to understanding "metamagic."

Some of our authors will be practitioners as performers. Some might come from the fields of philosophy and psychology. Some from medicine. Others might write from a deep faith tradition. Others will probably come from a more humanistic background. With some of the pieces, you will find yourself nodding your heads. With others, shaking your heads in frustration. Either way, our purpose is not to elicit agreement or disagreement. Rather, we hope, that whatever your context, you will find the ideas expressed in this dialogue stimulating, insightful, and a source for celebrating—if only from right angles—the wonder in the mystery that surrounds us all and to which the experience of magic can direct us.

Geoffrey “Doc” Grimes
September, 2021