

From Lawrence Hass Publisher of Theory and Art of Magic Press

The following is an excerpt of two chapters from *Gift Magic: Performances that Leave People with a Souvenir*.

Gift Magic was published in 2010 by Theory and Art of Magic Press. The book includes contributions by Jeff McBride, George Parker, Lawrence Hass, Eugene Burger, Rich Bloch, and Robert E. Neale. It is illustrated by Jay Fortune. It was edited by Lawrence Hass

As the title conveys, this is a book about performing magic in which you leave your participant with a souvenir. The book includes 11 gift magic effects, plus interviews and essays about performing this very special kind of magic. The book itself is an example of gift magic because all of the authors and the artist donated their material to the project, and Theory and Art of Magic Press donates every penny of profit to The Encore Foundation, a non-profit foundation who assists magicians in times of terrible need.

This excerpt includes “Chapter 1: Paying it Forward, an Interview with Jeff McBride” and “Chapter 15: ‘A Simple Gift’ by Lawrence Hass.” If you enjoy this excerpt and want to support our mission to raise funds for magicians in need, please purchase a copy of the book for \$25.00 (USD) by going to www.TheoryandArtofMagic.com. The book is a limited edition, and it is nearly sold out.

I hope that you enjoy this excerpt!

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Paying It Forward: An Interview with Jeff McBride

It is the afternoon of Saturday, August 15th, 2009—a hot, sunny day in Las Vegas. Jeff McBride, Eugene Burger, and I are gathered in the living room of Jeff’s house; we are surrounded by books and artifacts from Jeff’s marvelous magic library, and by masks from cultures all over the world. It is a perfect setting for this conversation about magic, gifts, and magical gifts.

—Lawrence Hass

Larry: Jeff, I have always thought of your magic as overflowing with generosity—from the cards flying out into the audience, to the way you appreciate and recognize your assistants and stage crew, to your passing on the gift of magic to boys and girls during your performance of “The Miser’s Dream.” How did you come to have this sensibility in the first place? Was there someone in particular who inspired this in you or did it come from some other source?

Jeff: I think I was really inspired in this by my parents who were extremely supportive and gave freely of their time and energy in nurturing my magic. And so very early on, as I was starting to learn magic in my teens, I was also beginning to teach magic. There was something wonderful to me from the very beginning about seeing other people empowered by magic and about passing magic on to them. I never thought of magic as something to be hoarded. As a teenager performing magic, kids came up to me at school and asked, “Can you teach me magic?” I had a choice to make: I had to say either “yes” or “no,” and I went with “yes.” Again, I

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think that sensibility came to me from my parents who were very much like that.

Larry: Was there someone who performed magic for you that left you with a gift? Someone who showed you that you could give a gift when you perform?

Jeff: The first magical performance I ever saw was not a conjuror, but a balloon twister. His entire show was a give-away because he created the props and then gave them away. He created these hands-on, temporal gifts. I remember it was a clown. . .he came to our Catholic school and was promoting an appearance—a free appearance—at a shopping mall. So it was a promotional give-away, but for a free show. I had no idea of all that at the time, but I remember the clown made a round balloon with a whole bunch of long skinny balloons hanging off of it. Then he played a game with the class, challenging us, “You get it, if you guess it.” What was this thing? I remember several kids shouting out, “An octopus!” And he said, “No, it is a meatball with a whole lot of spaghetti hanging out of it!” [laughter].

Everyone laughed and I laughed too, even though I didn’t quite get it. But I did go see him at the new Jamesway department store. When he made that exact same figure and asked, “Kids, what is this!,” I shouted out, “It’s a meatball with a whole lot of spaghetti hanging out of it.” And I got it; I knew the answer, and I got that balloon. I think that was the first gift that I received from a performer. Maybe that is a strange sort of core experience to have influenced me, but it was really remarkable and memorable. It is always hard to know exactly what inspires us, but that could well have been a pivotal moment for me.

Larry: It is amazing that you remember it so clearly. . . .

Jeff: Second grade.

Larry: Wow. So we turn from then to now: I cannot begin to count the number of times I have seen you perform pieces in which you give away something at the end. I have seen you give away wristbands, flowers, rainbows, cards, rubber bands, wands, shirts, stones, money. . .to name just a few things. What is all this magical giving about for you?

Jeff: Lewis Hyde mentions it in his book, *The Gift*—this book that we all admire. Lewis Hyde says that a gift creates an experience of bonding in a world where there

is so much isolation. Now when a magician does magic, often there is a distancing quality—a separation of status—a feeling or experience that the magician has more status because he has this power and secret knowledge that the participant or audience doesn't have. So the very act of presenting magic as a gift creates a “bonding feeling” and there is more of a unity instead of a division set up between people. I have found that I have had many more life-enhancing experiences creating unifying magic as opposed to magic that separates and divides. I have had a lot more fun and pleasure that way. It has increased the happiness quotient in my life in a very simple, but profound way.

To say a bit more, when I approach a potential participant, I often can see when I mention the word “magic” that there is a mixed emotion, a kind of an apprehensive moment such as, “Oh no, what am I getting in to?” Or “If I sign this card will the pen shock me?” There is some of this going on because people have grown up with all these media images of the magician as a trickster and even as a dark trickster. So they don't know if they are going to see a trick or have a trick pulled on them. How would they? One has to have considerable experience interacting with magicians to be able to realize the difference, and most people have had almost no contact at all with magicians. So setting up an atmosphere of gifting puts the participant at ease. It opens them up to a “conversation” [hand gestures back and forth]. It indicates that this will be a relationship rather than something that will be “done to you.”

Larry: Is there a place in a gifting performance when you feel their defenses melt away and they join right in with you?

Jeff: Yes. It begins with touching their hands or placing their hands in a gift-receptive mode. When a person's palms are open and together, they form a little bowl. This is an archetypal posture of receptivity, of being a receptacle for a boon, for a gift, for something that is coming. There is a pregnant, empty space waiting to be filled with a magical possibility (*see figure 1*).

You are setting the person up to catch a moment of magic, for a magical future. They don't know what, but they know something is going to happen. For most people, when they are in this pose, it triggers a pleasure response: open and waiting, hopeful that the space will be filled. Some magicians understand this very well, but many magicians don't seem to have any idea of the power of this. Perhaps

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it is because they haven't ever explored putting someone's hands in this position.

Larry: I suppose then we have a little experiment readers might try: put people's hands in this position to see how different and receptive they become. . .

Jeff: . . .yes, but it also poses a challenge to magicians because they must have something worthwhile to place there!

As an example, consider this: people would have a fundamentally different reaction to a card trick if the magician said, "I have a surprise for you," and put the participant's hands in this position; then took out a box of cards and set them there like a little gift. As opposed to going up to someone, shuffling the cards, and *thrusting* them at someone [laughter]—which is how so many cards tricks begin. . .with a "shuffle and thrust" [laughter as Jeff mimics this], as opposed to any kind of relationship or a promise of a mystery. In magic as in love, what is often missing is a kind of "foreplay" that creates a setting and a threshold for the magic to be magical.

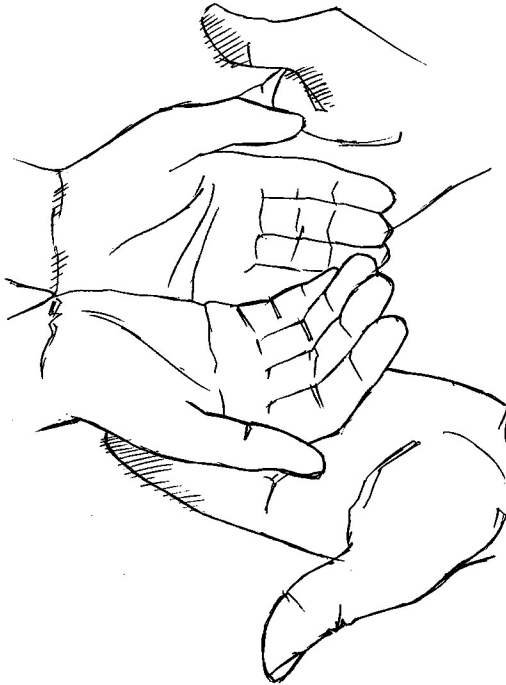


Figure 1

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Larry: Another thing too is that many magicians become so glib while they are “shuffling and thrusting”—they put up a wall of glib language that is unappealing and uninviting. So we need our words to touch them too, like when you touch their hands. . . .

Jeff: Yes, exactly. But let me stress that it is actually touching *each other's* hands. There is a permission happening, a meeting. For one example of how this goes: you can take a handshake, add the second hand, then use the first hand to bring their other hand to the middle. In this way, you start with a socially acceptable gesture, see how it goes, and then if it is welcome, move to another level of intimacy.

Eugene: Glibness really sets people into the opposite mode, doesn't it? The “glibber” you are the more frightened I become. And that means I am not ready to receive much of anything.

Jeff: Glibness sets up the following: “Do I now have to take out my rapier wit?” “Do I have to take out my own razor sharp tongue?” “Are we going at each other?” “Do we have to top each other?” Notice that we are now plunged into a status struggle as opposed to a bonding relationship.

Larry: I am sure that the readers will have many questions about details of your approach. Do you also do things with your eyes or voice?

Jeff: I think that postures are very important for moving people into intimate relationship. In a lot of my magic, my hands are often positioned under my heart, which creates a sense of intimacy and openness. Then bringing the hands up to eye level is important because it increases eye contact. However, depending upon the culture, one has to dial up or down the intensity of the eye contact. We also can use the magic in the middle—between our sets of eyes—to help soften some of that intensity. If the connection is too overpowering we can let them focus on the magical object, which takes some of the intensity off the bonding that is happening. Or conversely, we can dial up the relationship so the magical object becomes less important and the people can experience each other as the magic is happening.

It is an interesting kind of contradiction: creating a moment of connection while performing a piece of deception, so I try to re-frame that in my mind as

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“a little untruth that can bring us to a bigger truth.” I think about David Abram, the author of *The Spell of the Sensuous*. He says that when the priests he met in Bali performed sleight-of-hand, they considered their secret sleights to be a sacred prayer that was unknown to the uninitiated. I kind of like that rationalization, that coping mechanism [laughter]. Because it is a deep challenge to be deceiving someone and gaining his or her trust at the same time.

Larry: But by placing their hands right here [gestures in the cupped position] they are already halfway there. . . .

Jeff: . . .correct, because you are using the magic to connect rather than to “blow the audience away” or “kill ‘em.” Or to distance them or one-up them. Instead of all that, you are creating a magical moment that ends with a talisman or touchstone of the fact that magic has come into their lives. Which is, if you think about it, far greater than the “trick.” Because the trick is over in an instant, but the gift object can last forever. And every time they touch that object they can remember that magical moment and increase their happiness, if the moment was a happy one.

Larry: It occurs to me that your ideas here pose a real challenge for card magicians because they have the cards down in front of them or off to the side and this seems to communicate something very different.

Jeff: I love card magic. But I work really hard to get my card magic so it happens up around my face. First of all, having the cards up here makes much better TV! [laughter]. But also I can make a relationship with the cards between our eyes. Even so, I have to really work at getting into these positions because so much card magic we see happens at crotch level, gripping down here [two hands holding a horizontal packet], which not only takes us back to “shuffle and thrust,” but further means the performer tends to be looking down at the cards. The whole orientation then is eyes-down, head-down—which is just terrible for relationships.

But think about it: cards are challenging because the very nature of the game of cards is combative: I win, you lose. Further, cards are horizontal by nature; they are meant to be played at a table looking down while not showing your true emotions and feelings. “Keeping a poker face,” concealing what you have, hiding behind a mask, and not relating: these meanings are already in the air when

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you bring out a deck of cards. In our culture there are hundreds of years of pre-conditioning about cards that trigger feelings of separation and combat: I trump you. Or you trump me. Or I will take your money. Or I will cheat you at the card table. So there is a lot of baggage on the table when you bring cards out; there is a lot more than cards coming out of the card box [laughter].

In this sense, card magicians have a much higher mountain to climb in order to create the kind of magic we are talking about. At the same time, magic evolves as we evolve. The more conscious we become of our tools and what they trigger, the better able we are to transform those tools to create better effects. After all, we are magicians!

Larry: So I assume you might not start out with cards in a gift magic situation? I mean, you might get there, but you might start with other things?

Jeff: It depends upon the kind of relationship I want to create. I humorously say, and remind myself, that magic should “comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable” [laughter]. So depending on the situation, I might start right out with “Cards Out of the Mouth”: Whoah!! You know, to lay claim to a territory as a magician or to just get attention. Again, performing magic involves status relations and sometimes, in some situations, you have to stake your claim just to play your part as a magician. Like in a party environment where everybody is vying for attention and status: “Wow, he is the magician!” In situations like that I will often open with cards. But in other cases, I will open with something soft, like a magic rainbow or flower [“Magic Wishing Rainbow” and “Rainbow to Rose” from Jeff’s DVD, *Magic at the Edge*; they may be viewed at www.magicwisdom.com/giftmagicbook, courtesy of L&L Publishing]. Or I will make money appear to pay for a check, or produce some little token to represent the moment. These are all soft, intimate moments.

Another great one is Alan Wong’s “Stargazer,” in which a rubber band changes to a star. [This is also on *Magic at the Edge* and may be viewed at www.magicwisdom.com/giftmagicbook.] I think this is a perfect trick: there are no bad angles, there is nothing to see how it is done, and then the participant ends up with an unusual, exquisite little gift. Which, I might add, turns their analytical mind right off because they start playing with this little gift! Many times they will ask, “May I keep it?” “Yes,” I say, “and if you look at it every day maybe your wish

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will come true”—so there is a little intention in that.

I talk quite a bit about my philosophy of gift-giving on *Magic at the Edge*, which was shot at the Burning Man festival. Burning Man is all about the gift economy and gifting and give-away. The gift philosophy and economy is also at the heart of the Wonderground experience we create every month in Las Vegas. With all the great press surrounding it and the community involvement, the Wonderground is transforming the Las Vegas magic scene in really exciting ways.

[Editor’s note: for a glimpse of the Burning Man festival, see the video clip at www.magicalwisdom.com/giftmagicbook, courtesy of L&L Publishing; to learn about the Wonderground experience, go to <http://www.mcbridemagic.com/pages/wonderground.php>.]

Eugene: . . .because it is not about money; there is no money there.

Jeff: Yes, money is not in use at Burning Man. By explicit intention and design, it is a gift culture. It is probably the western world’s biggest potlatch. People go to extraordinary lengths to give away as much as they can [laughter], with their art, with food, and with many things.

Larry: I want to stay just a little bit longer on some of the details of performing gift magic. We have talked about the hands; we have talked about the eyes. Do you have any suggestions about the voice, about how we can use the voice to create the connection?

Eugene: Getting softer is part of it. Less hard and edgy. . . .

Jeff: Yes, getting softer, but also creating a conversation. You know? *Asking* the participant what is important. This puts half of the magical experience into their hands, literally and conversationally. When I ask a person “Is there something special in your life that you would like to bring into being?” that puts it squarely on the participant to conjure something deep inside of them. And I can tell when they are humoring me because they respond too quickly. When that happens I pull back a little bit. For example, with the “Magic Wishing Rainbow” there is a moment when I ask them to touch the rainbow, and if they go to do that too

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quickly, I pause just a bit and ask, “Are you sure you want that?” That usually gets them to probe a little bit deeper or more authentically. Because in these situations I want to subtly help them learn that this will not just be about “watching the magician do stunts”; it will instead be about the magician serving as a catalyst for their wish fulfillment. You know, a *magician* is asking you here, “What is important in your life?” “What would you really like to bring into your life?” This is just full of meaning and possibilities. So I am also asking in effect, “Can we play this magical game for a little while,” in the classic Bob Neale sense of making believe? I’ll tell you, this is fun for everyone; it is fun to take someone in a social situation to a deeper place, to a core value, and then give them a little token of the ride in the form of gift. Now I should stress that when I give it to them I say, “If you take this and place it somewhere you can see it everyday, *maybe* your wish and intention will come true.” I stress the “if” and the “maybe” because I do not want to make any extraordinary claims! [laughter].

Larry: Eugene, when Jeff talks about using questions, I think about your work because you so often use questions to invite people into the performance. Do you want to say anything about that?

Eugene: First of all, it tells the participant or the audience that I am taking them seriously, that I am really listening to them, and that we are engaged in a conversation. . . .

Jeff: . . .so much so that, if I ask a person a question when performing gift magic in a social situation (and I do not mean a formal show, which is a very different context), and the person’s answer or the conversation turns to something more profound, the magical moment may even be sacrificed to a much more important connection. The palmed object may go back in the pocket for a while or maybe forever while this person is in a state of bonding.

Larry: As we are talking about this, I am imagining some readers might feel uncomfortable about performing this way because it is so intimate. . . .

Jeff: . . .that’s why YouTube was created! Because you can avoid all intimacy. . . [laughter]. But I interrupted you. . . .

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Larry: No, that was well worth it [laughter]. But it seems to me that the only alternative is just to be demonstrating stuff, and then it seems the magician is. . .

Jeff: . . .trying to “blow the audience away” . . .

Eugene: . . .and doing one-liners.

Larry: What specific suggestions do you have for someone performing gift magic to help their performances be better? If you had one thing to suggest—one little gift—what would it be?

Jeff: To start with the simplest magic possible, the simplest techniques, so you don’t have to think that much about the technical level or procedure. This allows you to focus on the quality of the connection and “the moment” rather than the method. This allows you to be relaxed and at ease rather than anxious or worried about being exposed.

Larry: Have you ever had a moment of gift magic blow up? There you are about to give this gift and the whole thing just falls apart?

Jeff: Oh yeah. I remember I was doing my Rising Card effect “Kundalini Rising” for a group of people at kind of a new age center and I had dialed up the performance pretty strong on the breathing, the whole mythology of Kundalini, and all of the yoga involved. Then at the end of the experience, after the whole induction and mythology, with the card rising in her hand, I said she could keep the deck as a souvenir. I saw her eyes kind of open wide, and I said, “No, no. . .take it!” Which she did, but later I saw her leave the cards on a ledge. She did not want this gift. Like this was too powerful; she did not want a touchstone.

We have to always remember that people experience our magic on lots of different levels. They also have different belief systems because of different cultures or cultural programming and so they respond to magic in lots of different ways. So I usually ask permission before even performing. I will say something like, “Do you like magic?” For instance, I have had experiences in Africa when the reply to that has been, “No! Magic is evil!” So imagine what would happen if I had just blithely forced my magic upon that person. I am not there to convince someone

that magic is this great scientific exploration of perception and deception, you know? So I just drop it. I am not on a mission to convert people to "the western application of science through the optical arts of magic" [laughter].

Larry: Here is a question for you from George Parker, and it touches on something we talked about before. George says that it seems there is a difference between, on one hand, what we might call a promotional gift, like doing an effect with a business card that has our name and address on it so they have it "for all their future event planning needs." And on the other, giving away money or a gemstone or flower that isn't promoting anything. So the question here is, how should we handle promotional gifts so that they still feel like gifts?

Eugene: I'd like to jump in on this. I was just reading a book that Jeff gave me about doing readings for people, and one of the author's techniques was to do a Magic Square for someone on the back of a business card. So his idea is that while one side of the card is promotional, the other side has some value and remains a gift. But it is a very tricky line to walk. . . I think this is George's question.

Larry: Part of walking it, I suppose, has to do with how you handle the promotional side. I mean, I could *talk* about my business number and *instruct* them to call me "for all their future event planning needs," or I can give them the Magic Square card without commenting on the "market side."

Jeff: Relating to this, there is a Rosicrucian concept of doing good acts in the world without suffering gratitude. One can "suffer" from someone's gratitude, which was for me a very tricky concept to understand. But for example, "Oh thank you!" [craven and supplicating]; this suffers me with a kind of status I may not want, and perhaps also suffers me with their feeling of needing to reciprocate, which wasn't my intention at all.

So a key question to ask here is: when you give a gift, do you expect it be reciprocal? If so, one needs to be sensitive to the fact that it starts to look more like a market transaction than a gift. And we also want to think about how to deflect the idea that you want something back. We might say something like, "No, no, this is just for you."

Another idea is the notion of *reciprocal altruism*, which is much discussed

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in gift economies and circles. This is the idea that even if someone gives back, what he or she encounters is another gift. So, for example, someone receives their “lucky card” from me, which sends them to my website. Nonetheless, he or she finds there another gift—that is, the reading or meaning of their card—as well as the opportunity to gift someone else by sending them a lucky card too. This is a subtle way to deflect the circle of obligation. Even so, there is a difference between these kinds of gifts and the origami sculpture folded out of a ten-dollar bill that has been left anonymously in the hotel room for the chambermaid.

Larry: The distinctions you are talking about remind me of an ethos that is very much present in Jewish culture. The Talmud, for example, gives a ranking of different gifts determined by how much recognition is attached to them, with the very highest gift involving the giver’s total anonymity. For Jewish people, strictly anonymous giving is a mitzvah, a blessing in another way as well, because the word “Anonymous” on a list of donors provides coverage for people who are not able to give anything.

Jeff: Yes, excellent. There is another dynamic to this as well, which is that there often has to be the right context for a gift. People have to be in a gift-receiving mode or environment sometimes to even understand something as a gift.

There was this fascinating story in the Washington Post recently about Josh Bell, the violin player. Josh Bell is a concert violinist who plays one of the most expensive violins in the history of the world and sells out concert halls for over a hundred dollars a ticket. And there was this social experiment where he was busking in a subway for many hours one day. He only made about \$35; most people just walked past him. It was interesting: many children would stop and watch him, but their parents would always pull them away. For some reason children could perceive this amazing gift that was there for them, but most adults couldn’t see or hear it because there wasn’t a context for this gift; the gift was invisible to them. So people need to have a sense that they are in an environment where a gift is being given. I mean, to just leave a pen on a table for someone means nothing. It isn’t a gift; it is just a piece of junk.

And here is the key thing: magic makes a gift special. The moment of magic is a live moment. It isn’t just handing a pen to somebody or handing a business card to them, or a “friggey magnet.” But if I can magically produce that magnet, then

you might actually put it on your refrigerator and see my URL. Again, we need to remember if that is the only reason why I am doing it, if that is all it is about, then it isn't a gift. A pure gift is, at best, anonymous.

Larry: Your comments here have brought us back to our intentions—that an important part of the context is the intention. Random events aren't gifts; there has to be an intention of a gift, even if we do not know who gave it. The ten-dollar bill folded into an origami figure is anonymous, but clearly it was intended as a gift. So this comes right back to us as magicians. What is paramount with gift magic is the intention with which we infuse our performance; that is what makes the difference between a mere promotion and a genuinely felt gift.

Jeff: Yes, and sometimes my intention is or has to be market based and there is nothing wrong with that. Sometimes I need to perform a piece of magic in a certain way or setting that makes a booker want to hire me for money. This isn't a gift situation—it is a commodity exchange: here's my talent, hire me. But all that is very different in spirit and intention from being in a park, approaching a family playing there, picking up a leaf and making a flower bloom from it, giving it to the grandmother, and then walking away. Here there is no promotion, no name even—all they have is an incredible story to tell and a memory. I have given and received this kind of magic countless times—having wonderful little exchanges that do not lead to any reciprocity.

Larry: Do you think there is something about magic that makes it especially connected to gift-giving?

Jeff: Let's look at the nature of magic: from one perspective magic is an effect without a cause. And that maps right onto a gift—something that arrives without demand or a plan. Thus there is something about magic and giving, and receiving too, that defies expectations. So there is a connection between magic and giving that we can only learn about by exploring the moment, by doing it and not intellectualizing about it.

With performing magic specifically, you have to be out there thinking, "How can I discover situations in which I can create this wonderful dynamic?" As Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind," so when I go out into

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the world I carry a thumb tip with a rainbow streamer and a pocket full of fold-up roses so I can take advantage of a perfect moment. But you have to be sensitive to whether or not the moment really is a good one.

Just the other day I was in China working with a man whose business associate was a woman who didn't really like magic. She was busy working behind a counter at a cash register and he said to me, "Do something for her!" Now even though I had prepared this extensive little routine, I could tell that the woman didn't have the temperament or the time to indulge me in my gift-giving [laughter]. Not only was she pre-disposed not to accept any magical gifts, she was actually determined to counter them [laughter]. I could tell this just was her point of view on magic. So I put that routine back in my pockets, but still wanted a moment of connection with her. I concealed one of my little flowers in my hand, and as I went to give her a little coin, I changed it into the flower, and simply said goodbye. That was it. I walked away. That was it, and she accepted the gift because she didn't have the time to process what had happened. If she had seen me go into a whole magic routine, she would have just folded her arms and rolled her eyes.

Larry: On another subject, as we head toward the end of this conversation: we know that part of Lewis Hyde's idea is that when we have received a gift, then we are ourselves inspired to give on, typically to other people. . .

Jeff: . . .pay it forward. . . .

Larry: Right. So sometimes one way we know that we have received a gift is that we find ourselves engaged in a "labor of gratitude" that keeps the gift we have received in motion [for more on this idea see chapter 12]. With this in mind, would you say there are specific pieces in your repertoire that were labors of gratitude in this sense? Pieces that were inspired by a gift you had received and were giving on?

Jeff: Not so much with specific pieces, but what comes right to mind is a ritual we do in our home where Abbi and I have a box of objects that we have collected from all over the world. When students or friends are here I invite them to select an object from the box—and all the objects have a story attached to them that I am happy to share with the person who has chosen one. Abbi and I have been doing this for years since we moved into the house, just to create a sense of gifts moving

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through us. We are so blessed. We have so many gifts coming into our lives, and we are happy to continuously “pay them forward.” So we have this exquisite box, which people will see when they come to the Magic & Mystery School, and they will be able to look inside and take a bit of the magic home with them. It does not even have to be performance oriented; the whole thing is just a state of mind, a way of being. It is a way of living with gifts, so that gifts are passing through us continuously without hoarding them.



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A Simple Gift

Lawrence Hass

This little production of a small gift object is simple, almost nothing, light as air. And yet, for the right person at the right time, experience has proven it to be genuinely delightful. I have performed it hundreds of times to very warm, astonished reactions.

In thinking about why this piece plays so powerfully, I have come to see that part of the answer is its very simplicity. Everything is so clear and direct: the little star (the object I usually produce) appears out of nowhere. Also the piece engages the participant's heart and hands, and leaves them with a memorable gift. Many years later I have had children and adults show me their star and recall when they received it. If all that isn't enough to tempt you to learn "A Simple Gift," consider this: you will never, ever have to pull a quarter out of someone's ear again!

First things first: I learned this piece at Alain Nu's Phoenix Gathering in 2001 from my friend Just Alan—a most wonderful magician. I saw a lot of great magic that weekend, but Just Alan's little piece really knocked me out. Just Alan calls it "Wish Granted" and I am grateful for his kind permission to share here my handling, script, and little touches. Please think of this as Just Alan's gift to this book of gifts.

The "right situations" are like this: 1) I am working the house before a theater show, shaking hands, welcoming people, and introducing myself. And

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there I see a child (boy or girl) between the ages of six and ten, or a smiling, warm woman. Or 2) I am invited to socialize at someone's house and they have a child who is interested that I am a magician. Or 3) from previous visits, I know a secretary, waitress, bank teller, check-out person, etc. who is interested in the fact that I am a magician. In these kinds of situations, with these kinds of people, I launch in.

Script

You know, there is magic all around us, in grand things and simple ones. . .like the everyday wishes we make.

Tell me: did you make a wish on your birthday this year? And did you really, truly wish it would come true?

Well. . .touch my hand right here. I just made a wish. And it really came true! [*Open your hand to reveal a little star.*]

This wish is for you. Keep it, and sometime today make a magical wish of your own.

Method

I prefer to produce a little star because it perfectly fits with the theme of making wishes. But I will also produce a penny (which still fits the theme) if I don't have my stars with me, and occasionally, for the right person, I will produce a little heart. (*Figure 54 shows you the objects I use and their relative size.*) You can find such things at craft stores.

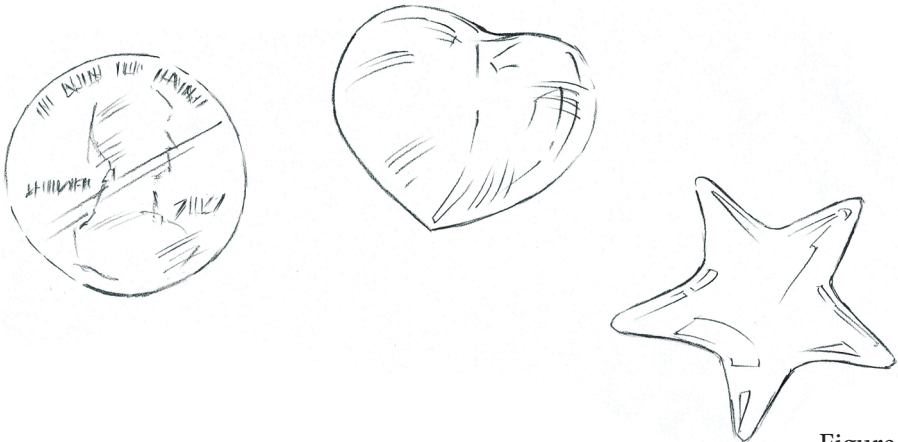


Figure 54

A SIMPLE GIFT

I begin with the small object I want to produce in right-hand finger palm position, with my right arm down at my side. On the word “Well. . .” I extend my left hand, palm up, fingers open so the participant sees that it is empty. On the word “Here. . .” I move my right hand up and toward my left hand, which remains stationary (*figure 55*). What happens is that the right hand will leave the star in the left hand as it uses the right index finger both to turn the left hand palm down (*figure 56*) and to point to a place on the back of the hand for the participant to touch (*figure 57*). As you look at these three figures, imagine them as mere moments in one, fluid motion.

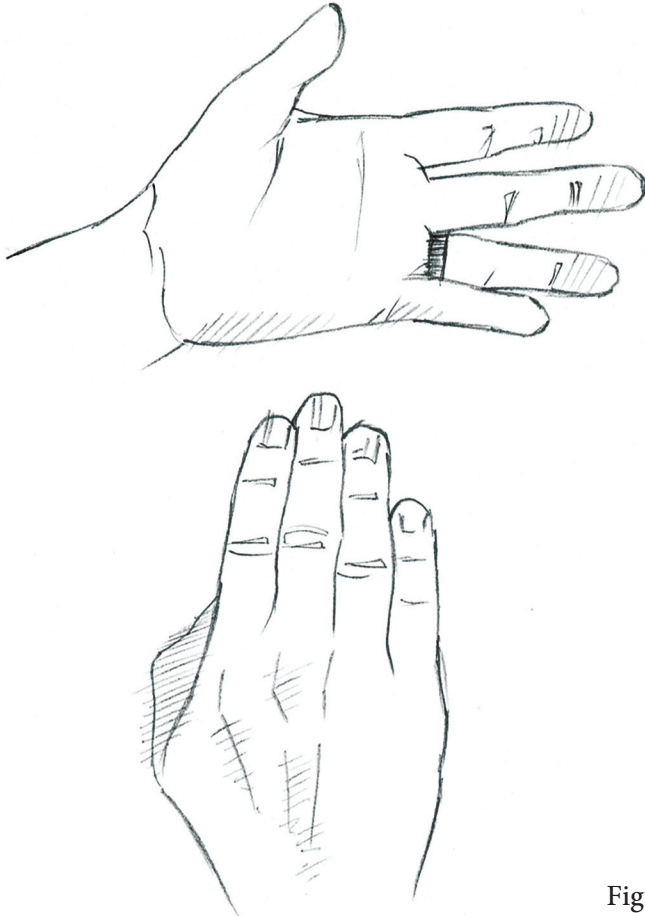


Figure 55

GIFT MAGIC

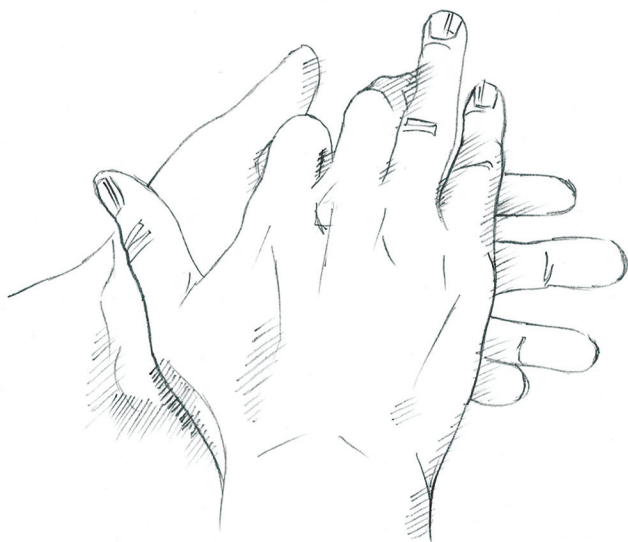


Figure 56



Figure 57

A SIMPLE GIFT

Now this might seem easy to do, and it is, but it is also easy to do badly. I have taught “A Simple Gift” to dozens of students over the years and many of them “get it” but some just do not. No matter how hard they practice, they can’t make the movement natural and the secret placement invisible. So at the risk of belaboring something “simple” I want to share some essential details for making the piece fully deceptive.

1. It is imperative that the right hand does not clutch the star as it passes over the open left palm. Indeed, while I hold the star in a loose right-hand finger palm when my arm is at the side, when I bring my right hand in motion toward my left hand, I loosen the grip further and let centrifugal force keep the star against my fingers. Thus, as my right hand approaches my left palm, it slows down and the star will naturally fly into my left hand. So instead of “right-hand clutch,” “pause,” and then “release” (all of which would be painfully obvious), the correct action is a flowing, almost throwing movement of the star into the left hand. It will take considerable practice for you to get the right feel and speed for this action.

2. Equally important is the fact that the secret placement (actually, throwing) of the star is an in-transit action (Arturo de Ascanio). That is, it secretly “happens on the way” of a strong primary action. Here, the strong primary action is using the right index finger both to turn the left hand palm down and to point to a place on the back of the left hand for the participant to touch. In fact, the pointing action and request for the participant to touch your hand is so strong that the previous moment, when the right hand was over the left palm, becomes psychologically invisible. As you practice the movement, always keep your intention on the primary action and try to forget about the secret placement; this is essential for success with this move. As you start working on this piece, it will be difficult to get the *intention* right because you will be focused on getting the *move* right and keeping your right fingers relaxed. As you keep working on it, you will suddenly find that you both have the right flow and intention; then the piece will be deceptive.

3. After all my work with students on this piece I can tell you a common problem is the tendency for the right-hand motion to be too fast as it approaches the left hand. Doing that draws unwanted attention to the right hand and all is lost. Practice moving the right hand so it is slow enough to feel natural, but fast enough for the star not to fall.

4. Finally, it is important to use the technique Juan Tamariz calls “Shifting

the Gaze” during the secret placement (see *The Five Points in Magic*, Seattle: Hermetic Press, 2007, pages 11-12). That is, I look at my open left hand, then, as my right hand flows toward it, I look up at my participant to catch her attention while the placement happens, then I look back down at my right index finger pressing on the back of my left hand. This subtle shift of my gaze splits the participant’s attention even if she doesn’t look directly at me. I invite you to try the piece with and without this technique; I think you will quickly notice the difference it makes.

Final Thoughts

When I say the line, “And I think it came true!” I give my left hand a little twitch—what Topas calls “The Clic.” (See his lecture notes, *Presentation Secrets*, 2000.) This is an important action because, as Topas says, it is powerful and expressive and it precisely defines the moment of effect (page 10). After the “Clic,” I slowly, fluidly open my left hand one finger at a time to reveal the star. After a couple of seconds, I pick up the star and present it to the person with a gift-like intention. Trust me when I say it will be very warmly received.

As thoughtful, creative magicians, we are always tinkering with this and that as ways to improve the deceptiveness of what we do. Thus, I know from my own experience that some of you may be tempted to devise a way to show the right hand empty at the outset of the piece. For example, you might be tempted to use a Ramsey Subtlety or devise some way to secretly load the star after showing the hand empty. Far be it for me to stifle creativity, but my advice is: *forget about it*. Showing the right hand empty in advance is unnatural and unnecessary. As Vernon taught (for example, see *The Vernon Touch*, page 73), this kind of action “telegraphs” that you are getting ready to do something and subtly challenges the audience. Both of those things are exactly what we want to avoid with a friendship-making piece such as this one.

