

Bunny Boy Collective

"If you take any activity- any art, any discipline, any skill take it and push it as far as it has ever been pushed before, push it into the wildest edge of edges, then you force it into the realm of real magic. "

-Tom Robbins

Astonishment is Our Natural State of Mind.

What?

The magic arena is a place of infinite possibilities and there's room to play whatever game you want. But just for a moment let's play the game of pushing the art into the wildest edge of edges.

All right. Here we go. Think back to your first magical encounter. The seed experience that first excited you then compelled you to do magic yourself. Someone did a trick for you that made you gasp. For me it was when my uncle Paul smashed a newspaper-covered glass through a table top. A moment of ecstatic bliss where every thought was pulled from my face leaving nothing more than empty space.

My first instinct was not to hear a joke or be entertained or to be told a story or to make small talk but to experience that moment again and again. And it's natural to think if you could learn to do magic yourself, then...well, you could have this experience all the time. But then about three seconds later you realize that it's fun to know secrets and to do things for people that they can't figure

out. And suddenly you're out of the astonishment game and into the ego game and with hard work and some good jokes and maybe even into the money game.

So now you're a long way from home and from that first virgin gasp that motivated the journey. And now you're performing some of your high-entertainment-value effects and despite yourself a profound moment of astonishment is unleashed. It doesn't happen every time but when the moon is right and the conditions are just so...there it is, a moment of total whitelight astonishment. And you look at those astonished faces and maybe you're not sure what to say, or you feel a little guilty, or a bit uncomfortable because it's stopped the flow of your show or changed your easy relationship with the audience. Something powerful has happened. But everyone knows it's just a trick and you're "just a magician" so there's this dysfunctional relationship going on and no one's sure what to do with this strange experience including yourself.

But in general you're pretty happy because on some level you recognize this as a big win until someone says, "I wish the children were here to see this." And for a moment you feel your whole game fall apart. Doing magic for children can be glorious. But the frequently voiced opinion that the experience of astonishment is a childish thing makes you wonder about what's really going on.

If you listen carefully you'll also hear things like "that made me feel like a child again" or "you made me feel like a little kid at the circus." And if you think about this, you'll see that what these astonished adults are really trying to say, even though they're not consciously aware of it, is that for a brief moment, *they experienced a clear, primal state of mind that they **associate** with a child's state of mind.* Somehow the adult experience of astonishment triggered some feeling of what it felt like to be a child.

I'm going to say this again because it's so much fun using the italics button: *The experience of astonishment is the experience of a clear, primal state of mind that they **associate** with a child's state of mind.* It's the same experience that seduced you into performing magic in the first place. And if you follow these footprints it takes you right up to the crumbling edge of everything we think we are...and just beyond to a state of mind we experienced naturally as small children but that society devalued then

made taboo as we became adults.

Here's basically how it works, give or take a few metaphors.

You come into the world a blank slate. No ideas about who you are or what anything is. You're just being. And it all feels great ...because there are no options, or opinions or judgments. There is no right or wrong. Everything is everything. That's what you see in a baby's eyes. Pure child's mind. Then, very quickly, we learn stuff. The names of ten thousand things, who we are, what we're supposed to be, what's good and bad according to the current rules of the game. And you organize all of this information into little boxes. And when any new information comes along you file it in the appropriate box.

Right now you might be filing these very thoughts into your whack-o ideas box. I understand. You're just doing your job. You've been trained to do this since birth. You have thus created your world-view.

There's no particular reality to any of this. But it's in your head and you know the territory and it's where all of your thoughts do their thinking. But we quickly forget what was there in the first place because these thousands of little thought-boxes are stacked up so tight that the original clear space of child's mind is completely covered up. It's not gone. It's just blocked by this wall of over-stuffed boxes.

And then along comes a focused piece of strange in the form of a magical effect. Let's say this book vanishes from your hands. "Poof" no book. Your trained mind races into action and tries to put the piece of strange into one of its rational boxes. But no box will hold it. *At that moment of trying to box the unboxable your world-view breaks up. The boxes are gone. And what's left? Simply what was always there. Your natural state of mind. That's the moment of astonishment.* The sudden experience of going from boxes to no boxes. *If you can keep the fear-response from arising you have the experience of going from a cluttered adult mind to the original clear space. Gee, it almost makes you feel like a kid again.*

For most people the moment lasts under ten seconds. Then because we crave the security of our missing world-view, we

quickly build a new box. The "it-went-up-his-sleeve" box or the "it-was-all-done-with-mirrors" box" or even the "I-'don't-know-what-happened-but-I-know-it-was-a-trick" box. And that's all it takes. One thought, one guess, even a wrong one, and the boxes all come back, natural mind gets covered up, and the moment of astonishment is over.

Astonishment is not an emotion that's created. It's an existing state that's revealed.

So what's the point?

This new model redefines the magician's valuable role in our culture as an "astonishment guide" who can help others experience their natural state of mind. This is a galactic leap from the magician's current role as novelty entertainer, or super con-man or Mr. Ego. The center of magic has always been the therapeutic experience of our natural state of mind. But that primal experience is so powerful and the taboo of "losing" our adult mind is so great that we water down the experience with jokes and excuses and "hey, it's just a trick."

When the experience of astonishment starts to be recognized as a highly-valued destination, the win/lose magician vs spectator game starts to dissolve. Suddenly you're both on the same team...equally responsible for getting the most out of the moment.

More experienced astonishee's who've learned to surrender to the moment and sink into the astonishment will be rewarded with a deeper, more sustained experience. Others who feel compelled to fight the moment or treat it as a puzzle to be figured out will get what they pay for...non-astonishment.

There, is a genuine difference in the quality of people's experience of magic once they understand the new model and take responsibility for the moment. I've had the participants who "get-it" trying to explain it to those who don't. One astonishee said it was like the difference between tossing down a beer and savoring a fine wine. Someone else referred to it as "gourmet astonishment."

This model reshapes the perceptions of people who feel "I was astonished but I know it was all just a trick, so what I experienced couldn't have been real or very valuable."

Because now it's understood that the astonishment and the tricks are not the same thing. The astonishment is real. It's a brief flash of our natural state of mind. A place we should all experience more often.

The tricks are simply tools to help unleash the moment.

You and your astonishee can still have fun and tell jokes and play together, but now there's an understandable therapeutic value to the game. A definite win for all players.

In a nutshell: You're using magical Illusions to dissolve cultural illusions in order to experience a moment of something real.

The art of astonishment, when pushed into the wildest edge of edges, is the art of doing real magic.

So now it's up to you. This is not something that can be mass-produced and stuffed into a vinyl packet-trick wallet. This will take everything you've learned about how people's perceptions and illusions interact and then some. You may even want to stop performing for awhile to break free of old patterns.

Until then, even if magic is just your way to relax and have fun (which is a profoundly worthwhile goal in itself), there are still a few things you can do to help create this new game. If the situation is right, let your audiences know that the moment of astonishment is a quick flash of their natural state of mi[ld. Tricks are tools. Astonishment is real. You're just helping them to unleash the moment. Some people will instantly relate to this, others will make funny faces. But if this one idea gets out and takes hold, it could dramatically transform people's perceptions of magic and magicians...quickening the evolution of the art.

A bigger challenge is to train yourself not to step on the moment. I'm still working on it myself. When you hit that rare white-light moment of pure astonishment. don't tell a joke or apologize or hurry on to the next trick. Resist the urge to run away from the fire you've worked so hard to build. Relax and enjoy the heat and let your astonishee's have a complete experience.

Surfing in the center of the big gasp is at the heart of magic. Gasp-surfing isn't always possible because theatrical or commercial considerations will take center stage. Although even here you can splash around in the moment an extra beat or two to let it resonate.

But if you're in a relaxed setting and you've already helped your participants understand the new game, then you can start exploring the edges. These experimental performances are your laboratory. So whenever possible check the results by interviewing your subjects to find out their real experience and perceptions ...so you can learn how to better extend or deepen or enhance their astonishment experience next time.

Much of this is unexplored territory for me too. I'm currently straddling my past and current approaches to magic and can feel my pants starting to rip. These conflicting visions are what make up the contents of these books. So now what? So now we pull back from the edge to the security of our current Close-up culture, take a break for some milk and cookies, then begin our search for some unboxable pieces of strange.