

2007-05-20 Magic Illusions

Opening Words

We are here
on a mid-spring day, to worship,
to remember with amazement
that we are part of all that is,
that we do not have to earn the right to be here,
but only receive it with gladness. So we say:

As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek;
refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we have kindled this light in thanksgiving.

Sequence:

Does the Japanese maple branch first say
“Abracadabra” before its wine-colored leaves
unfold and lift their fingers to the sun?

Does dawn have to utter “alakazaam” in order to remove the purple covering of night and reveal the skillfully disappeared magician sun dressed in a cape of rose and pale yellow?

Do the volunteer cooks making savory meals in our kitchens to feed the homeless who gather at Faith Mission use wands to make their magic?

Do the volunteers who make coffee, or sell books, or staff tables, or usher our guests,
or balance the microphone sound, or play the piano, or lift their voice, or water the plants, or change the light-bulbs, or lift stains off the carpet, or precisely place the chairs, or hang paintings on the wall, or bring roses to the sweetly arranged bright boxes, or read from the pulpit, or kindle a

fire...do they each wear pointy hats with stars and moons when they join together in the sleight-of-hand called Sunday Celebration?

Does the completely wordless silence that now gathers around us like a wizard's wide cape have little magic of its own?

the great silence

Does the sheer fact that we are here mean that we are isolated from all that live outside these beautiful walls? Do not those we love and miss still knock at the door of our hearts? Are not their names, their memories, their stories alive inside us right now? Can the speaking of their names, the silent remembering of their faces, not make them appear right now?

naming

Does the sorcery of the rising sun, the magic of maples, the enchantment of roses, the magus of memory and the divination of hope not have their match in the spiritual alchemy of music?

Readings:

The First Reading comes from magician and illusionist David Blaine's book *Mysterious Stranger--- A Book of Magic*, written in 2002. If you want to see magicians David or Cris/Criss Angel levitate, type their name into Youtube, and you will find hundreds of examples.

In the 1800s, two women performers, Lulu Hurst and Annie Abbot performed feats of strength and resistance using the little known laws of inertia. Using that principle, you can successfully resist the combined strength of ten people. Stand facing a wall, with your arms fully extended and your palms flat against wall. Make sure your fingers point upward.

Then get ten volunteers and put them in size order, with the smallest one first in line. Have them stand in single file behind you, with each one's

hands outstretched and placed on the back or shoulders of the person in front of them. On the count of three, have them push with all their might, and try to pin you against the wall. Of course, they can't, and their own exertions will cause them to be thrown to the ground.

Because of the laws of inertia, each person in line will absorb the pressure of the person directly behind. The combined force of all the people behind cannot be transferred to the people in front of them, so as long as you can withstand the force of the person whose immediately behind you (the smallest person in the group) you'll be able to hold off the entire team.

The Second Reading is the wondrous poem of the Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Mary Oliver, who read last year at General Assembly.

The Ponds

Every year
the lilies
are so perfect
I can hardly believe

their lapped light crowding
the black,
mid-summer ponds.
Nobody could count all of them --

the muskrats swimming
among the pads and the grasses
can reach out
their muscular arms and touch

only so many, they are that
rife and wild.
But what in this world
is perfect?

I bend closer and see

how this one is clearly lopsided --
and that one wears an orange blight --
and this one is a glossy cheek

half nibbled away --
and that one is a slumped purse
full of its own
unstoppable decay.

Still, what I want in my life
is to be willing
to be dazzled --
to cast aside the weight of facts

and maybe even
to float a little
above this difficult world.
I want to believe I am looking

into the white fire of a great mystery.
I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing --
that the light is everything -- that it is more than the sum of each flawed
blossom rising and fading.
And I do.

Sermon

I've been fascinated by magicians since I was in college. This sweet guy named Steve and I worked together washing dishes in the cafeteria, and he performed a magic trick right in front of my eyes. He had told me he was studying magic, so naturally I asked him to show me a trick or two. He agreed to do so the next day. So at work that day he brings out three small metallic tumblers... you know, like for drinking water. He takes a two-inch wide ball and puts it under one of them, and then rearranges the tumblers in the old shell-game trick, but slow enough for me to figure out where the ball still was. I tapped the middle of the three confidently. I

knew it was there. He lifted it. Nothing. I said, “Hey, wait a minute. I followed that perfectly, it has to be in there.”

He laughed as I lifted up the tumbler to look inside. He said, “Here, I’ll do it again.” He put the ball underneath a tumbler, and this time in slow motion...and I mean REALLY slow motion...he moved the tumblers about. Again, I knew I was right when I tapped the left tumbler. The ball simply HAD to be under it.

It wasn’t. And Steve laughed at my very visible befuddlement. Then he said, to my surprise “Here, I’ll show you how I tricked you, even though we’re not supposed to reveal our secrets.

First he showed me that what I thought was a ball was actually a piece of foam rubber fluff.

It appeared to be solid, but wasn’t, and it didn’t weigh more than a piece of eiderdown. Then he showed me how he could crush the ball small as a pea and utterly conceal it in the two smallest fingers of his hand, and slip the thing under any tumbler he wanted right before my eyes without me seeing a thing. Underneath the tumbler it would immediately spring back to its ordinary size. He showed me up close how it was done, and I watched, amazed at the skill it took to do such a thing with confidence right up close. But then he got an impish grin in his face, and he said: “Of course, that doesn’t explain how THIS happens!” And with that, he lifted up one of the tumblers, and out came a ball three times the size of the little ball. I picked it up. It wasn’t made of soft material, but it was entirely hard rubber with no give whatsoever. And, the diameter of the ball was clearly greater than the diameter of the mouth of the tumbler. I couldn’t fit the ball back into the tumbler because it simply did not fit.

He giggled. I was mystified. Almost mad, because I realized that he had led me along by claiming to tell me how the trick was done, and then pulling the carpet out from underneath me by showing me a trick that reduced his revelation to a mere setup for a greater bewilderment.

And that meeting with Steve was the beginning of my fascination with the skill of magicians. Whether it’s watching Chris Angel saw himself in half

without a box, entirely surrounded by people on a stage, or being mystified as he appears to read peoples minds; or watching David Blaine levitate six inches off the sidewalk in a Brooklyn neighborhood; or watching my old magician friend Jim Vetter disappear, just like that, out of a sturdy wooden chest set on concrete against a solid brick corner in a basement...I simply love magic. I know they're all tricks, involving intelligence, craft, skill and dexterity. Each of these magicians claim that thinking is behind their tricks, planning and practice, not supernatural agency. None of them think they are channeling the forces of fate, or unknown and mysterious powers. They all admit, candidly, they do not believe that such powers or forces are anything but a kind of "magical thinking," or what is sometimes called "superstition," that is, rational thought dressing up as a kind of wishing well. Magical thinking is a desire for easy control over the things of this world without having to do any of the work, or even asking whether having control over things is a good idea to begin with.

Yes. Real magic is work. Effort. Magician Chris Angel says he worked *ten years* planning this "sawing in half trick." Others before him had done such tricks using different methods, often involving men who, through a terrible accident, had heads and torsos but no legs. Chris cuts his own body in half, however. And he is not inside a box. And obviously, he has his legs, so his illusion, his magic trick, must be created differently from the earlier version. But however he does it, he creates the illusion with skill, thoughtfulness and the work of questions and reason. He does not say a private "abracadabra" and wait for mysterious powers to descend.

Magic as an art form, a craft, a technique for dazzling people, has been around from ancient times. Egyptians were famous for their magicians. The Book of Exodus in the Torah speaks of them as having similar abilities to Moses, able to turn water into blood, walking sticks into cobras, etc. The New Testament, too, is filled with references to magicians, like Simon, the magician who wanted to purchase the magic he ascribed to the followers of Jesus. The early catacombs often portray Jesus walking around with a magician's wand. The Gospel of Matthew even begins, as I said one Christmas Eve, with the story of a group of Magi, or Magi, from Persia, following a moving star to find Jesus. (The English word "magic" comes from their name. This fanciful story about the traveling star would

have been a true horror story to people in the Roman era, since such an image called into question the dominant philosophy of the era. Many Romans believed that the stars were fixed to the crystal dome of the sky, and represented Fate, or the absolute control of superior powers over our little human lives. By saying that a star actually moved...not a planet mind you, but a true and immobile star... the Magi tale was saying that there were no mysterious forces or powers controlling human lives, and that all human beings are both terribly free and completely responsible for creating their own lives by thinking and reasoning for themselves.

But however fascinating its history, real magic requires skill and work. It requires thinking carefully, weighing everything, taking time. It requires living in this world.

But “magical thinking” does not. What is “magical thinking?” “Magical thinking” is an approach to life which acts as if magic is not work, but a real cause and effect governed by powers we simply don’t understand.

“Magical thinking” is an attitude of conflict-avoidance, a belief that problems can be solved in some invisible, effortless way, without having to use the cool, rational craft of magician magic. Liberals, conservatives, the religious and non-religious all dabble in “magical thinking.”

And when I say “magical thinking,” please, I am not just talking about people claiming that aliens built the great pyramid, or that the Nazca lines in Chile are runways just because some fool thinks they “look” like runways. Those kinds of things are just the frayed edge of “magical thinking.”

I want instead to talk about the more ordinary and common kinds of “magical thinking.” Expecting someone to read your mind is a form of magical thinking. Chris Angel only pretends to do it. Others actually think it’s a possibility. “He should have known I don’t like broccoli.” How could he have known that unless you told him? No one can read minds, not even David Blaine or Chris Angel, although both of them use rational tricks to make you think that. And since I agree that no one can really read minds, I think the best examples of spiritual life in this world are not new forms of talking with God, or reading God’s mind, but rather, all those times when we take seriously the fact that we have to talk with each other

instead. “She called me at ten o’clock in the evening. Can you believe that? I mean, she should know that’s too late.” How can she know that unless you say something? No one can read minds. I think that our spiritual work in this life is to live as if that is true. “I wish he would stop being so forward. He’s always right up here close to my face.” How will boundaries be set unless you set them? I assure you, no magician will come along to set them for us.

“Miranda looks so much like my aunt Sophie, who I just couldn’t stand. So I don’t even want to be in same room with Miranda because of that.” But Miranda is not your aunt Sophie, any more than the Nazca lines are runways. She is Katherine. Her own person. Your spiritual work, it seems to me, is to not magically make one into the other, but to work hard refusing to associate your feelings for Sophie with your feelings for Katherine. It’s to let Katherine be Katherine. Don’t magically change her into someone else.

“Magical thinking” has other common forms too. I’ve met people who ritually criticize themselves in advance, like sort of a preemptive strike, so that no one else will insult them or hurt them first. Their self-dumping...”Oh, I can’t sing worth a damn!” is like a magic spell to get people to say “Oh, no, you’re a good singer.”

I’ve met people who are “worried” when things are going really well in their life. So they unconsciously conspire to break a vase or knock over a glass as a way of magically making something negative happen so that their good life might be maintained. When you are feeling guilty that everything is going right, that too is magical thinking. I hear folks complain about how their religion makes them feel guilty, but I have observed that an awful lot of people seem to think that feeling guilty is rather a magic charm. They find it useful. If you feel guilty, then you are at least suffering a little bit and that should be sufficient to get folks off your back.

The spiritual life for me is not about other worlds, or other dimensions of reality. The spiritual life is about abandoning those other worlds so I can live in this one. Speak to the people I have to speak to. Tell the truth to folks I have not told the truth to before. I have to ask others about what

they want, need, or fear. It can't magically happen by mind-reading or worse, assuming they think just like me. They have to set their own boundaries with me, and I have to set my own boundaries with them. Neither Merlin nor David Blaine can speak for me. I have to speak for myself. Others have to speak for themselves, not ask others to do it for them. "Darlene, sweetheart, can you talk with Johanna? You know her pretty well, don't you? She always eats candy when we go to the movies with the most crinkly of wrappers. It's so distracting. Can you get her to stop it?" This person does not want to talk with Johanna herself. She wants to avoid the reality of speaking up herself, and, turning her supposed friend Darlene into a sort of human magic wand, a mere prop famous magicians apparently use to make things happen without effort.

Oh, we are still called to be the voices of those who are disenfranchised in this world. The call to social justice is just that...making the invisible visible, giving those literally scared speechless a real voice. But their voice, not ours.

The freedom and responsibility suggested by the mythic moving star is still upon us. It cannot magically be whisked away by our fears about what people might think of us if we speak up to them. It cannot magically be defeated by the sheer number of our disappointments stacked against it as protection, or by any sense of entitlement that still dogs our tracks.

David Blaine makes it clear in his reading that his kind of magic is NOT a form of magical thinking. He is not creating escapes away from this world, but goes instead right into the middle of this world, right to the basic physics of inertia. He applies the physics of inertia to work a wonder, knowing that many people don't know that application of inertia. And folks like Chris Angel deal with peoples fears about death, decay and loss with their magic. He cuts himself in half, makes folks disappear, and pulls threads out of his eyeball to address that almost universal discomfort with the transience of all things.

He even calls literalist biblical readings into question by effortlessly walking across a swimming pool filled with people, a clear reference to the "walking on water" story preserved in the Gospels. Real magic is never about miracles, he is saying with blunt clarity.

And it seems to me that magicians like Blaine and Angel, even though they are clearly showmen like the great Universalist P.T. Barnum, are telling the truth about what it means to live an honest spiritual life a lot better than those who try to convince me that this world is something to escape from, a place where I deserve to be “left behind” in hellfire because I do not convince myself, like the late Jerry Falwell did, that God speaks to me and tells me to dismiss most of humanity with a wave of my hand.

What these modern magicians are telling me is that even though it is not perfect, deathless, and flawless, even though it decays and falls apart, this world is still the home of our spirits. They are not telling me I need to be “saved” *from* the world by denial, magical thinking, and escapism. They are telling me the world is bright enough as it is. Dazzling enough even though it’s fragile, and tinged with decay and loss. In Mary Oliver’s lovely words:

Still, what I want in my life
is to be willing to be dazzled --
to cast aside the weight of facts

and maybe even to float a little
above this difficult world.
I want to believe I am looking

into the white fire of a great mystery.
I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing --that the light is
everything -- that it is more than the sum of each flawed blossom rising
and fading. And I do.

The mystery is here, she says, not somewhere else. It’s a matter of perspective, rising above the fears. The light IS everything, and it shines even from the flawed blossoms, and torn lily pads. You have only to look, or better, think...not magically, but honestly and clearly and with gratitude. I don’t know where the sun comes from anymore than I know where that large ball which dropped out of Steve’s tumbler came from. The magic of great magicians just invites me to live my own life, a life of

joyful duty, in the here and now, doing the work, taking the time, thinking things through, paying attention the physical rules, the inertia, the gravity, the honesty and the craft of living, all so that I can dazzle and be dazzled in that light.

Offering

Spell

Just like that! Poof! It's spring!
Were you watching closely?
Were you fooled?
The snowflakes changed into leaves.
The bitter cold changed into soft green
blades of grass, and ice changed into
rubber-stemmed dandelions. It was a good trick,
I think you'll have to admit.
Excellent craft on the part of the magician,
whose name I suddenly have forgotten.
Funny how that happens
when the light gets into your eyes,
and your amazement is so profound
that nothing, even names, seems
to find any room inside.
Just like that! The service is ending!
The "We are here" is changing
right before your eyes...abracadabra-- to
a "We are singing" and a "We are leaving for a while until poof! the choir
appears and the concert begins. It will happen by magic.
Just like that!