

Magick for Skeptics

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By Elyce Picciotti

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It is not my intention today to get you to believe in elves or fairies or even in magic, the title of this piece notwithstanding. It is my hope, that as Unitarians, I can get you to at least temporarily suspend your disbelief long enough to hear my words with an open mind, and simply to accept that there are indeed “more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” That we are finite beings in an infinite universe of infinite possibility. There will always be more to learn, and as we grasp each new piece of the infinite puzzle, our ability to affect our own lives and those of the people and the world around us grows.

I will, of course, make some assumptions along the way. And assumptions can be dangerous things -- especially the ones we don't know we make. For example, we all assume, at least those of us who were born in this country and grew up speaking English, that we speak a common language. But do we? Can we not all think of occasions where our meaning or the intent of someone else's words was misinterpreted or misunderstood? In this, people who began by speaking a different language actually have an advantage, simply because they do not make the assumption. So, slang, jargon, dialects, different educational backgrounds, pronunciation, even hearing loss or acuity, all creep in to muddy the waters.

And that's just for the easy language that we use every day. Some of the more esoteric concepts can get really complicated. I guarantee you that my understanding of the word “magick” is different than probably anyone else's in this room. But what about words like love or peace or freedom or liberty. Home, family, truth. And once you get into religion -- ALL bets are off.

So, while I will make assumptions, I will try very hard to point them out, and to make them as broad and generally acceptable as possible. And I will be very careful to define my terms -- not just the esoteric ones like magick with a “k“, but more importantly, the ones that are, in my opinion, too often used without explication, and thereby often lead to enormous confusion and conflict.

What do we mean when we say that we “know” something to be “true”? According to the American Heritage Dictionary, to know means “to perceive directly with the senses or mind. To have firmly secured in the mind or memory”. But does that actually make something true? A million years ago, men *knew* that fire was alive. Several thousand years ago, men *knew* that the earth was the center of the universe. Not long ago, men *knew* that the world was flat. What we know to be true has changed dramatically over the millennia. Just think what we may *know* tomorrow!

Can we even state, with any confidence that *science* can prove things to be true. Any decent scientist will inform you that even the most rigorous scientific experiments and

the most careful observation, can only *disprove* a hypothesis or theory -- not prove it. The more scientists learn the more they realize they don't know. They do not even pretend that they could factor in every possible variable into an experiment, only perhaps, every conceivable one. And what we can conceive is limited by what we know, what we've experienced, and our perceptive abilities. So the best science can give us is strong probabilities. Indeed, most scientists would tell you that "scientific proof" is an oxymoron, kind of like military intelligence and jumbo shrimp.

In 1947, Thomas Kuhn, a young professor at Harvard, was asked to organize a set of lectures on the origins of 17th century mechanics. As preparation, he began tracing the subject back to its roots in Aristotle's *Physics*. Kuhn was stunned by the total and complete wrong-headedness of Aristotle's ideas that all matter was composed of spirit, form and qualities, the qualities being air, earth, fire and water. How could the man who single-handedly invented the deductive method be so flatly wrong about the nature of the physical universe? The answer came to him when he realized that he had to look at the universe through Aristotle's eyes rather than his own.

This stroke of inspiration resulted in Kuhn's developing the idea that every scientist, indeed all of humanity, works within a distinctive paradigm, a kind of intellectual gestalt that colors the way the universe is perceived -- a framework of presuppositions, a background of shared assumptions.

People become very attached to the prevailing paradigm. As Kuhn states: "There is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community. The transfer of allegiance from one paradigm to another is a conversion experience that cannot be forced." But paradigms, even globally accepted paradigms, do shift. And when they do whole bodies of knowledge can be both gained and discarded. It's not the nature of reality that changes, but our perceptions of reality.

The current prevailing paradigm includes molecular biology, genetic engineering, nuclear physics, quantum mechanics, neuro linguistic programming, magnetism, air travel and cyberspace. Aristotle's included none of these. Poor old Aristotle could not have begun to comprehend the things that make up our reality. Almost every aspect of our world today would have been considered impossible magick in Aristotle's day. Yet reality has not changed. We have.

To *believe* (also according the American Heritage Dictionary) means "to accept as true or real, to credit with veracity, have confidence in, or trust."

I ask you to accept that there is precious little we *know* as absolute or truly self-evident, but there is much that we believe -- either because we ourselves have perceived it, or because others whom we trust have perceived it and described it.

Uh oh.

Boy does *that* open a can of worms. I myself have never seen a volcano erupt. Nor have I ever seen an angel. I have seen neither dinosaurs nor elves. I've never seen a quark, or even an atom. I've never even had a hallucination. But I have had dreams. So how do we “know” that someone else has really experienced something or that the language they have used to convey their perceptions accurately describe the experience?

The fact of the matter is -- for the most part we don't. But a combination of reason, logic, deduction and our own experiences make some things more believable than others. They fit comfortably within our rational view of the universe -- our prevailing paradigm.

Other things require greater or lesser leaps of faith. We believe them because we want to, or because we are afraid not to. These things we label religion or mysticism or magic and witchcraft. But I've never been much good at faith leaping—even when I've wanted to. In fact, I tend to be a skeptic among skeptics. So how is it that I've come to you today to talk about something as esoteric as magick?

Let me start by telling you what I do believe. Hopefully, these are down to earth and realistic enough for you to accept without a great deal of effort.

I believe that Renes Descartes was right when he said “I think, therefore I am.” (I do find it interesting that it was not until the 17th century that man could rationally prove his own existence!)

I believe that the universe exists. (OK, it might all just be a figment of my imagination, but since I have to deal with it regardless, I might just as well accept that you are just as real as I am.)

I believe in the laws of conservation of matter and energy, which state that matter and energy can be neither created nor destroyed, but only changed in form.

I believe in the law of cause and effect, and the Hegelian dialectic, which states that every effect is in itself, yet another cause generating yet another effect, and so on.

I believe in the fluid nature of energy which we describe in terms of currents and flows. I deduce from these that everything is, in some way or another connected and so every action in some way, no matter how miniscule, affects everything else.

I'm also pretty comfortable with chaos theory, which in essence says that small variations in initial conditions can result in huge, dynamic transformations in concluding events. Hence the common analogy of a butterfly flapping its wings in California and causing a tidal wave in Japan (a stretch, I grant you). But the idea is that a pebble cast causes far reaching ripples. Cast it differently, at a different angle, or with greater or lesser force, or cast a different pebble, and the ripples are different.

And finally, I believe with every fiber of my being and every synapse in my brain, that we don't know everything. Indeed, that we are very very far from knowing everything.

That there are paradigms infinitely farther beyond our current comprehension than ours would be to Aristotle.

So -- what about magic?

Aleister Crowley, a controversial but accomplished early 20th century magician, was the first modern person to add the "k" to magic to distinguish the practice from the visual deceptions of stage magic. He defined magick as making events conform to your will. According to modern Western magickal tradition, magick is the movement of natural energies to create needed change. It is the process of rousing or building up this energy, giving it purpose, and releasing it. Magick is a natural, not supernatural practice. Indeed, to practitioners of modern magick, the whole concept of supernatural is bogus, since everything that is, is part of nature.

Several early modern scientists combined a study of magick and science. For example, Francis Bacon, in addition to being a champion of modern scientific observation and experimentation, also seriously studied magic, astrology, and alchemy. Isaac Newton, the greatest scientist of the late 17th century, was as preoccupied with alchemy and theology as he was with physics, mathematics, and astronomy. The quest for a greater knowledge of magick and alchemy led to the development of the scientific method including the objective observation and recording of experiments, which is the foundation of modern science. Since the 17th century, the mechanical view of nature has dominated academic thinking and made it easy for serious scholars to dismiss magick as part of outdated "superstitious" religion or "failed" science.

It remained for the pioneer psychologists Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, Freud's student and later rival, to provide an acceptable modern psychological explanation of how magick could work through the human subconscious mind. In particular, Jung's psychological theories gave important roles to subconscious archetypal forces, the anima and animus in each of us, and our shadow or dark sides. His theories confirmed that our subconscious minds do indeed influence the outcome of events in the physical world.

Crowley said that every intentional act is a magickal act. By that definition, my simple act of standing before you today is an act of magick. That's one possible definition, but to me that's a bit too easy. Magick, for me, is a way of tapping into things we can use without necessarily understanding why they work—casting pebbles into the great pond of life in order to achieve a desired “ripple.”

I routinely use things which I don't fully understand, because I have confidence that I will achieve a desired result. I drive a car but know practically nothing about combustion engines. I protect perishables with shrink wrap but have no clue how it's made. To tell the truth, I'm not really sure exactly how a match works--but they usually do.

I also “know“ that odd things happen all the time for which we (the greater “we“ meaning all of us) have no real explanation. Sure, some of those “amazing but true” stories are hogwash, but some of them are legitimate. Shall we discard them simply because they

don't fit into our prevailing paradigm? Is it at least possible that there are forces at work from a paradigm we have yet to perceive?

The way we perceive reality defines the limits and boundaries not only of an individual world view, but of individual achievement. Realizing that our perceptions are limited is the first and most critical step in reaching for a new paradigm.

And what wonders might that new paradigm hold? Quantum mechanics considers the influence of the observer on the observation and calls that interaction causality. There is no reason *not* to believe that consciousness has an effect upon the surrounding environment; there is no place free of the influence of the observer where measurements could be made that would refute this statement. The laws of physics are still evolving. Physics is meeting metaphysics, putting forth such concepts as advance potential waves, which are perceived before they are generated and thus are an example of an effect that occurs before its cause. Electrons are penetrating barriers that, by all the laws of probability, should be impenetrable. Scientists are beginning to speak of the Dirac Sea, a limitless expanse of energy comprising the interconnected fabric of the universe.

Starhawk, a noted modern-day witch, some of whose writings are included in the UU hymnal, in her book [The Spiral Dance](#), writes:

“To work magic is to weave the unseen forces into form; to soar beyond sight; to explore the uncharted dream realm of the hidden reality; to infuse life with color, motion, and strange scents that intoxicate; to leap beyond imagination into that space between the worlds where fantasy becomes real; to be wise, exhilarating, dangerous—the ultimate adventure.”

What, I ask you, constitutes a pebble? An action? A gesture? A thought? A word? A dream? How do we cast our pebbles into this great and interconnected universe? What ripples our pebbles generate? Do we need to map out and understand every cause-and-effect relationship in order to know that those relationships exist? Shall we strew our pebbles indiscriminately, or can they be cast with intent, in accordance with our will, in order to affect needed change? If a butterfly can cause a tidal wave, if “for want of a nail” a kingdom can be lost as in the old folktale, then could not a thought move a mountain, or a gesture change a life?

So, you see, I'm not going to suggest that you immediately go out and join a coven and dance naked under tomorrow's full moon. I have no spells and incantations to offer, no potions, no miracles. Just, perhaps a different way of perceiving the universe, and, perhaps, a way of empowering you to act upon that universe.

May the powers of the stars above and the Earth below,
Bless this place, and this time, You who are with Me, and I who am with You.

So mote it be.