

PROJECT MAGIC by Arthur Kurzweil

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Magical effects attract us for different reasons. Sometimes we like a trick because of how it looks. Magic dealers and others often describe effects as being “pretty.” Sometimes we like a trick because it is ingenious. We might buy a trick that we never perform but that we admire for its brilliant or clever design. A trick can be a toy and a trick can be a teaching tool. A trick can be entertaining and a trick can be educational.

Gospel magic is just one example of the use of tricks as visual aids for the teacher. There are ministers, priests and rabbis who find that an occasional trick stimulates the mind and imagination, opens it up to new ideas and illustrates fundamental notions and theological concepts. Some psychologists use magic effects in their private sessions to provide metaphors that reflect how our minds work. Salespeople use magic tricks in their efforts to make contact with their accounts. Pediatricians use magical effects to make friends with young patients, and science teachers use them to share principles of the natural world. It would be enlightening to learn of all the varied ways that magicians, both professionals and amateurs, use the effects that capture our imaginations.

An extraordinary example of an innovative way that magic is being used is David Copperfield’s Project Magic. On November 1 and 2, 2002, the first international Project Magic convention and workshop was held in the theater of the MGM Grand, Las Vegas where David Copperfield performs. In the evening, David Copperfield offered his superb show; during the day, physical therapists, physicians, hospital volunteers, healthcare professionals, and magicians gathered for two days to share twenty years of experiences and enthusiasm about this life-changing therapeutic activity.

The idea is simple, but as it is said, “Genius is the ability to recognize the obvious.” In essence, health care professionals have found that the use of magic as a therapeutic tool for their patients is and can be highly effective in many ways. During the first day of the conference, for fifteen minute or half hour intervals throughout the entire day, reports were offered by occupational therapists, physical therapists, physicians, psychologists and healthcare volunteers, each of who told of the remarkable results they have achieved or witnessed through the use of magic. There were representatives from Belgium, Austria, Mexico, across the United States, Canada and elsewhere.

The way it works is this: local magicians get together with healthcare professionals, teaching the professionals how to do tricks and suggesting ways to teach them to patients.

Then, the professional healthcare workers teach them to select patients who they are treating.

Imagine, for example, that someone is in an automobile accident and experiences a serious head injury. The patient may find a physical action that was once simple to be almost impossible. Before the accident, if asked to raise his arms out in front of him with his palms facing down, the patient would have found it to be the simplest of commands. If he were then asked to turn his arms and hands so that his palms faced each other, this 90-degree rotation would be easily done. Now, after the accident and head injury, the patient can barely do either of these most natural actions.

The therapy for such a patient includes exercise, of course. The brain and limbs need to learn how to communicate with each other again. The medical professional needs to prescribe tried and true activities to help the person to move more effectively. Project Magic simply says, “Use magic tricks. They are fun, they require the patient to learn the same skills or exercise the same muscles or stimulate the same parts of the body, and the tricks have some extra advantages as well.”

For the right patient, the mastery of a magic effect is even more than the doctor ordered. The automobile accident victim, in learning the trick (which might take you five minutes to learn but can take him weeks or months or more), is using his memory, mastering the sequence, moving the muscles that need routine and repetitive motion, and stimulating the nerves that need to be revived. A rope trick, for example, where the magician can make a knot in the rope without letting go of its ends while the volunteer who imitates the magician cannot, can be a perfect exercise the patient. The trick requires the performer to grasp both ends of the rope with his hands and fingers, to raise his arms out in front of him, to turn his arms, rotating them in various ways – in other words all of the same things that a boring, traditional therapeutic exercise requires, but with the added element that it is a cool trick! What could have been a monotonous exercise became a trick to practice, perform, and about which the patient can feel pride.

One of the many videos shown at the conference was a brief glimpse of a young girl, not even a teenager, who had a stroke. The few seconds of the video that were presented happen to capture the very moment when the girl, who was depressed and almost defeated by her predicament, performed a trick for the first time. The trick was “The Leaping Rubber Band,” a classic effect that appears in many magic books for beginners. It is so simple for most of us to learn that we hardly ever think of the complex operation this trick actually is. Memory, sequencing, individual finger movement, eye-hand coordination and more, all come together for a moment of illusion and wonder. The few seconds of the videotape brought tears to the eyes of many participants at the conference, just feet away from the casino tables, slot machines, and fun. The amazement and pride on the faces of the people to whom the girl showed this trick was only eclipsed by the joy and satisfaction that registered on her usually otherwise somber face. Her countenance lit up like a beam of light as she realized her magnificent achievement. Her hard work paid off: she did the exercises her doctor wanted her to do, she mastered the trick, she

entertained some people, and she felt great about it all. This is the magic of Project Magic.

The second day of the Project Magic Convention and Workshop brought participants together with David Copperfield. While he did stop in a few times during the first day to greet the convention participants, Copperfield spent the entire morning of the second day leading a moving and informative workshop with participants. Copperfield shared the stage with Julie Dejean, the administrator of Project Magic. In 1982, when Dejean, who is a warm, articulate and energetic professional, was an assistant director of the occupational therapy department at the Daniel Freeman Hospital in Inglewood, California, she was asked to attend a meeting with David Copperfield to discuss the use of magic in therapy. She then became a member of the team that worked to develop the structure for the Project Magic program. Julie Dejean and David Copperfield have worked with one another over the years to share the concept of Project Magic throughout the world. Together they have presented over 75 Project Magic workshops.

Copperfield and Dejean both talked about some particularly memorable cases where magic made a huge difference for patients. They also showed video and film footage, each clip more moving than the next, where workshop participants saw the use of magic with real patients and how their lives have been changed by using magic effects as therapeutic tools. Copperfield, who has already proven himself as a remarkable performer on television and the stage, was equally impressive in this intimate workshop setting. He was warm, personal, humorous, sensitive, and generous with questioners and with his time. For both the therapists and the magicians at the workshop, receiving instruction from Copperfield himself on how to perform a rope trick and a rubber band effect was a thrill. Copperfield not only patiently taught the trick; he also gave some important, down to earth performance tips.

Perhaps the highlight of Copperfield's involvement in the workshop came when he spoke to the gathering about why he loves performing and what magic means to him. With the enthusiasm of a beginner and with eyes beaming with the light of a true master, David Copperfield spoke about the impact that amazed facial expressions and body language have on him. He described a moment in his show from the night before (attended by many of the Project Magic participants) when, after a certain effect, a woman in the first row jumped completely out of her seat and stood before the stage in total amazement, her body and head gesturing as though she was in a different reality and just witnessed the impossible. It is that amazement, that pure wonder, which inspires Copperfield to do the work that he does.

The first international Project Magic convention and workshop occurred simultaneous to the publication of David Copperfield's Project Magic Handbook, an exquisitely produced 291 page, hardcover book written by Genii's own Richard Kaufman. While, the book presents the history of Project Magic and describes how to start a Project Magic program, the heart of the book consists of about 50 magic effects, expertly described and illustrated, that can be used effectively in a therapeutic setting.

Each trick includes therapeutic information including the requirements to perform the effect (typical examples would be “midrange flexion and extension of fingers,” and “cognitive skills and sequencing,” to name just a few.) Also included with each trick are therapeutic goals, and instructions on how each trick can be adapted to patients who might not be able to perform certain functions but can use alternate means to achieve the same goals. The book ends with Therapeutic Quick Reference Guides that help the health care worker to select tricks based on the goals that would be most appropriate for the particular patient or patient population. It is interesting to note that in addition to tricks that require physical movement, the book includes some mentalism effects for patients who require improved cognitive skills and communication skills. All of the tricks in the book have as one of their goals increased self-esteem. It is not difficult to imagine how the successful mastery of a trick and its subsequent successful performance for others can have a wonderful, healing impact on the person who has performed it.

Many dedicated people have contributed to the growing influence of Project Magic. Winona Dickson, a delightful and dedicated individual, and a professional on the staff at Kansas Foundation for Medical Care in Topeka, Kansas has been Coordinator of the project since 1992. Walther Richter, President of Project Magic Austria, and Ruth Joselevitz, president of Project Magic Mexico, served as the International Conference Coordinators and were instrumental in making the gathering the fantastic success that it was. One group that was particularly well represented at the convention and workshop were members of Voluntarias Judeo Mexicanas, a Jewish women’s volunteer organization in Mexico that has gotten quite involved in Project Magic, serving as assistants to medical professionals who help to teach the magic effects to patients. It was obvious and inspiring to see these dedicated and engaging volunteers as they shared their enthusiasm for this profoundly life-transforming effort.

Magic needs no justification. The amazement of a spectator, the surprise of the volunteer, and the gasp of an audience have been all magicians have needed since time immemorial. But as participants in the Project Magic convention and workshop learned, magic can also be an extraordinary tool in unexpected ways. Magic entertains, magic instructs, magic heals.

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