

Sleight of Mind

Why We All Need a Daily Dose of Brain Magic

Website: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/keith-barry/ted-talk-hypnosis_b_3728458.html

Once, when my youngest child was still in kindergarten, I stumbled onto the scene of a disaster. The ship was sinking and drowning passengers were flung far and wide, except for the lucky few who had made it into the laundry basket. Oops, I mean the life boat.

"How the heck do you expect me to make lunches today, if you use up my sandwich bags?" I demanded.

My son Aidan looked up from the couch where he was conducting emergency rescue operations with all 28 of his stuffed animals. "But Mom, this is the Titanic!" he said. "The passengers need those bags to breathe!"

I looked again. Sure enough, some of the smaller animals had been stuffed into sandwich bags on the wide blue carpet, or rather, on the wide blue sea. The bags were life preservers, complete with oxygen.

The first lesson of parenthood is that imagination can be a messy business. The second lesson -- and the most important one -- is that your imagination can create a kind of brain magic that is the essential ingredient for happiness.

I was reminded of this recently when I watched the joyful Irish illusionist Keith Barry conduct a TEDTalk where he creatively deceives us into thinking he can perform feats like drive a car at top speed while blindfolded, shatter a coke bottle with a shard of glass and a dash of negative energy, and accurately predict where a spike was hidden beneath a series of paper cups. Barry is brilliant at convincing us that such things are possible, despite the fact that he admits right up front that "magic is all about directing attention."

Why do we let him manipulate our minds so easily? Because we want to be deceived. Each of us desperately hopes, in some dark secret corner of our hearts, that there really is such a thing as second sight or voodoo magic. This isn't only because we love to be entertained, but because we long to be transported into other worlds. Worlds, perhaps, where we don't have bills to pay, nagging spouses, job deadlines, or whining children. Worlds where we are heroic and miracles happen.

The thing is, we all have the power to make our own brain magic. I do this every day as a novelist, sitting for hours at a time and making up stories, letting my mind roam free and getting myself in that weird zone where my characters take over. I might not be driving a speeding car blindfolded, but I effectively have "second sight" and see through somebody else's eyes just like Barry, as my characters react to situations on the page -- situations I throw at them, mind you -- in ways I wouldn't necessarily react myself.

I know many people who are lucky enough to unleash their brain magic in various ways. My husband, a software engineer who works on tall red robots, spends his days imagining these robots working alongside humans. He has literally stepped into the world he once inhabited by reading science fiction writers like Heinlein and Asimov as a kid. My brother, a ballroom dancer, transports himself every Friday night by donning a white shirt and red sash for his tango lessons, unleashing his own brain magic to transform himself from being a new dad and mild university employee into a macho bullfighter or lusty Spanish lover. One of my good friends transports herself -- and her audience -- playing roles as varied as schoolgirls and Greek goddesses on stage.

Those of us who have children can see how this brain magic develops. Young kids think they're invisible when they close their eyes and firmly believe in the tooth fairy. They imagine themselves as pony princesses, flowers, and eagles despite the relentless monotony of schoolwork and endless commands from adults to "grow up" or "stop acting silly." If we're lucky, we -- and our children -- hang onto our brain magic anyway, through creative jobs or artistic outlets, or through loving other people who allow us to unleash our inner illusionists.

In my favorite summer movie this year, *Before Midnight*, Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy play a couple in a relationship that has hit a rocky stretch. Yet, even in the throes of an argument over seemingly insoluble issues, the characters are able to use a little brain magic to role play and transport themselves quite literally into another scene -- one with a much happier ending. I could feel everyone in the audience around me willing them to make it, just as we cheer Barry on as he performs his magic, hoping he really can take those corners blindfolded.

When we're able to hang onto our brain magic, we can effectively thwart our own feelings of failure and unhappiness by revising our own narratives. Instead of mourning the marriage that fell apart or the real estate deal that soured, we're able to redirect our minds toward the positive lessons learned from bad decisions, failures, rejections, and even grief. We can blissfully imagine ourselves not in laundry baskets of soiled socks and T-shirts, but in life rafts floating among magical talking animals, as in *Life of Pi*.

Instead of falling victim to our sinking egos or sorrowful memories, with brain magic we are able to see ourselves as heroes ready to risk it all for love or laugh in the face of danger. We know on a profound level that, as humans, we are flawed creatures, yet we still have faith in ourselves, love for one another, and a passion for whatever adventures our brilliant imaginations can conjure, no matter how messy they might be.
