

## **And hurry down the chimney tonight**

Bringing magic into life, awakening magic in psychotherapy

By Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar

**It felt love**

How  
Did the rose  
Ever open its heart

And give to the world  
All its beauty?

It felt the encouragement of light  
Against its  
Being

Otherwise  
We all remain

Too  
Frightened

(Hafiz, translated by Daniel Ladinsky, 1999)

**A.**

I'm a sucker for magic. I like magic so much that sometimes I look for it where it is quite clearly absent.

I remember a day, when I walked in Piccadilly Circus and witnessed a magic dance. A man was standing there, nonchalantly leaning against the wall, and a stereo to his legs, playing loud music. Underneath him – I saw it with my own eyes, dancing by the stereo were two paper-cut figures of Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse. They were dancing without support to the rhythm of the music; they were quite good, really.

That's fantastic, I thought, but how the hell does it work? Well, the man kindly explained that the paper-cut figures had special magnets distributed over their bodies, and when they were aligned parallel to the tape they picked up the electromagnetic field and moved in rhythm. Sounds logical, doesn't it? Sounds fab. So I bought it, to my wife's astonishment, and for five pounds I had my own Mickey and Minnie paper-cut figures.

When I got home I rushed to my workroom, closed the door and set the tape down. I took Mickey and Minnie out of their plastic packet and laid them carefully on the carpet by the tape. I played Aretha Franklin's *RESPECT*. Nothing. They weren't dancing. They weren't even shaking their paper and cotton-thread legs. Nothing. I waited. I turned the volume up; still – no movement. Maybe they don't like Aretha, I thought (honestly!).

Maybe there isn't enough rhythm here, in *RESPECT*. I took a Pixies CD that I haven't listened to in years. Surely there's enough rhythm with the Pixies. When I turned up the volume, Tom – my wife, knocked on the door.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

I pointed at Mickey and Minnie.

"They wouldn't dance to Aretha so I thought I'll try the Pixies."

Tom looked down to the floor, then at me, then down to the floor again. Minnie and Mickey rested quietly, oblivious to the Pixies' effort.

She shook her head and left the room.

I didn't know what to do. I was about to give up when I finally realised what had happened. It was a shock to my system.

The guy's stereo tape was on the ground – a strong tarmac pavement, not on a bloody carpet!

Surely, I thought, the vibrations of the music cannot travel that good on a carpet. So, I rolled the carpet and put the CD back on. I held Mickey and Minnie up, standing on their cotton-thread legs, to give them a good start, so to speak. I tried different angles but nothing worked.

Tom's head peeped in again.

"I can't take it anymore," she said, "give me the packet." You see, she's a scientist!

I handed her the packet with the instructions I didn't even bother reading and she pulled a long coiled fishing wire and attached it to the tape, the other end she wrapped around my finger. She put Mickey and Minnie mouse on the string, using a hook they had.

I was shocked.

"Now, wiggle your finger," she said. Mickey and Minnie magically came to life.

I insisted that Tom stayed for the entire 'I say a little prayer' to watch the magic of Minnie and Mickey Mouse dancing before I allowed her to leave the room.

As I've said – I'm a sucker for magic. This is why I do psychotherapy; this is why I use trancework and NLP. I'm a sucker for magic; this is why I use touch and bodywork; this is why I work with people, whose universes have always offered me magic in abundance.

## **B.**

Finding magic is about asking the right questions, and really listening. It's not a question of 'what is magic', since when we ask this we define magic as a thing, we take it out of context; we endeavour to force the known into the categorically unknown, or unfathomable.

Finding magic is about asking ‘when is magic’, in which circumstances, and in which maps can we qualify this event or process as magic? Magicking is a process of extracting ‘this which is so much more than this’ from the ‘this which is what I can see and explain’.

In ‘Life of Pi’ (2001), Yann Martel beautifully describes magic: *“I can well imagine an atheist’s last words: ‘White, white! L-L-Love! My God!’ – and the deathbed leap of faith. Whereas the agnostic, if he stays true to his reasonable self, if he stays beholden to dry, yeastless factuality, might try to explain the warm light bathing him by saying, ‘Possibly a f-f-failing oxygenation of the b-b-brain,’ and, to the very end, lack imagination and miss the better story.”*

Magic is about recreating, presupposing and allowing for the better story.

In this paper, I would like to present you with three contexts of useful magic – in life in general and particularly in psychotherapy, and discuss the presuppositions and effect they carry with them (as well as ideas of eliciting them). I would also discuss some commonly non-useful sorts of magic from the world of therapy.

So, I invite you to sit back and relax, take a deep breath and prepare for your own Mickey and Minnie to come to life.

Puff!

### **C. Presuppositions of Magic**

These are the presuppositions I find helpful to hold when you expect generative magic, or would like to have more of this wicked dance in your life!

- Magic is already here
- Magic is everywhere, all the time
- We are all sorcerers
- Magic happens in unexpected ways
- Magic is a self-validating phenomenon, it doesn’t need scientific proof
- You cannot force magic
- Experiencing magic and talking about it are two distinctively different things
- Magic happens in parallel and systemic, non-linear ways
- You don’t necessarily have to believe in magic in order to experience it
- Magic encourages faith, growth and generativity
- Magic involves surrendering to it without abandoning yourself

Holding these presuppositions as a therapist, creates an invitation for magic, since while still pacing the client’s map, intention is given to the systemic nature of maps. We recognise the inevitability of different truths ‘interacting with each other’, of the magical dance of realities when we are no longer hung-on to how reality ‘really is’.

## D. Generative magic

In ancient cultures, shamans, healers, sorcerers and priests played the sacred role that therapists play nowadays in modern western society. They were channelling archetypal, divine and collective energies to invite healing, change and support. In its endeavours to be scientifically accepted, psychotherapy has been slowly disassociating from magic, and whereas some good came out of it (it was sometimes accepted by science. We could also systematically apply changes and teach them), we lost permission to use magic. Furthermore, the therapists started to believe that they were the ones with the power, for it is far easier for a sorcerer to recognise that the source of shift is not his ego, than it is for a psychotherapist to accept the same. In most types of modern psychotherapy, little space remains for the acknowledgement and healing influences of the mythical, the archetypal and the divine.

Reclaiming magic in psychotherapy is also about awakening a dormant resource, which can easily be called upon – and utilised – with faith.

Following are three types of useful, generative magic: magic as a state of transition, everyday magic and magic of connection. There are other kinds of useful magic, but these are the ones I would like to discuss with you today; some magic that can work well in psychotherapy. Naturally, these types of magic are rarely present in a ‘pure’ form and commonly weave and interact with each other as well as with other types of magic.

1. **Magic as state of transition and transformation:** This type of magic describes magic as it serves as an invitation to expand a reality or transcend it. When the current map-logic cannot contain an event and requires broadening of perspective (state of transition / trance), and we must move beyond the known into the uncharted.

I have spoken of these magical states of transition and transformation on previous occasions<sup>1</sup>. In many ways, we can look at these magic moments as a systemic call for expansion, whereupon a part of us (most commonly our cognitive self) still clings to one map-logic, while our larger self (unconscious, somatic, relational) is already responding to – and perceiving ‘messages from other maps’ (or from meta-maps). We can either surrender to this experience or explain it away with our own map-logic; we can either open the window or pretend the wind has never called us by name.

Robert Dilts, after Joseph Campbell, describes “The Hero’s Journey”, and rightfully reframes some life changes (including ‘struggles’, ‘addictions’ and ‘problems’) as a magical, archetypal journey of transition (1987-2003). Harnessing the mythical and archetypal to the individual journey of change creates a broader context, where we are no longer struggling on our own but rather, fulfilling a human task of coming back home after our quest.

I once worked with a client who complained about a particular phobia, but said she cannot be hypnotised. When Sara’s hand was levitating quite high and her fingers consistently responded to questions, I asked her whether she was in trance. Sara opened her eyes.

- “No, I’m not,” she said.
- “So, what’s going on over there with that arm hanging?”
- “I don’t know,” she said, “it’s quite comfortable for it, I presume.”
- “Can you try to bring it down?” I asked.
- “Of course I can.”
- “So try to bring it down.”

Sara made some strange-looking faces. Her arm was hanging up there.

- “Well?”
- “It doesn’t seem to want to come down.”
- “I’m a bit concerned, does it happen to you a lot?”
- “No, it never happened to me before. It’s quite strange, really.”
- “But you’re not in trance?”
- “Of course not.”
- “How do you explain it, then?”

Sara went quite and then she said:

- “I think it’s because of the typing.”
- “Because of what?” I wondered.
- “Typing,” she repeated.
- “How can typing give that hand free will?”
- “It’s because I press my fingers down all day typing, and now that I’m relaxed, it just wants to go up and stay there.”
- “I see,” I said, “It makes sense. But, do you only type with one hand?”
- “No. Of course not.”
- “So, why wouldn’t the other arm develop a free will and float up right now too?”
- “I really don’t know”

At that moment, not surprisingly, the twitching of the other hand began to move up.

- “Here it goes,” she murmured.
- “Here it goes,” I seconded.
- “Funny,” I then added, “but one would think that if this could happen to those hands, then surely your eyes, that are open all day could develop free will and close down right now as well, don’t you think?”

Her eyes shut.

- “Can you open your eyes, Sara?”
- “They don’t want to.”
- “But you’re not in trance?”
- “I don’t think so.”
- “You know, Sara, I’m slightly concerned. If you are not in trance but your body can do all these amazing things, then it could be absolutely overwhelmingly magical if you were in trance, don’t you agree?”

Sara went quiet.

- “I think,” she finally said, “that I know what’s going on.”
- “What is it then?”
- “My hands and eyes are in trance!”
- “Ah. I think you’re right, Sara. And what would it take for them to teach the rest of you how to be in trance now, Sara?”
- “I think we just have to wait and see.”

- “Well, I am sitting here now with you, and I’m looking at you and I’ll wait with you. We have all the time in the world.”

### **Ways of encouraging magic of transition in therapy<sup>2</sup>:**

- Challenging self-limiting beliefs, complex-equivalences or limiting identity statements (e.g. using the NLP sleight-of-mouth patterns).
- Knowing, and communicating it congruently, that however much there is and however much is known, there is always so much more than this.
- Cultivating your own (therapist) capacity to stay centred, grounded and open.
- Challenging rigidity and ‘the truth’. Using recursive thinking and being willing to challenge your own maps.
- Being willing to wait.
- ‘Holding space’ for a client and believing that a state of transition (confusion, not knowing, curiosity and ignorance) is blissful, and even more so – inevitable.
- Directing clients to larger systems (chunking up).
- Using permissive trancework.
- Inviting breath into where it is not yet going. (e.g. “you hold your breath when you’re talking about it, and I notice you tense your shoulders, what would it be like to say this but this time allowing breath to flow and reach your shoulders?”)
- Being playful in therapy, being interested and curious. Being genuine<sup>3</sup>.
- Finding, cultivating and surrendering to faith.
- Working with re-defining identity.
- Abandoning labels and instead using senses, experiences, being.
- Moving from your centre (not from your ego) and connecting – going into trance yourself.
- Engaging in psycho-physical rituals – such as meditation, Tai-Chi, Aikido, Kundalini Yoga.
- Engaging in active practises of centring and grounding to contain change<sup>4</sup>.

2. **Everyday magic - magic in the Buddhist sense:** when we cultivate our ability to see the world with awe, to celebrate life, to find the better story. This is the naturalistic / Buddhist point of view.

This is, possibly, the most important magic attitude to teach in therapy, particular to depressed people. We can do that by modelling curiosity, and encouraging fascination and benign exploration of the world.

In a recent workshop with Ernest Rossi (2002, personal communication), he was talking about learnings and activities that are worth pursuing in life, that encourage generativity and healing “Find what’s curious for you,” he said, “what’s fascinating, what’s unknown, what’s numinous; this is where you can grow.”

This type of magic is useful for generative life and therapy because it encourages us to remain open and flexible. It is only when we ‘know’, when we ‘fully understand’ that we become stagnant and rigid.

The last century has presented a strong counter-position to the external-locus of control of the previous centuries. We are now seen as the masters of our castles, the emperors of our bodies and brains – not merely snowflakes carried adrift by menacing wind or softly melted by a kind sun. But now the time has come to embrace double-description: to hold the ancient paradox of both claiming autonomy, responsibility and act for our own future, and – at the same time – surrender to the archetypal, the collective, the divine, to Nature. When the therapist can demonstrate she peacefully holds both views and can alternate between them, she invites her clients to do the same – to look for the new, the fascinating and magical while resting on the ancestral.

*“When you look deeply at an orange, you realize that an orange – or any fruit – is nothing less than a miracle... When you look at it deeply, you will be able to see many wonderful things – the sun shining and the rain falling on the orange tree, the orange blossoms...”* Thich Nhat Nanh (2001).

### **Ways of encouraging everyday magic in therapy:**

- Asking the universe for a symbol (using peripheral vision).
- Looking at the world with baby eyes (accessing baby state, anchoring and exploring the world with baby eyes).
- Shutting all modalities but one and exploring (just listening, touching your friend / partner with ears and eyes shut, buy 20 spices and herbs and, with eyes close, taste them one by one).
- Using Zen eating (mindful eating)<sup>5</sup>.
- Walking (slower than usually) in nature (having a session outside?).
- Slowing down – and doing whatever we do slower, so we can notice so much more.
- Stack anchors of curiosity, wonder and awe and explore senses.
- Engage in creativity, drawing, pottering, writing poetry.
- Shamanic exercise of 1<sup>st</sup> positioning nature – experiencing the world from the point of view of a bird, a plant, a stone.
- Encouraging recursive thinking, multi-maps, expanding matrices, moving systemically<sup>7</sup>.
- Engaging (with client / on their own) in any physical activity – calling forth body curiosity and body-wisdom.

3. **Magic as connection:** When we truly make contact with another sentient being.

### ***I want to play / John Dent***

*I want to play with my friends*

*Have fun and be silly*

*Because I forget how important these things are*

*It helps me trust and be open  
It makes the world seem like a safer place.  
Being playful takes me out of the darkness,  
In which I get stuck  
Being playful takes me into the light.*

*Things I could do are:  
Go ice-skating  
Dress-up in silly cloths  
Write nonsense poetry  
Walk funny  
Pretend I'm rich and famous  
Throw snowballs at policemen from behind trees  
Walk backwards.*

*And when I need someone to play with,  
Who shall I call on?  
Will you play out with me?  
Will you be my friend?  
Will you put all the problems of the world to one side,  
And dance and rejoice with life?  
Because sometimes this is what I need  
A hand to hold whilst I'm being free  
Of the dark hole I get so comfortably stuck in.  
We can be free together,  
Running around, being airplanes,  
Flying over the world  
Touching the clouds  
Riding the waves,  
Like dolphins chasing the sun  
Flirting with flowers  
Like butterflies  
Playing like happy children  
And remembering it's ok to play  
Remembering  
It's ok to play.*

A client came to therapy wanting to translate her energy, her strength and vocation into freedom of breath and body flexibility. She felt that her body aches and stresses, no longer reflecting her adequately, she didn't have the need for tension anymore.

We worked with breathing. I put my hand on her stomach and invited her to breathe into this space, as if we are meeting, exchanging greetings, I am here, I know, me too.

We breathed. It was magical. Tears came out of her eyes and she said, "It is so rare for me to have intimacy that is not bound with attachments of sex or

possessiveness. It is so nice to really be here, with you, without trying to change anything, prove anything or make anything happen.”

To dare and go there one must be willing to have his soul touched by another; to risk the possibility of change, the challenge of the unknown.

When I interview a client for therapy, I ask myself – Am I willing to go with this person on a journey that may change my life? Am I curious and interested to embark on such an unknown adventure with him?

When you see me and bless me, I exist even more. Through movement of relating, of touching your soul with mine, I become more alive. And what is life if not breath, which connects the innermost with the outermost, until they are separate and yet they share a vibrant relational field.

And really, is there anything more powerful and profound than allowing yourself to be you, genuinely, and from this very place to connect with another? Is there anything more frightening than doing so?

Therapy works also because it may allow for the magic of connection to happen, whereupon two embodied souls share a moment, a breath.

#### **Ways of encouraging magic of connection in therapy:**

- Breathing together, with or without touch, with or without eye contact.
- Therapist centring, and opening to the client as an invitation.
- Buddhist practices of generating Bodhichitta and Metta-Bhavana<sup>6</sup>.
- Working with Archetypal Energies: Dilts' Co-Sponsorship exercises (1987-2003).
- Using many of Stephan Gilligan's rituals of connection, for example Good Self/Bad Self identity; A question of Centring (with partner); Speaking from one's centre; Cultivating and sensing archetypal energies (1997, 1998).

### **E. Non-generative Magic**

These are common types of magic that I find foul. It doesn't mean that I'm right, it only means that in my way of thinking of reality, I don't like this sort of magic.

1. **Magic of quick-fixing:** When we disrespect ourselves or others by trying to fix a person as if he or she were broken; as if they were machines that had to be mended; as if it was in our power to fix people.

I don't like quick-fixing because they imply we are broken, and that we **need** to be changed, to be different from who we are. Questions I keep asking myself are: “is this a world I want to belong to? Would these presuppositions make my life richer or poorer? Would they support my humanity and unfathomability or limit it?”

I like to belong to a world (map) where change is possible, but where just being me is ok too. I'd like to hold presuppositions that allow for flexibility and leave space for unknown, unexpected; for fate.

The mathematician Gödel has shown that any mathematical world is either incomplete (there are some things it can not prove) or immanently holds contradictions (Shanker, 1988). I like my realities to be like that too.

In asking to be 'fixed' or 'done to', the client implies he is wrong, and diminishes his autonomy and responsibility, while assuming the omnipotence and better understanding of the therapist (the therapist is the expert in me). I don't want this responsibility. I don't want this power. I want to be empowered by your autonomy and empowerment, not on your expense. I want to see life unfolding in you naturally, not mechanistically following the manual for perfection, for the 'right way' to be.

2. **Magic of the ego:** When we pretend that it is from within our cognitive selves that magic arises; when we claim sole ownership of magic.

Some people, among them NLPers believe that we can control our mind (or brain) by meticulously altering its mechanisms (e.g. through submodality change). By doing so, they claim, we actually alter our world.

There is a great similarity between this claim and the Buddhist belief about liberation. But there are also some great differences. According to Buddhism, the world is an illusion, we create it through our minds and we enslave ourselves to it unnecessarily (the map is not the territory). Liberation, or enlightenment, is the process of realizing this on every possible level and becoming 'masters of our minds' (Gyatso, 1995). This opening to magic can be attained by virtuous behavior, moral practice and faith. Without developing a moral character and remembering our insignificance, without learning the falsehood of all attachments (not just the painful ones) and ascribing to a higher good we will merely decay our souls – creating a false image of omnipotence and hurt others and ourselves (ibid.). Without a value of a higher order, we turn ourselves into machines. We forget that the magic of life is higher and bigger than us, even though it is within us all.

Although the difference between the two religions can be seen as merely a difference of values rather than praxis, I still believe it is a great one.

I'm reminded of Mr. Savage's conversation with Mustapha Mond, the world controller in Huxley's (1932) 'Brave New-World':

*"We don't," said the Controller. "We prefer to do things comfortably."*

*"But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin."*

*"In fact," said Mustapha Mond, "you're claiming the right to be unhappy."*

*"All right then," said the Savage defiantly, "I'm claiming the right to be unhappy."*

*"Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen to-morrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind." There was a long silence.  
"I claim them all," said the Savage at last.*

When we behave like magic is solely in our hands (and miss double-description), we lose god, myth and the richness of ancestral history. We become the rulers of our soulless empire; we have a kingdom but nobody to share it with. We miss the better story.

3. **Black Magic:** When we use magic in a way that takes us further away from our centre; when we use magic to hurt ourselves or others; when we use magic disrespectfully or irresponsibly.

Anything that takes us away from our centre, from being honest and real with ourselves is, for me, black magic. Under my presuppositions you categorically cannot be unkind to yourself or others and still be centred. Black magic is when we use power, intension and direction in a path without a heart.

## **F. White rabbit's footsteps**

I'd like to believe that this paper is a beginning; that you were intrigued and excited by the potential of using magic in your practice; that you remembered that magic is everywhere, that you do it anyhow. I'd like to believe that you would want to awaken your own magic, in your practice and your life.

I'm a sucker for magic. There's nothing more addictive for me than seeing life unfolding, it's magic. And I really want to hear your own tales of magic:  
Tales of magic of transformation and transition.  
Tales of everyday magic; tales of awe.  
Tales of magic of connections, of relationships.

Tell me your magic tales so we can pass it on.  
Tell me your magic tales so others can rejoice, grow and blossom, so others can find more magic in their lives too.

Tell me your tales of magic, so we can make this happen.  
Tell me your tales of magic.

## **Footnotes**

1. See the following articles – 'Holistic Approach to Psychotherapy' (2001), 'A myth of Transition' (2001), 'When the Hammock swings' (2003).
2. For further ideas and discussions see 'A Myth of Transition' (2001) and 'When the hammock swings' (2003).
3. See Gilligan's Therapeutic Trances, (1987).

4. For grounding and centring exercises see Gilligan's 'The Courage to Love' and Anodea Judith's 'Eastern Body, Western Mind'.
5. See Thich Nhat Hanh (2001) beautiful and simple exercises for mindfulness in our everyday life.
6. In future papers I shall present a therapeutic adaptation to religious principles practices, rituals and practices, including the Buddhist 'generating Bodhichitta' (connecting with divinity within) and 'Metta-Bhavana' (cultivating loving kindness).
7. See Michael Hall's 'The Matrix Model' (2002) for a model of exploring, expanding and changing matrices in a systemic way.

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