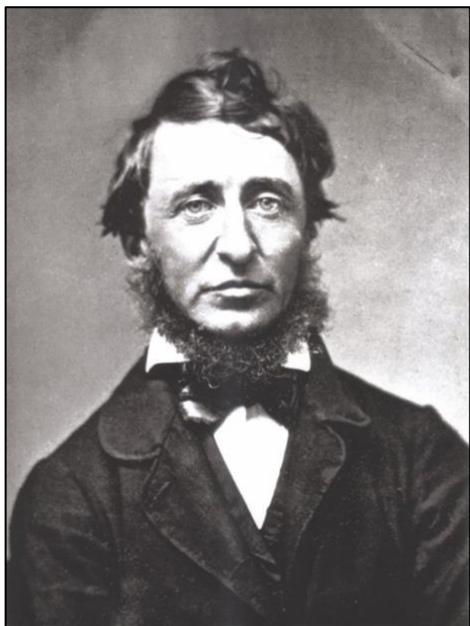


## “Simplify! Simplify! Simplify”—A Secret to Performing ‘Consequential Magic’

“Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify! Simplify! Simplify!”—Henry David Thoreau



This is one of the oft-quoted aphorisms of the nineteenth-century American naturalist, philosopher, and essayist Henry David Thoreau. The quote comes from his *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*. A quick Internet search reveals just how many applications his small piece of wisdom has enjoyed since its first appearance in 1854. For many readers of American letters, *Walden* is a fixture in the American Romantic interpretation of the place we hold in the natural world and the common moral sense we derive from our reflection on it, a theme that is almost a “truism” in Western culture.

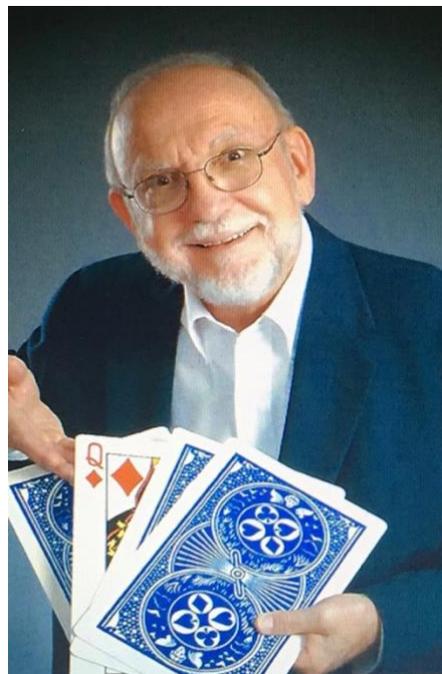
But before I drift too far from course, I think I see in Thoreau’s wisdom a connection to our magic. More to the point, Thoreau adds, “I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen.” For much of my career in magic, I’ve been a hoarder—you know what I mean? (And I bet you do!) Every convention, every lecture, every excursion to the brick and mortar in the past has only “fed the frenzy” to “spend more cash to stash more trash.” I’ve got two rental storage units and 150 plastic bins as evidence. I guess it’s something I had to do. I had to gorge myself at the trough.

And maybe feeding at the trough is a necessary stage in our maturation in magic. In his first posthumous book, *Teaching Magic*, Eugene Burger reminds us that “magic is a voyage of self-discovery.” Perhaps hoarding is important to help us, as Larry Hass has said, as step one, to “find good material.” Eventually, we draw from “the stash” those few pieces that we can make our own, pieces that will complement our own *persona*, magical effects that serve our role and purpose as magical performers. But bottom line, those pieces that, through practice, we can learn to do well. In other words, we begin “to simplify.”

I was led to this topic recently in a conversation with “Doctor” Mike. He and I often perform together in venues in “the southern sector.” We share the stage in library shows, in colleges, occasionally in performances for churches, and for civic organizations. If we aren’t performing together, we sometimes serve each other as “gaffers” and “go-fers.” At the expense of seeming haughty or arrogant, I have watched Mike really “grow his show.” Mike is really good!

Three factors make him really good as a performer:

1. For one thing, “Doctor” Mike has grown in his confidence before his audiences. He has mastered poise, staging, and the fine art of audience connection. He owns the platform, projecting joy, self-confidence, and delightful, genuine eagerness to please.
2. Second, he has mastered his performance pieces. Mike doesn’t perform works that involve complicated sleight of hand—he takes his cue again from Eugene who, disavowing the double



lift, claims he always goes for the subtlety over a sleight if the subtlety can get the job done with more ease. He performs tricks that all magicians know and many have performed. The key is, he has made them his own.

3. Third, Mike has finally perfected a script for his whole show that complements his persona, engages his audience with both wit and wisdom, and serves to elevate the art of magic that moves his audiences consequentially. And for that, I have seen them twice rise with a standing ovation.

Last week, Mike sent me his script, seeking a kindly but serious review. I was really moved. I had heard much of it in a show a month or so back, but *this* script framed his show with what Larry Hass has called for after “good material,” must be “good words.” Moreover, the script is focused on a theme, the very title of his show, “The Wizard of Us.” This title sets up a sequence of tricks that are consistent with the theme, and it closes the show—much as it begins—with an echo of his opening.



Mike begins with an appeal to the magic we all possess and the common role the magician shares with his audience: “I am a magician. You are a magician. Magic is all around us if we have ‘eyes to see and ears to hear.’ Like the characters in *The Wizard of Oz* we can discover the real magic is in us and if we work together, like Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion, we can create real magic. As a magician, it is my task to remind us that we live in a universe where surprises and deep mysteries are around the next corner.”

The flow of effects that follow are all in keeping with that theme—the exploration of the magic all around us. “I woke up that day to those magical

feelings of wonder, mystery, and the possibility of transformation.”

Then, after Mike has cajoled his audience to follow him and has demonstrated his good will, he offers them an invitation. “Magic can teach us to foster make-belief. When we make believe we use our imaginations. Magic is the space between reality and imagination. So, let’s use our imaginations.”

“Doctor” Mike connects his audience with our common past shared in the community of magicians and their gifts to the community-at-large: “There have been and are magicians in every culture. Magicians are those who, sometimes with only their words, radically change our perceptions and change our lives.”



Mike offers several examples of the gifts of the imagination familiar to any contemporary audience, first from popular culture—the movies, contemporary religious icons, and finally, reminding us all of our place in passing time and the healing magic we have all experienced within that passage. “We all have been given the gift of time. We begin with a profound question asked by the late poet Mary Oliver when she writes: ‘Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life.’”

By the end of his show, his audience has embraced “Doctor” Mike’s vision of community, prompting his closing invitation.

“Let us, the wizards of the world, help bring wholeness and healing to the world. We can bring some healing and wholeness if we learn to cooperate like those four friends in *The Wizard of Oz*, instead of competing with each other. Let me demonstrate the difference.”

Mike’s show reflects Thoreau’s principle of “simplicity.” Every word, every movement before the audience, each of his performance pieces, and all his “good words” are aligned with the principle of “simplicity.” It follows chronologically from Mike’s discovery of magic as a child to the grand revelation that we are all magicians. Mike shares Bob Neale’s charge that “it is the role of the stage magician to reveal the magic that is in all of us.” This twenty-first century “truism” can humanize any magic show by connecting we performers emotionally with our audiences and help open them to the discovery for themselves that, as Mike has said, “we live in a universe where surprises and deep mysteries are around the next corner.”

*Just sayin’ . . .*

Doc Grimes