

# “Through the Trapdoor with Bob Neale”: Nine Session Exploring Thirteen Themes in Selected Works by Robert Neale



Hosted by  
Michael Smith and Geoff Grimes

# Session 9: *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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**Life and Death and . . .**

THE 2018 MAGIC & MEANING CONFERENCE

## The Robert E. Neale Index

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A Resource for the Study of Robert E. Neale’s  
Trilogy of Magic

Prepared by Michael Smith and Geoffrey Grimes  
9/5/2018

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## Session 9: *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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- 1) The "Four Falls"
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# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusion*

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Sources:

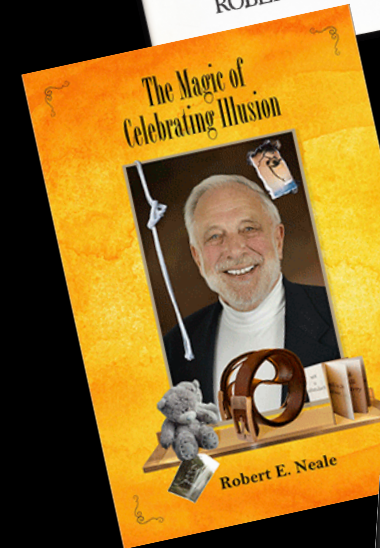
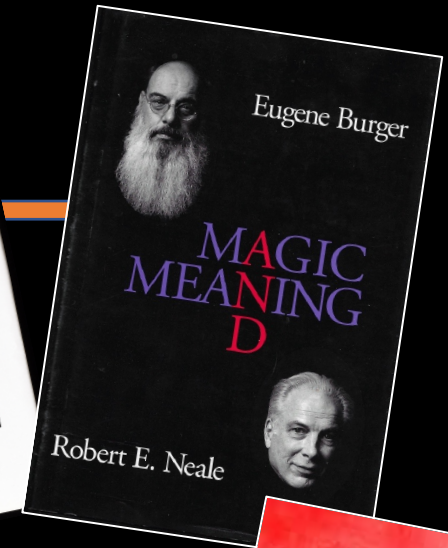
*Magic & Meaning* (1995), pp. 133-136.

*Life, Death, and Other Card Tricks* (2000),  
pp. 143-146.

*The Magic of Celebrating Illusion* (2013),  
pp. 181, 175-176, 198-200

*An Essay on Magic* (2015), pp. 120-121.

*Breaking Our Magic Wands* (2017),  
pp. 38-39.



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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From Larry Hass (Bob's editor):

“Bob suggests that our accounts of ultimate things—reality as a whole essence, what it all means, where it all comes from—are tall tales. They are ‘whoppers,’ and he argues that it is important and less destructive to joyfully celebrate this fact rather than to slide into the rigidity of ‘totalitarian imagination.’”

*The Magic of Celebrating Illusions, p. 198*



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *On Celebrating Illusions*

”So what? So, celebrate nonsense! I say this to both believers and disbelievers. I suggest to all believers that making up meaning is a potent process in which make-believing is extraordinarily sufficient. Such creativity with illusion is full and mature play. . . . Maybe it is time we stopped the futile attempt to cast out illusion and begin to celebrate it. It is never too late to play—especially with what really matters to us.”



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# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *On Celebrating Illusions*

“A caution is useful. Real celebration of illusion is possible, but it does not come cheap. The delight is prefaced by terror, accompanied by terror, and followed by terror. Delight offers relief from terror, and followed by terror, not its extinction. Life is terrifying, a chaos in which one is lost. Death is terrifying, equally a chaos in which one is lost.”





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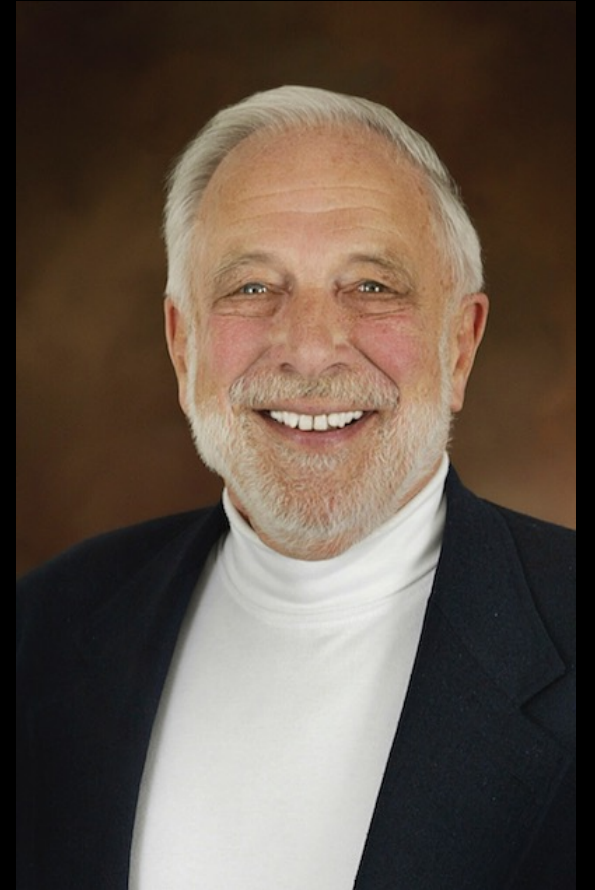


# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *On Celebrating Illusions*

”So, we make up meaning. Our illusions are crucial. We are found and founded by them. But they are not without cost, for ‘the dream is always false.’ Our illusions have the potential to destroy us.”

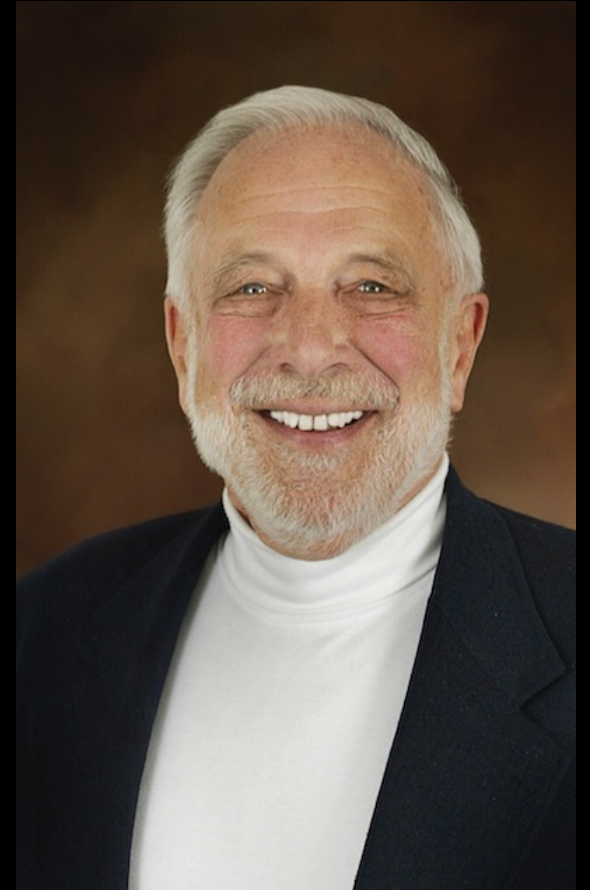


# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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*On Celebrating Illusions*

“So careful evaluation is required.”



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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”So careful evaluation is required.”

Does our attachments to some particular illusions diminish or increase our humanity?



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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Does our attachments to some particular illusions diminish or increase our humanity?

**Does our attachment help us humbly acknowledge our terror over life and death?**



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”So careful evaluation is required.”

Does our attachments to some particular illusions diminish or increase our humanity?

Does our attachment help us humbly acknowledge our terror over life and death?

**Does it grant us more freedom, courage, and hope?**



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *On Celebrating Illusions*

”So careful evaluation is required.

Does our attachments to some particular illusions diminish or increase our humanity?

Does our attachment help us humbly acknowledge our terror over life and death?

Does it grant us more freedom, courage, and hope?

**Does it connect us more deeply and widely with our communities?**



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *On Celebrating Illusions*

“The answers can be ‘yes,’ but they are not necessarily so. Remember, the dream is always false.”





*The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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*The Four Falls: **A Preface***



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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## *The Four Falls: A Preface*

“In the beginning, there were animals scattered about the world that made up stories because they were human animals and told those stories to others because they wanted to remain human.

But, all they really knew about it was that they liked the stories. They were told and retold in dance and song, in poetry and art. In the telling of them people discovered who they were, what they should do, and why they existed. The stories brought order out of chaos and delight in life.”



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“But then, unaccountably, for this is a sacred story, a disaster occurred, a fall into *totalitarian imagination*.

Indeed, there where four falls, four tumbles taken by us to create and maintain our own defense against the freedom of imagination.”



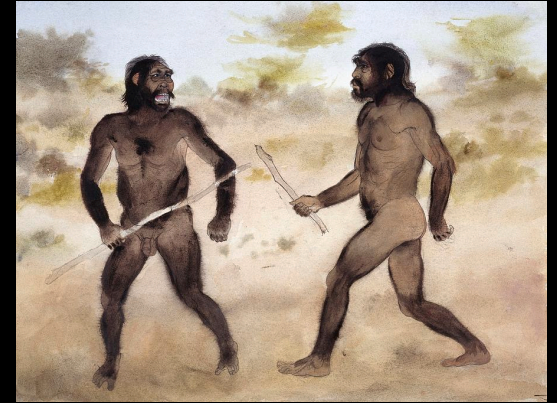
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*The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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*The Four Falls: **First Fall***

# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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## *The Four Falls: **First Fall***

“We forgot that stories are created out of our own imagination. . . . In place of acknowledging our creativity and the creativity of our social and cultural traditions, we claimed that the products of imagination are delivered and received. In short, we claimed ‘revelation.’

‘Nobody made this up. Therefore, it must be true.’”



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*The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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*The Four Falls: **Second Fall***

# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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## *The Four Falls: **Second Fall***

**“We believed in only one specific revelation.  
‘How can ultimate truths say different things?’**



So mine is valid while yours is not, mine is divine while yours is demonic, and, of course, mine is revealed truth while yours is imagination.

The result was alienation from others.”

# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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*The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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*The Four Falls: **Third Fall***

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## *The Four Falls: **Third Fall***

“The revelation must be fixed. There was a freeze on the natural act of change.

We became alienated from ourselves.”



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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## *The Four Falls: **Third Fall***

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*The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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*The Four Falls: **Fourth Fall***



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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## *The Four Falls: **Fourth Fall***

**“In our fourth tumble we did all that we could do to protect the single revealed, final truth from attack.**

Protection of the imagination itself from change was never necessary. When imagination functions, it changes, and this is what sustains it.

But we swallowed the poison of purity. We tried to convert others.”



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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## *The Four Falls: **Fourth Fall***

“Failing all else, we tried the ultimate solution of killing people.”



*The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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*The Four Falls: **The Consequence***

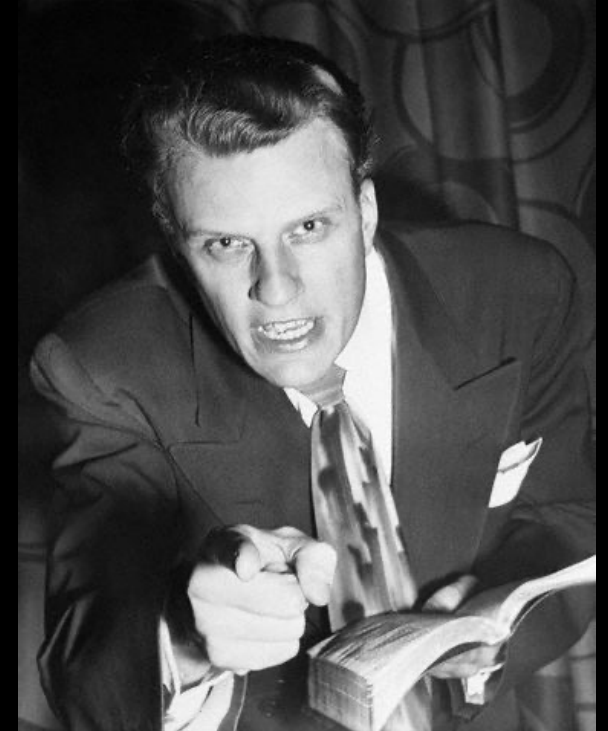
# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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## *The Four Falls: **The Consequence***

The four falls have led to a single, revealed, final truth that is deemed superior to life itself.

The disaster of forgetting our imagination leads to our bureaucratic terrorism of belief and disbelief.



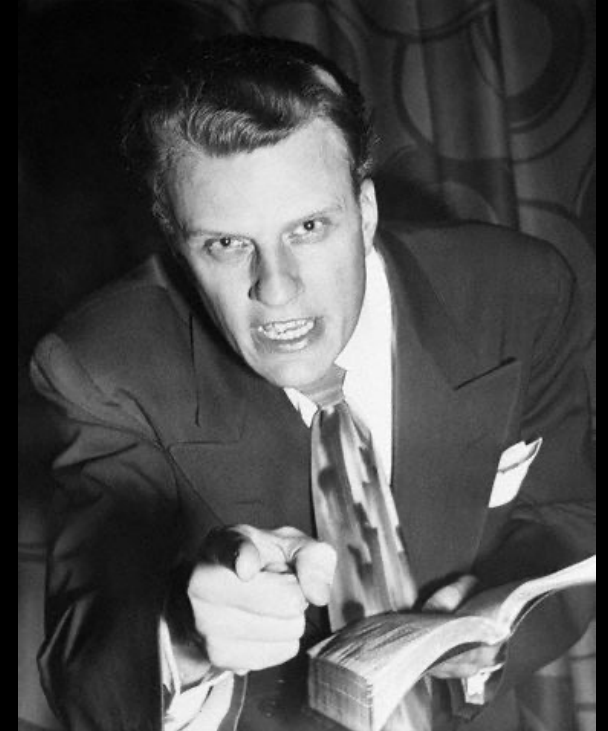
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*The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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*The Four Falls: A Postscript*



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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## *The Four Falls: A Postscript*

Bob writes,

How do we celebrate story? . . . I suggest we celebrate story by telling stories, retelling stories, telling new versions of old stories, and telling new stories. The more stories the better. The more they differ the better. And the more they conflict with one another, the better.



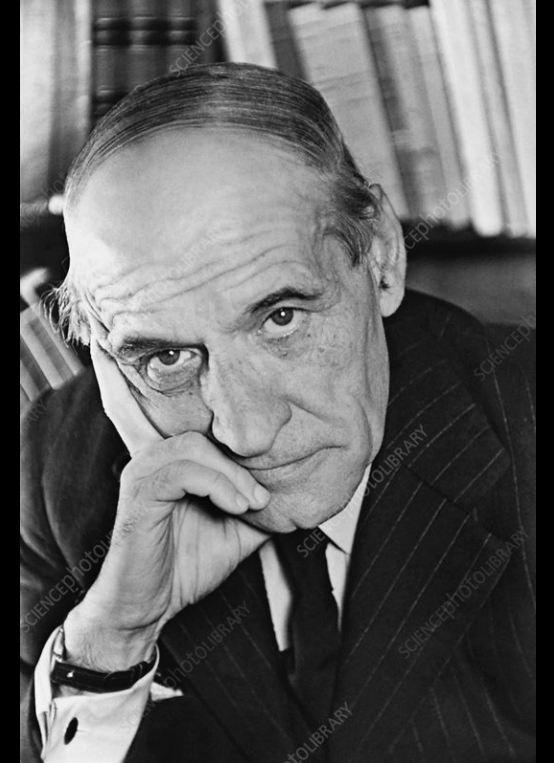
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## *The Four Falls: A Postscript*

“As full storytellers, we are skeptics. As . . . Ortega y Gasset reminds us, “The skeptic is the man with the fullest, richest, and most complete life. Some foolish ideas lead us to suppose that the skeptic does not believe anything. Quite the contrary!

The skeptic differs from the dogmatic in that the latter believes in only one thing and the former in many, in almost everything. And this multitude of beliefs, acting as mutual restraints, make the mind flexible and prolific.”



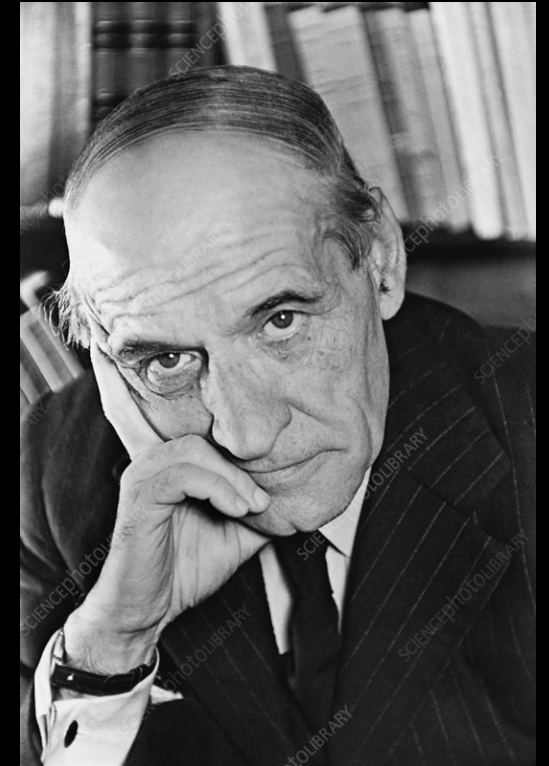
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# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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## *The Four Falls: A Postscript*

“For me, being ‘flexible and prolific’ with beliefs is making believe. Telling stories that conflict celebrates both the process and products of making up meaning.”



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions:*

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## *The Four Falls: A Postscript*

“Tell yourself about your life. That is, tell a story about it. . . . It is most unlikely that we don’t have any, and it is most likely that many of our stories are hidden from our casual awareness.

Just consider our experiences of love and family relationships, healing, religion, and anything that is crucially important to us.”



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“If we honestly reflect on what we find, we will find lots of tales there, some of which, we might realize, are actually a matter of profound importance to us.

And they are probably whoppers!”



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# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *The Four Falls: A Postscript*

“So, our attachment to our illusions must always include careful, honest evaluation of them and our willingness to change and develop.”

“Thankfully, this rigorous discipline does not prohibit delight. Rather, it necessitates it. If our illusions are always necessary and always insufficient, celebration is most opportune.”



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# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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*Life and Death and . . .*

# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *Life and Death and . . .*

Bob's definition of magic—one last time:

“Magic is the performance exercise of imaginative mastery that grants *symbolic power over life and death* by means of ritual control over change in the artful play of impossible effects of being, doing, and relating.”



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *Life and Death and . . .*

We will not attempt to cite all Bob Neale's references to life and death but to suggest an overarching perspective in Bob's works.



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *Life and Death and . . .*

In all his writings there is a deep awareness of life in all of its beauty, ugliness, messiness, and absurdity as well as the ultimate awareness that “one day we all die.”

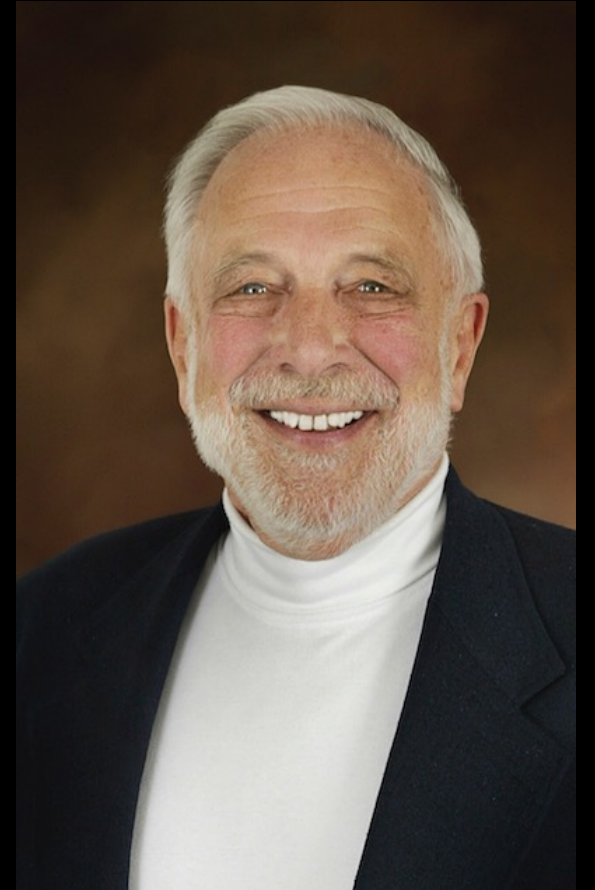


# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *Life and Death and . . .*

Like Prospero, the magician in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, we all have to let go of our "magic" in order to step into the deeper mystery of life and death and what may lie beyond death.



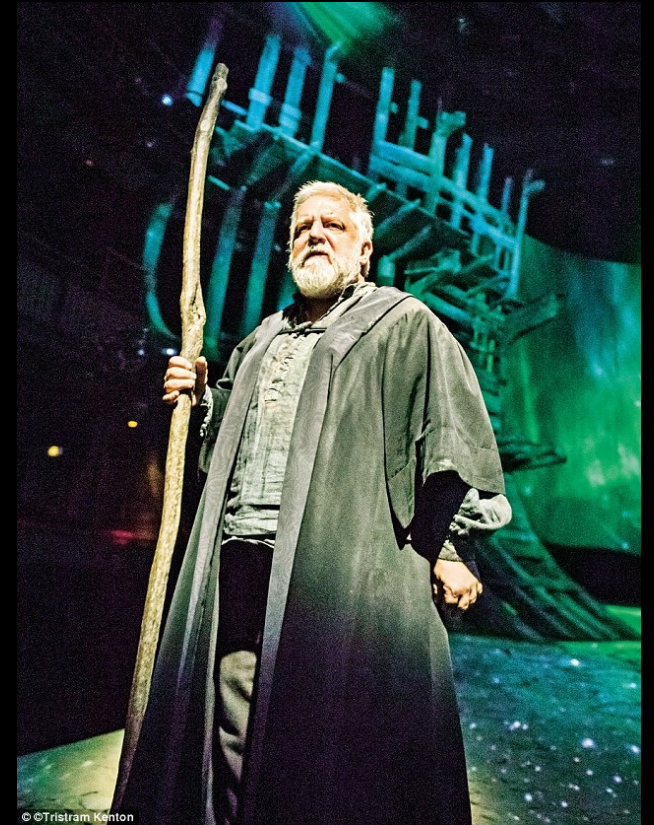
# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *Life and Death and . . .*

Prospero: “But this rough magic I here abjure, and when I have required some heavenly music, which even now I do, to work mine end upon the senses that airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff, bury it certain fathoms deep in the earth, and deeper than did every plummet sound I’ll drown my book.”

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 5, Scene 1



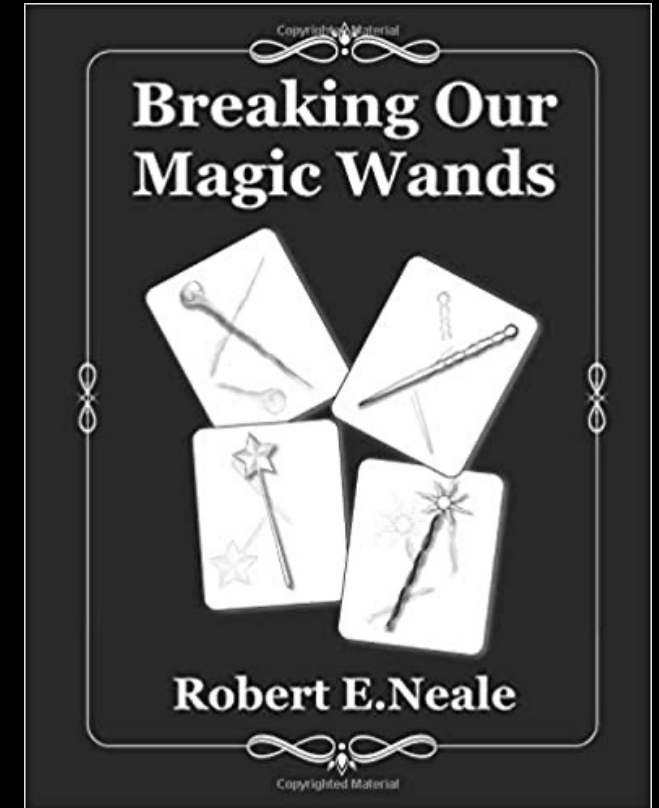


# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *From “Breaking Our Magic Wands”:*

From Bob’s “Broken Wand Ceremony”  
(in *Breaking Our Magic Wands*, 2017, pp.  
38-39)

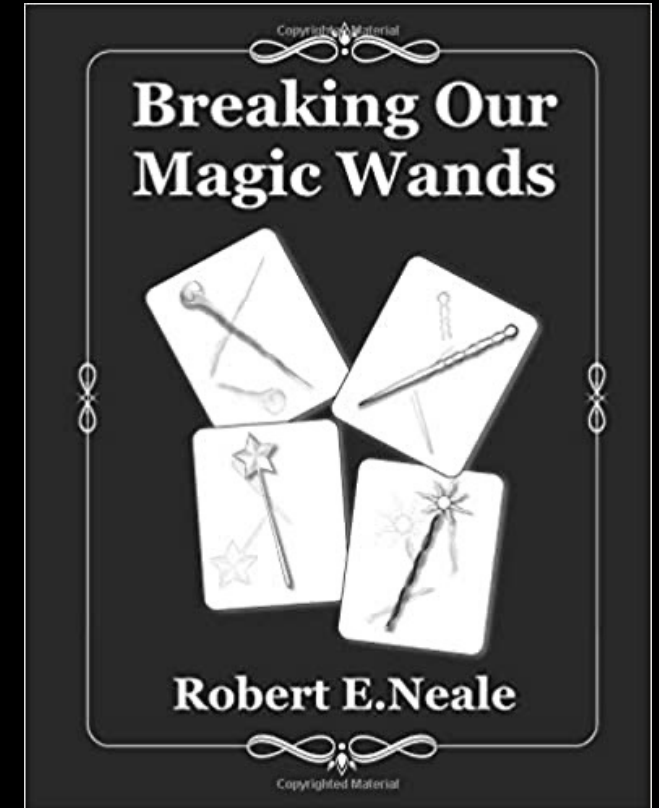


# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *From “Breaking Our Magic Wands”:*

“We gather in the name of Mystery behind all of life’s mysteries. The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible. As knowledge increases, wonder deepens. The final conclusion is that we know very little, and yet it is astonishing that we know so much and still more astonishing that so little knowledge can give us so much power.”

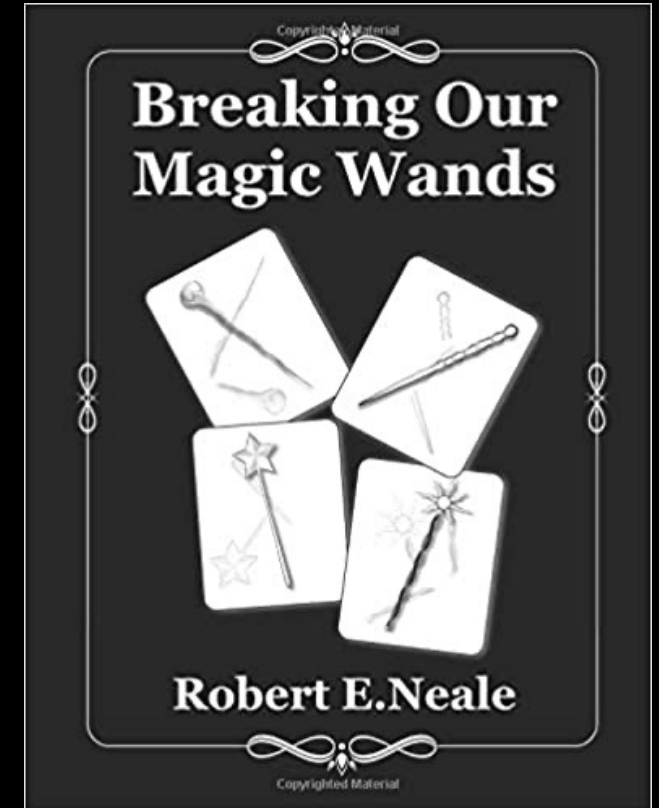


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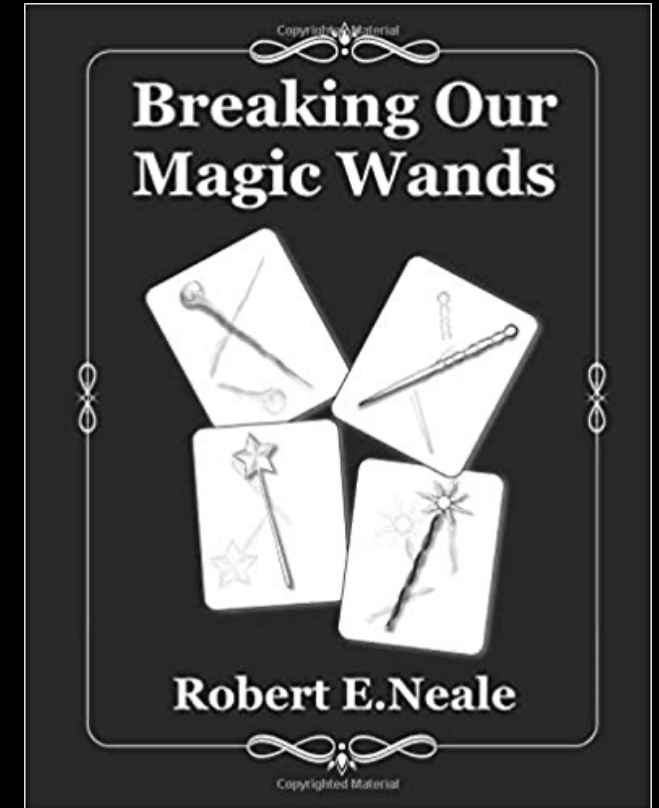
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“What is more mysterious to us than our own art and craft? The magician appeals to the part of our being that is not dependent on wisdom, to the part of us that is a gift and not an acquisition—and which is, therefore, more permanently enduring.

The magician speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives, and to our experience of pity, beauty, and pain.”



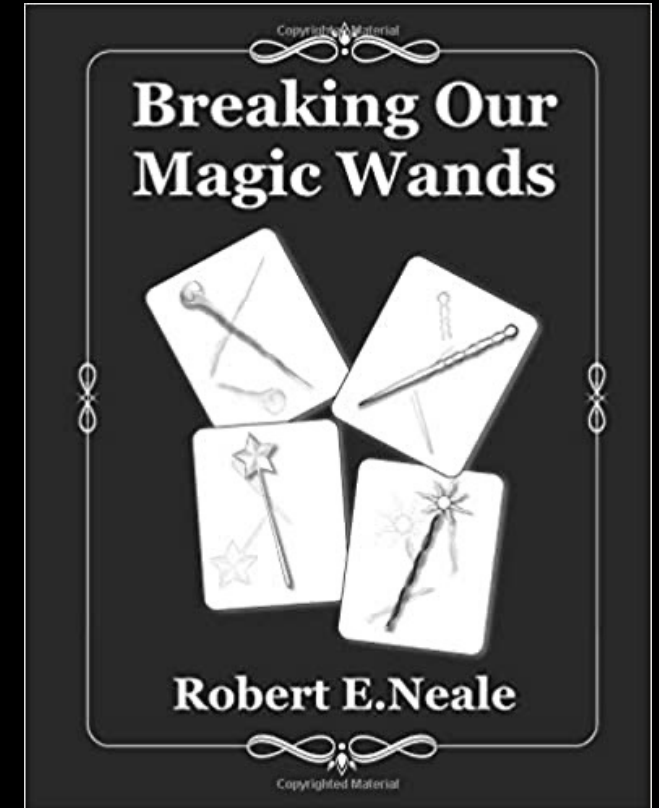
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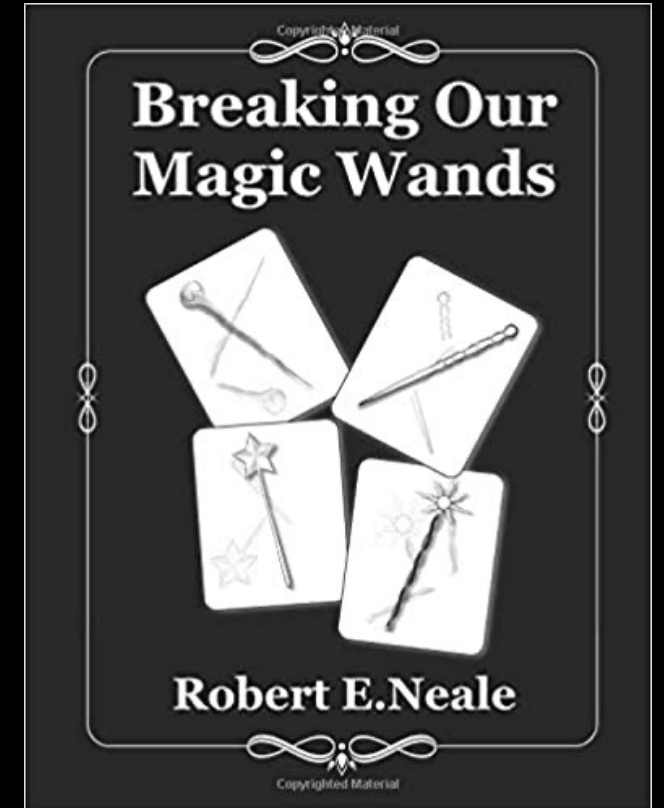


# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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*From “Breaking Our Magic Wands”:*

“So mystery reigns. The magician in us proclaims:  
“If there be a skeptical star then I was born under  
it, yet I have lived all my days in complete  
astonishment.”



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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*Life and Death and . . .*

We conclude with these words from Bob's book, *Life and Death and Other Card Tricks*. Writing about the great French existentialist Albert Camus' classic novel, *The Plague*, Bob says,



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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*Life and Death and . . .*

“The novel is a chronicle of heroism. In the face of suffering and death we are to love, endure and heal. In a crisis of life and death, people may meet and grow to love each other. This is the hope, and this is the ultimate reward. For Camus, there is meaning in this and there is no meaning greater than this.”





# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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*Life and Death and . . .*

Bob continues,

“Death does prompt us to hold one another, to heal one another—and to create card tricks. In response to my brother, my dying friend, Camus, and to the experience of death itself, my card trick ‘Sole Survivor’ came into being.”

(See *Magic and Meaning*, pp. 133-136)



# *The Ethical Heart of Spiritual Illusions*

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## *Life and Death and . . .*

Bob created another, more hopeful, script for this card effect he called “Survivor.” This version “is more balanced in understanding and reflects the overall spirit of the original source: Evil exists but is countered by good.”

*(See Lie, & Death and Other Card Tricks, pp. 143-146)*



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Session 9: *Life and Death and . . .* In closing

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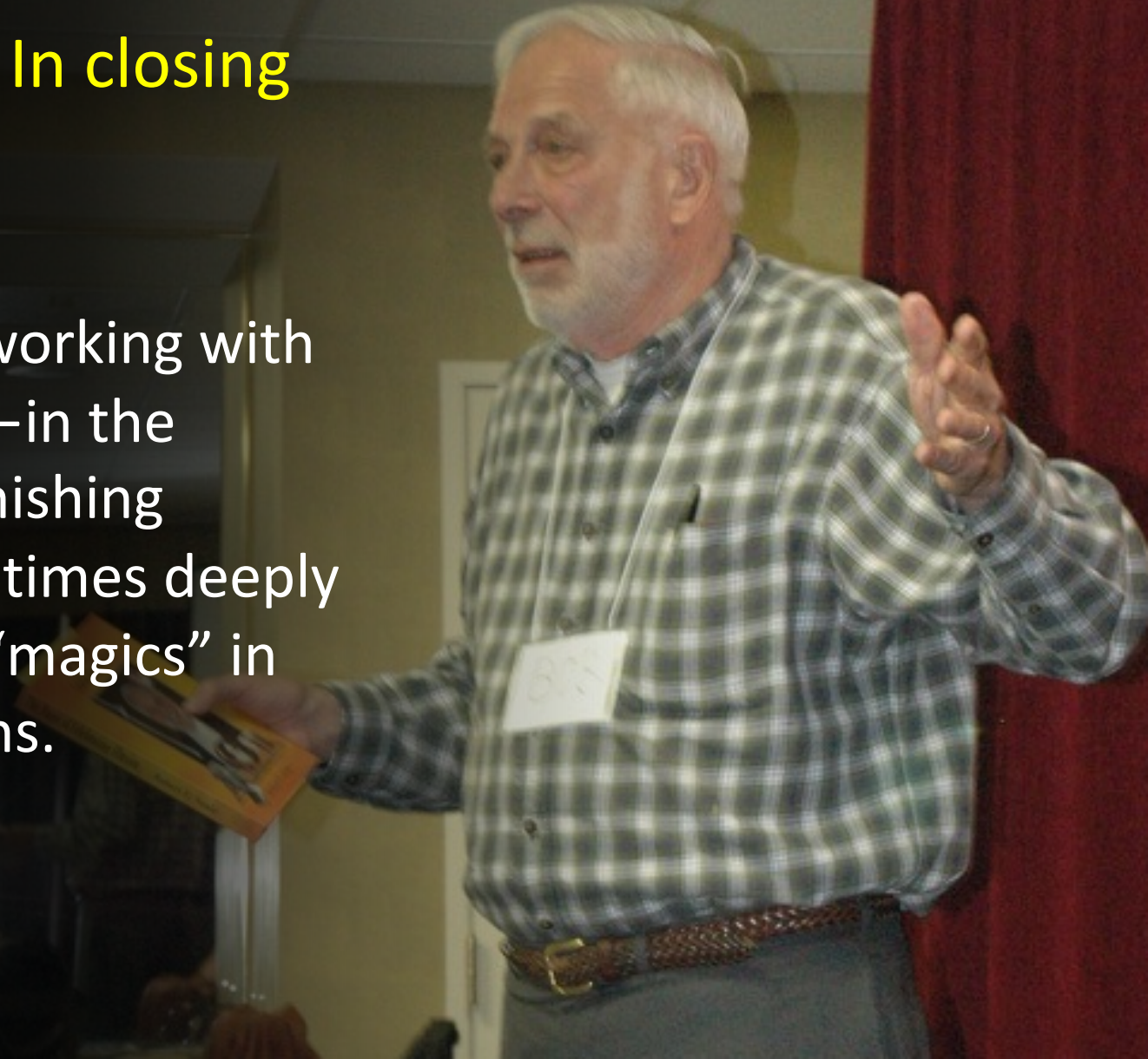


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## Session 9: *Life and Death and . . .* In closing

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We are grateful to Larry Hass who, working with Bob over the years, has brought us—in the *Trilogy* and later works—Bob’s astonishing (though often challenging and sometimes deeply disturbing) insights into life’s many “magics” in all of their remarkable manifestations.

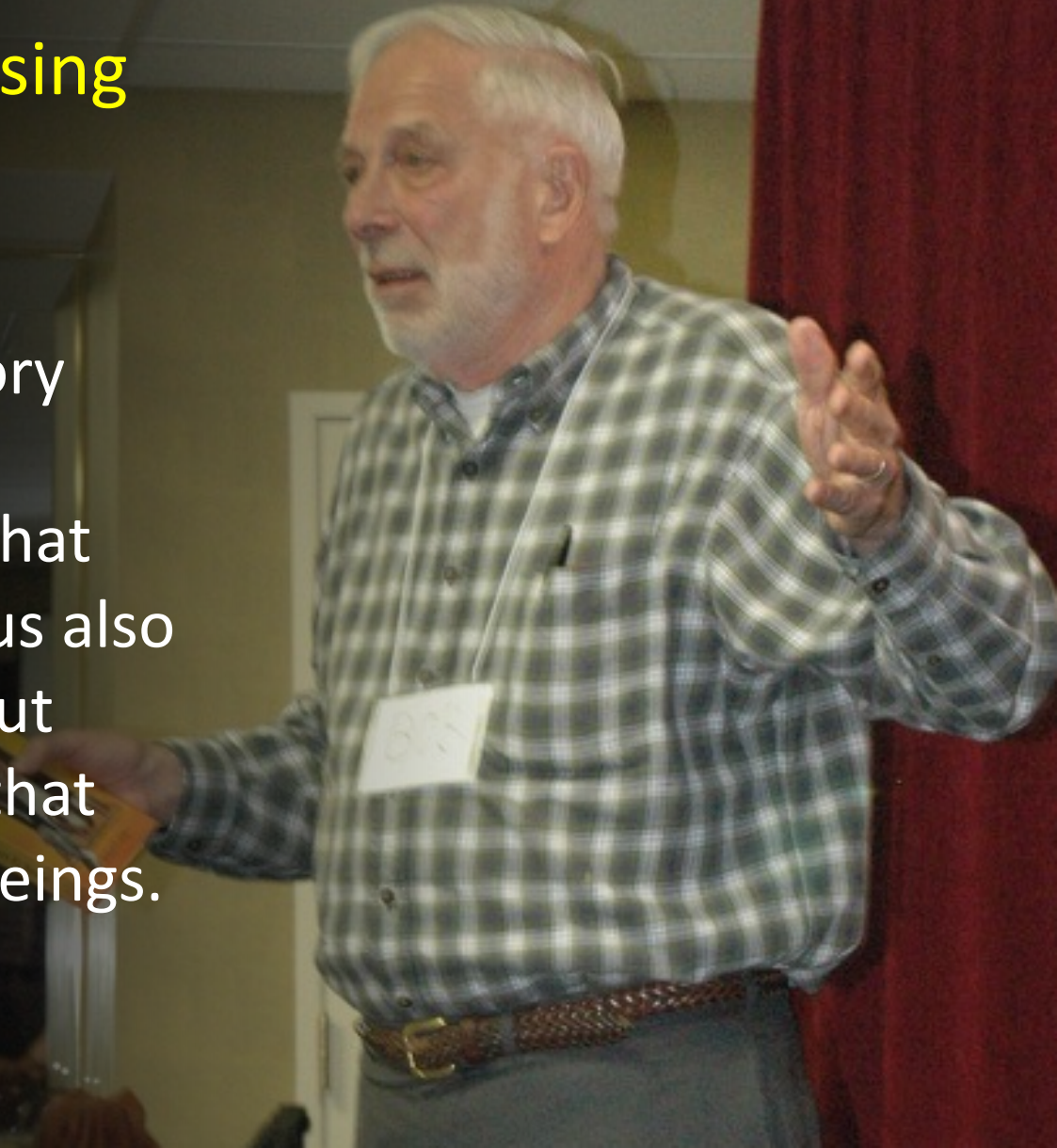


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## Session 9: *Life and Death and . . .* In closing

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The *Trilogy* provides us with a general theory and language—a framework—for better understanding ourselves and why we do what we do as magical entertainers. It compels us also to be more thoughtful and intentional about how we build our shows from an attitude that respects our audiences as fellow magical beings.

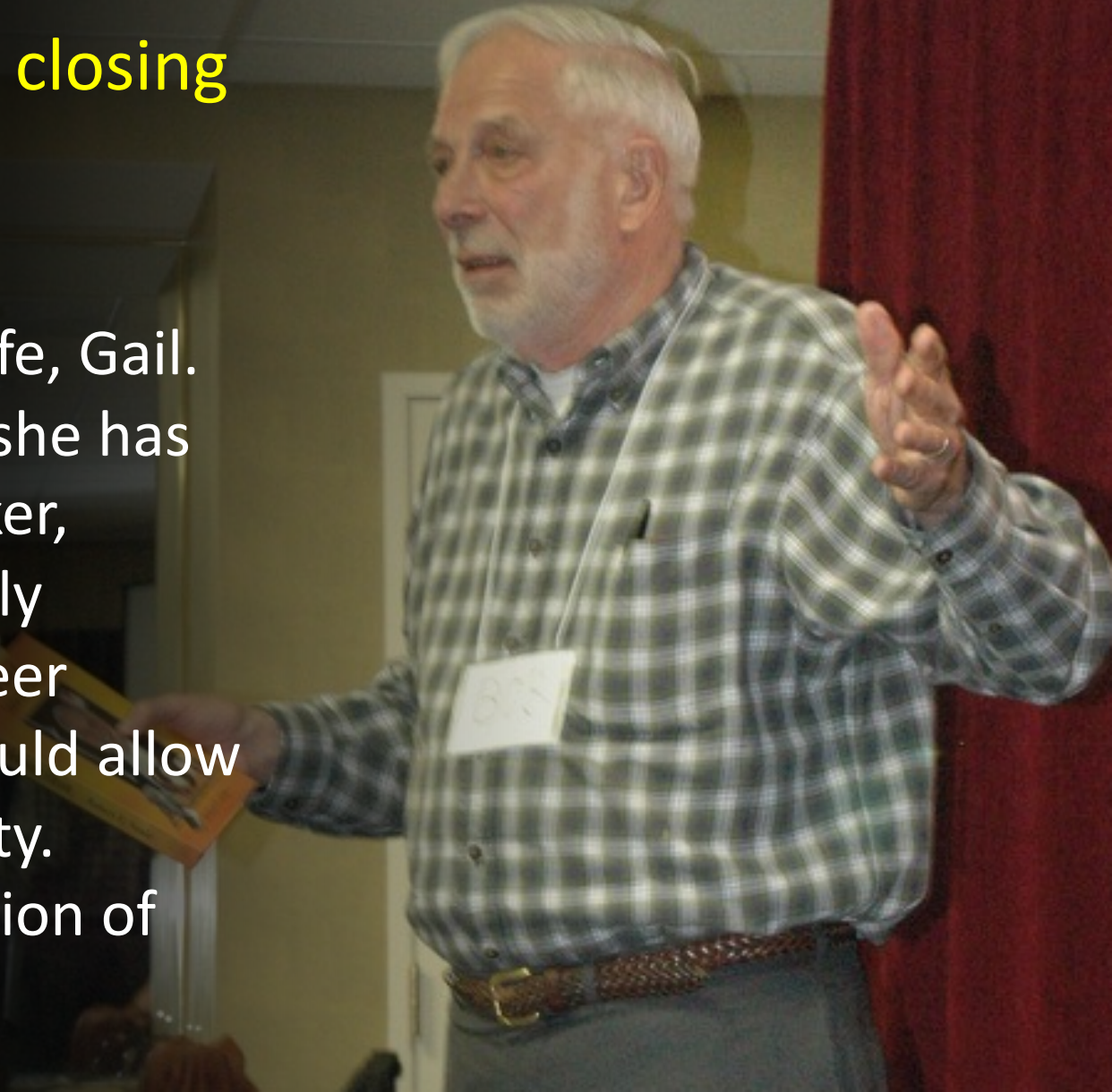


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## Session 9: *Life and Death and . . .* In closing

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We are especially indebted to Bob's wife, Gail. From the beginning of their marriage, she has supported his unique talents as a thinker, creator, and writer. Early on, as Bob fully acknowledges, her own successful career provided the financial stability that would allow him to develop and market his creativity. Through it all, Bob's success is a reflection of their remarkable partnership.

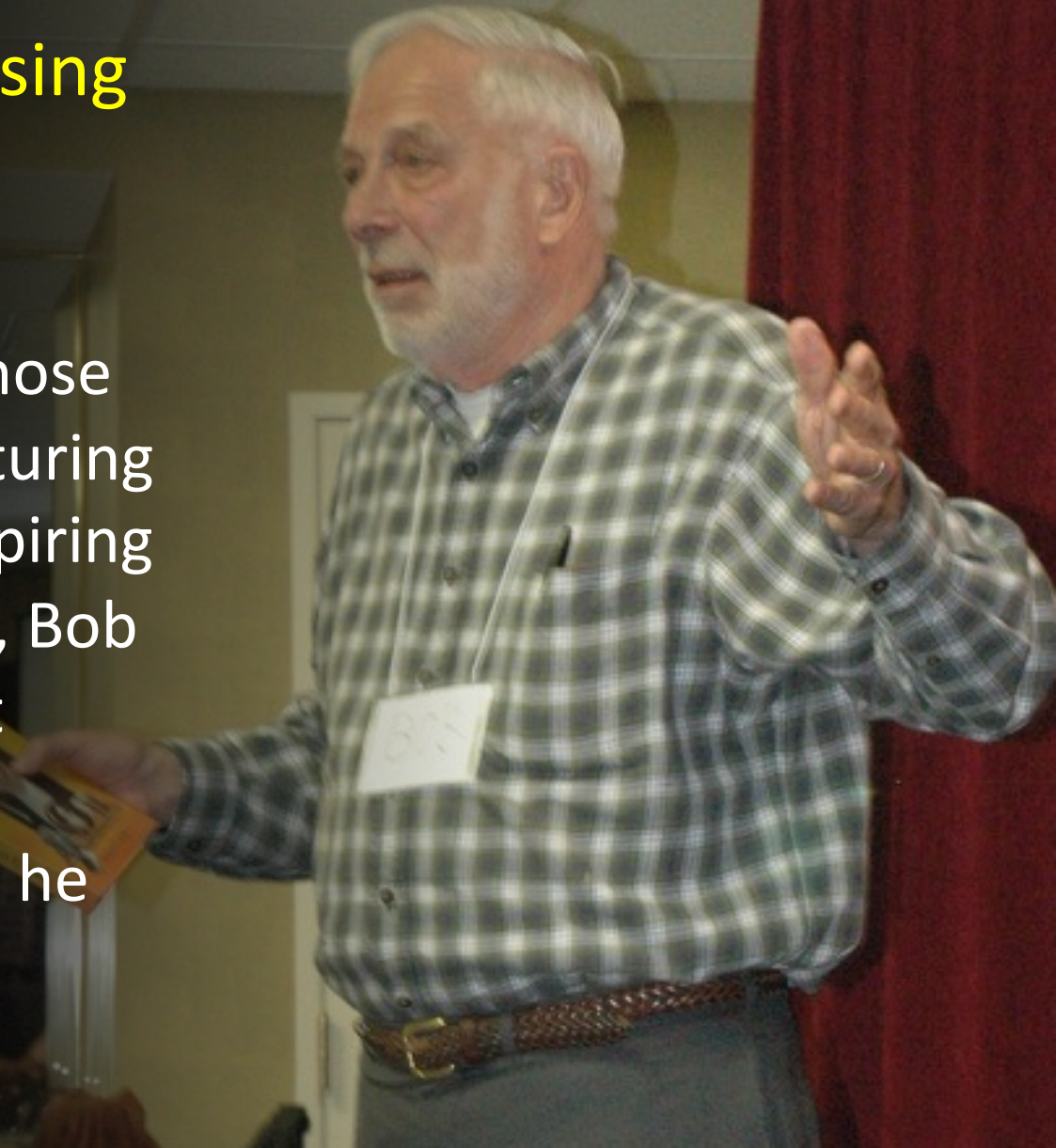


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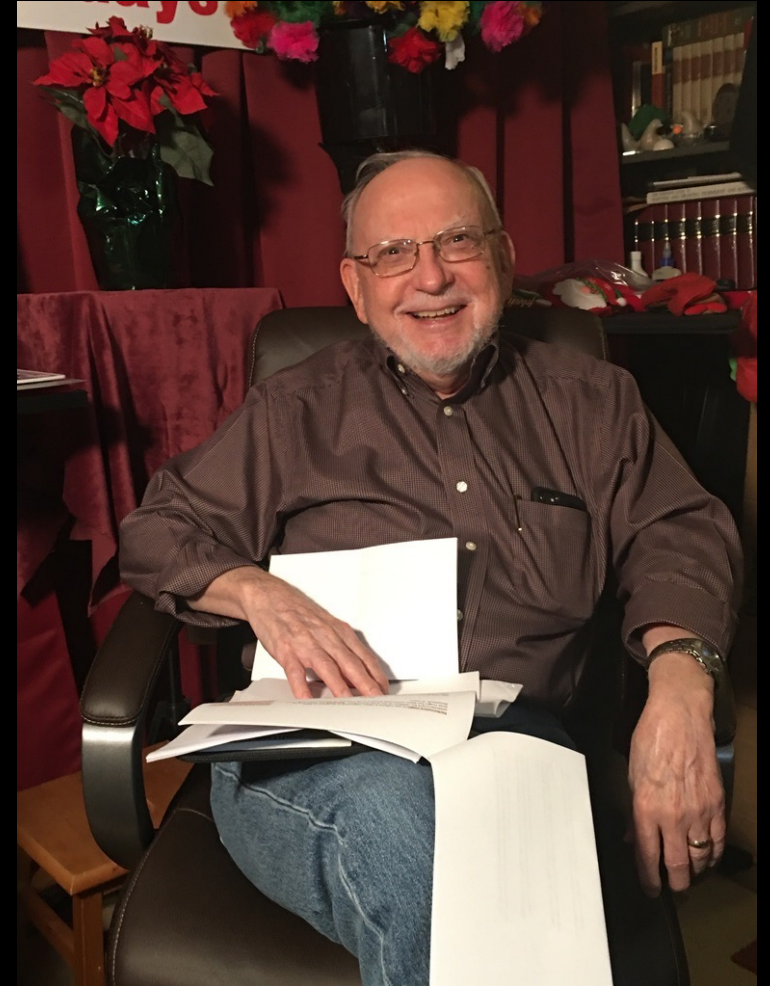
Finally, we are indebted to Jeff McBride whose *Mystery School* has created a safe and nurturing “play space” over the years for so many aspiring and developing magical entertainers. Here, Bob always found a supportive community that provided much needed feedback to his formative ideas and the platform on which he could share them.



# Looking ahead . . .

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Doctor Mike's suggestion for homework:



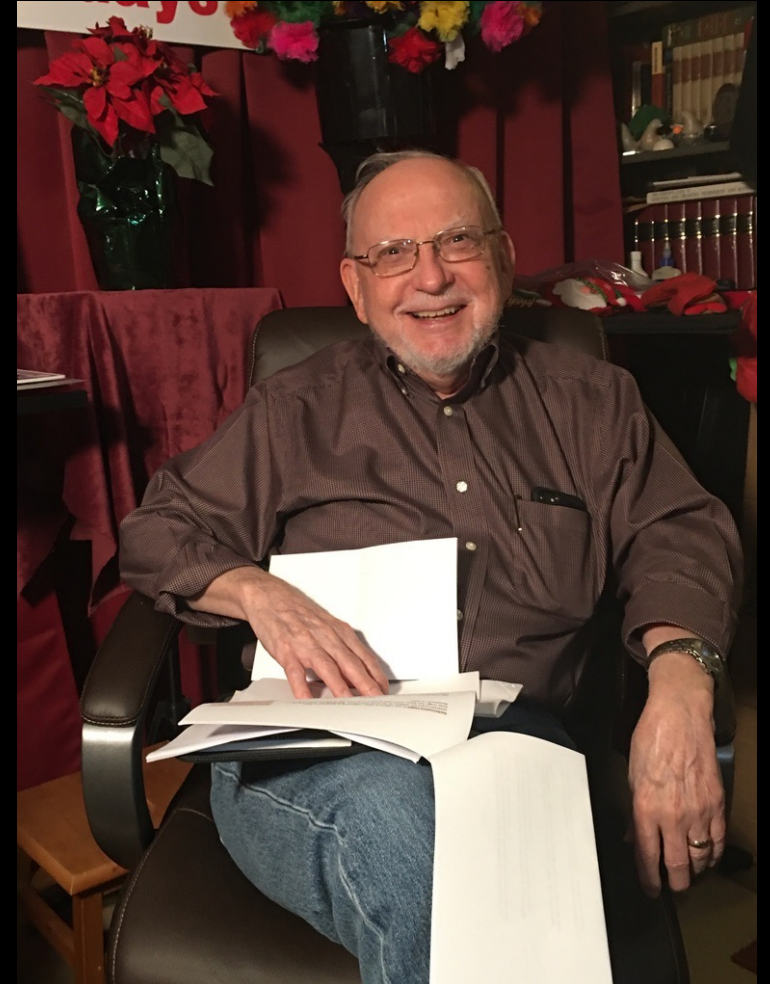


# Looking ahead . . .

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Doctor Mike's suggestion for homework:

May we, even as we do our card tricks,  
“meet and grow to love each other.”



# The Backstory for this Workshop:

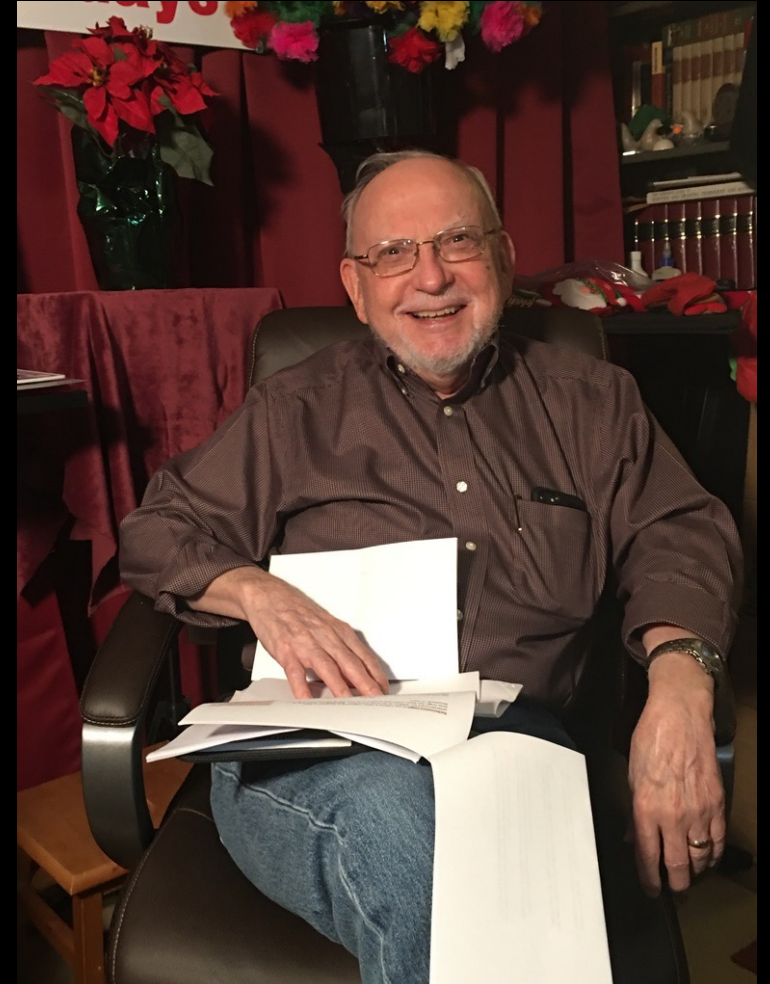
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Personal discussions in DeSoto

Identification of “themes”

Magic & Meaning Conferences,  
*McBride Magic & Mystery School*  
Las Vegas

PEPTalk Presentations



# The Backstory for this Workshop:

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## The Index— Identification of the 13 “themes”

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Paul Pruyser’s Three World Perspective

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Illusions

Magic

The Magician(s)

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## The Robert E. Neale Index

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A Resource for the Study of Robert E. Neale’s  
Trilogy of Magic

Prepared by Michael Smith and Geoffrey Grimes  
9/5/2018

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Special thanks again to Jeff and Abigail McBride for their inspiration for our study of Bob Neale and to Larry Hass, Bob's editor and publisher -

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