

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ATW-25

Now You See It, Now You Don't - V: Closing Scenes

Eugene, Oregon

October 18, 1973

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The Amazing Randi lives in a house guarded by two beautiful macaws. On the door is a Peruvian mask from which blaring martial music issues when the bell is rung. The door opens from the opposite side one would expect from the position of the doorknob. Inside are mummy cases, clocks that run backwards, and other strange and incongruous objects that plainly advertise the dweller as a creator of illusions.

I met Randi less than 24 hours after I became a Geller convert and was still feeling good about my experience of the previous evening.

Randi turned out to be a delightful host, talkative and funny, with a twinkle in his eye and a roguish look that always let you know he might be up to fooling you. I told Randi what I had seen Uri do. He listened attentively but made no comments. When I finished, he invited me over to a table on which were envelopes, paper, nails, nuts, bolts, and little aluminum film canisters -- the sort that rolls of 35-millimeter film come in.

"What shall we try first?" he asked, "some telepathy?" He invited me to take a piece of paper and three envelopes. "Go to the other end of the room or out of the room," he instructed. "Draw any figure you like on the paper, fold it up, seal it in an envelope, seal that envelope in another envelope, and that in the third." I followed the instructions and brought the sealed

envelope back. Deep inside was a drawing of two intersecting circles.

"We'll put that aside for now, " Randi said, setting it down on the table. He handed me a carton of sturdy four-inch nails. Pick any six that you think are perfectly straight." I did. I also looked to make sure they were all real nails. "Now put a rubber band around that bunch and set them aside!" I did.

"Meanwhile, let's try one of Mr. Geller's favorite tricks." He picked ten film canisters and told me to stuff one of them full of nuts and bolts -- "so tightly that it won't rattle if moved." He went out of the room while I did this. "Now mix them all up," he shouted from the kitchen. When I had done so, Randi came back and sat down at the table.

He studied the canisters and moved his hand over them without touching them. "I'm going to eliminate the empty ones," he told me. "When I point to one and say it's empty, you remove it. And set it down quietly so I can't tell anything from the sound." He made passes over the canisters, just as I had seen Uri Geller do on television. "That one's empty," he said confidently, pointing to a canister in the middle. I removed it and set it aside. "Don't tell me if I'm wrong," he said. "That one's empty." He pointed to another. Randi had a great sense of drama; I found myself very involved with his performance. He eliminated another canister and another. Finally, only two were left. He passed his palm over one and then the other as if feeling for subtle emanations from the metal inside. "That's empty," he said at last, indicating the one on the left. I removed it. It was empty. The remaining can was full of nuts and bolts. He had never touched the canisters nor jarred the table. I was amazed.

"Now," Randi told me, "that was a trick." "And I'm going to show you how to do it. But I want you to promise you won't reveal the method because we magicians aren't supposed to reveal secrets. This is a special case." I gave my promise, and Randi taught me how he did it. It was very simple -- so simple a child could mas-

ter it. In fact, Randi said he had taught several children to do it. The trick is based on a subtle but easily perceptible difference between the full can and the empty ones -- a difference that can be seen by one who knows what to look for.

"What if the canister is filled with water?" I asked.

"It's the same idea -- you just look for different things." "Do you remember when Mr. Geller tried to do that on the Tonight Show?" Randi asked. I thought I did. "Let's look at it," he said. Randi has a videotape machine in his house and recordings of most of Uri Geller's television appearances. "I learned how he does most of his tricks by studying these tapes," he explained. We relived the famous Tonight Show. There was Johnny Carson telling Uri to go ahead and do something. Uri stalled. There were the film canisters, one full of water. "But we handled those cans in a way that eliminated the difference," Randi said. Uri was moving his hand over the canisters. "No, I'm not getting it," he said and gave up.

We sat through the rest of the show in which nothing much happened. "Now look at this," Randi said. He put on a videotape of the Merv Griffin Show, where Uri appeared a few nights later. It began with Griffin stating that Uri's failures with Johnny Carson had convinced him Uri was real. The high point of that show was the bending of a nail.

"All right, back to the table," Randi said. He picked up the bunch of six nails. "Let's find one that's absolutely straight." He rolled each one back and forth on the table, keeping up a constant patter while eliminating those nails that had what he called "little woggily-woggilies" -- slight irregularities that kept them from rolling smoothly. He ended up with one nail that he liked, holding it between thumb and forefinger, midway along the shaft. "Now, keep your eye on it," he said, "I'm going to try to bend it." He moved it back and forth slowly and gently between his thumb and forefinger. I hardly knew what to expect. Suddenly, the nail began to bend before my eyes. "Look at that," Randi chuckled. Sure enough: it was bent to about 30 degrees.

I shook my head in astonishment. "Not bad, huh?" Randi asked. I allowed as how it was not bad. "That's incredible," I said. I took the nail. It was not warm or in any way unusual. Just bent. Then, also before my eyes, Randi showed me in slow motion how he had substituted a bent nail for one of the straight ones, how he had concealed the bend from me until the proper moment, then revealed it while rubbing the nail between his fingers. But I had seen it bend. Suddenly, I experienced a sense of how strongly the mind can impose its own interpretation on perceptions: how it can see what it expects to see and not see what it does not expect to see.

"Now, let's watch that tape of the Merv Griffin Show again and see how Uri does it," Randi suggested. Sure enough, there was Uri Geller manipulating three nails just as Randi had. And under Randi's tutelage, I could see that one nail was never, in fact, shown in its entirety to the close-up camera, even though Uri was claiming to hold up each nail, one at a time, to prove its straightness.

"Ready for some more telepathy?" Randi asked. "Let's try that sealed envelope." He went back to the table, sat down, pulled up a pad and pen, and held the envelope to his forehead. "You concentrate on the figure," he told me. He started making marks on the paper and drew out an equals sign; he seemed to be way off. "Now don't tell me how I'm doing," he said, "just let me work on it." Slowly, he extended the lines, crossing them into a flat "X." All the time he muttered to himself. Then the lines began to curve. "Oh, I see it now," he said happily. And there on the pad appeared the two intersecting circles -- exactly as I had drawn them. There was no doubt that Randi had known what was in the envelope. I opened the envelopes, one by one, took out the folded paper, and showed it to Randi. "Well, well," he said, pleased with himself. "Look at that."

Randi showed me how he did that one, too, and it was also very simple. Really, there is only one way to know what is inside an envelope without using paranormal powers and that way involves getting one's hands on the envelope for a while. "People come back

from seeing Uri Geller," Randi said, "and they say, 'He never touched the envelope.' But if you question them carefully, what they really mean is: He never touched it in ways that they think would have enabled him to know what was inside. But that is the basis of stage magic. You take advantage of little opportunities to do the dirty work and know that people aren't going to notice you. Geller is a master opportunist."

"Have you ever seen him doing the dirty work?" I asked.

"I sure have. I was at Town Hall the other night. The thing that really irks me is how much people let him get away with -- things they wouldn't let a magician get away with. Remember when he asked that woman to write a foreign capital on the blackboard, and she wrote 'Denver?' The whole audience was annoyed at her for not following instructions. At one point, you could just see every head in the audience turn to glare at her, and right then old Uri just shot a glance at the blackboard. It's that simple. And when he broke that ring at the end -- remember that? He said, 'Let's try two rings at once.' What he did was click off his microphone for an instant, wedge one ring into the other, and give a hard squeeze so that the zodiac ring broke where the setting was joined."

"And you saw that?"

"I saw it. It's that simple. Everybody looks for complicated explanations, and the explanations are always simple. That's why you don't see them. And the people who are easiest to take in with that sort of thing are intelligent people, especially scientists. The people who are hard to fool are children, because they look at what they're not supposed to look at; scientists are pushovers."

"Has the Stanford Research Institute ever had a professional magician act as a consultant in their studies of Geller?" I asked.

"Never! Isn't that unbelievable. They get insulted if you suggest it, or they say that a magician would put out 'bad vibes' that would interfere with Uri's abilities."

"All right," I said. "I'm impressed with everything you've showed me and told me. But last night Uri Geller bent one of my

keys for me. Can you do the same?"

"Got a key?" Randi asked. I brought out the brass key that Uri had failed to bend. "Give it to me." Randi took the key and played with it for a while. "Yes, I think that will work," he said. He sat down across from me and held the key under my nose, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger.

"Look at that," he said, "I think it's going." The key was bending. In a trice it was bent to about 30 degrees, looking for all the world like a Geller production.

"No!" I protested. My faith in Uri Geller lay in pieces on the floor.

"All I needed was a moment in which your attention was distracted to bend the key by jamming it against my chair; -- I made the bend appear just as I did with the nail." Again I had seen not just a bend but actual bending.

"Have you ever tried to bend a key with your hands?" Randi asked.

"A little. I've just assumed I couldn't."

Randi then showed me how he could bend a key with his hands, and I was able to do the same, although with difficulty. But I saw clearly that with practice one could get very good at bending metal objects quickly and surreptitiously without recourse to lasers concealed in the belt or any other complicated devices.

Randi also made a fork bend for me, although he could not simulate the fork I had seen melt over Uri's hand. He astounded me with other sleight-of-hand tricks. Even when I knew what to look for, I could not see him doing the "dirty work."

"Do you think that knowing what I do now, I could see Geller doing it?"

"I doubt it," Randi replied. "He's very good. He can take advantage of any situation and turn it to his advantage. And people want to believe in him. I remembered how Martin Abend had remembered Uri's telepathic performance and how I had embellished some of what

I had seen in telling others about it.

"What about the time I saw him make a ring sag into an oval shape without touching it?" I asked.

"Look, I can't explain all of what he does, especially if I haven't seen it. I repeat: he's good. And he probably has many different techniques available. But if an accomplished professional has a chance to watch him closely, it can all be figured out. That's why Uri won't go anywhere near me or any other magician."

"How did you get a chance to watch him up close?"

"First, by masquerading as a reporter when he was interviewed at TIME. And then by studying the videotapes."

"Do you want to expose him?"

"I'd love to, but I don't think that will be easy. The fact that I can duplicate his feats by magic tricks proves nothing. The only way would be to catch him substituting a bent nail or jamming a key against a chair leg, and that will be difficult."

I thanked The Amazing Randi for his time and went on my way, amazed. I had never before had the experience of going from such total belief to such total disbelief in so short a time. Nor had I ever doubted my perceptions so thoroughly. Uri's unwillingness to perform in the presence of magicians seemed especially damning.

Since then I have thought a lot about Uri Geller and have talked with others about him. One person I spoke to was Ray Hyman, a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon here in Eugene, who teaches a course called "The Pseudopsychologies." It deals with astrology and various psychic and occult phenomena. Dr. Hyman describes himself as an "open-minded skeptic, who has never seen a genuine psychic phenomenon," and does not know what kind of evidence it would take to convince him of one's existence. He has a background in magic and spent a day at the Stanford Research Institute watching Uri Geller last December. He decided that Uri was "a very good magician and an incredible opportunist" and that he could replicate most of what he saw by simple tricks.

"What I find most interesting about Uri Geller are the reactions to him," Hyman told me. "For instance, the physicists at Stanford were irate at the suggestion that Geller might be tricking them. They were physicists -- real scientists -- and I was only a psychologist. I was astounded that they had never bothered to check up on Uri's background in Israel."

Hyman showed me correspondence from a professor of psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who described Uri's early work as a stage magician and enclosed clippings from Israeli papers denouncing Geller as a fraud. At one point, an Israeli court ordered him to refund money to a man who contended that he had produced magic tricks and not psychic phenomena as advertised for his performance.

"The question of whether he's real or not is less interesting than what he's showing us about the nature of evidence and the way belief shapes perception," Hyman went on. "Uri Geller is an important person; we can learn a lot from him." I agree.

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What is there to conclude from this maddeningly contradictory mass of data. First, I think that the question of whether Uri Geller is real or not is essentially unanswerable. As deep as I have gotten into trying to answer that question, the data come back reading: maybe yes and maybe no.

I cannot say with certainty that Uri Geller does not have the powers he claims. I have an intuitive conviction that such powers exist. I also have a strong feeling that Uri is, among other things, a brilliantly artistic stage magician, whose ability to create belief is great. But I am not sure that stage magic can explain completely all that I saw him do. And that is as far as I can go without getting very confused.

It must mean that the question of whether Uri Geller is real is the wrong one to ask. A better question might be: How are Uri Geller and James Randi the same? I find them the same in that being around both of them boosted my mood and had a salu-

tary effect on my thinking. In their own ways, both of them showed me very clearly that my sense impressions of reality are not necessarily the same as reality, and I value that experience. But Uri believes in psychic phenomena and The Amazing Randi does not. They balance each other nicely: Uri's excesses of belief (his preoccupation with intelligences outside the universe, for example) and Randi's excesses of skepticism ("Psychic healing is a bunch of nonsense.")

People who believe in things like telepathy and psychokinesis are sometimes accused of thinking wishfully. I have always thought that people who denied the existence of such things were also thinking wishfully -- that is, ignoring certain evidence while paying attention to other. Leon Jaroff, the editor of TIME who wrote the negative story about Uri Geller, is quoted in NEW YORK Magazine as saying, "There has never been a single adequately documented 'psychic phenomenon.' Many people believe in things like this because they need to." That view discounts completely the evidence of direct experience. It, too, is based on a need to see things a certain way.

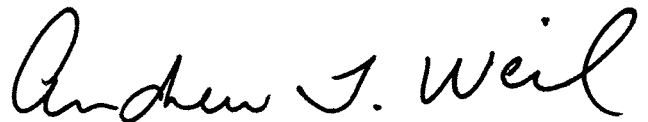
Selective perception of evidence is the basic method by which we construct our models of reality. Many systems of thought urge us to distinguish between reality and our models of it. For example, one of the important themes in Don Juan's philosophy, as transmitted by Carlos Castaneda, is that what we call "objective" reality is nothing more than a consistent model -- one of many possible -- built up of learned and habitual ways of selecting evidence and interpreting perceptions.

Some of these systems go on to suggest that human imagination, and particularly, the capacity to fantasize, are vitally involved in the process by which reality is shaped and made to seem objective. "Wishful thinking," though it has a negative connotation, is an appropriate term to describe the process, and we all engage in it, often unconsciously, to bring things into reality according to our needs and to make them leave reality according to our needs.

That is why certain questions like, "Is Uri Geller a fraud?" or "Do psychic phenomena exist?" are unanswerable. The answer is always Yes and No, depending on who is looking from what point of view. Each of us has the power to make such phenomena real in our own lives or not. The first step toward making them real is to believe that evidence exists. In this way "faith" or "wishful thinking" is a technique used to obtain certain experiences that make the technique unnecessary.

As for Uri, himself, I wish him good fortune and wisdom to use his abilities well. From knowing him, I have learned an enormous amount about the way I see things and the need for great care in evaluating evidence pertaining to things I would like to believe.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'A'.

Andrew T. Weil

"Since the dawn of history various extraordinary phenomena have been recorded as happening amongst human beings. Witnesses are not wanting in modern times to attest to such events in societies living under the full blaze of modern science. The vast mass of such evidence is unreliable, coming as it does from ignorant, superstitious, or fraudulent persons. In many instances the so-called miracles are imitations. But what do they imitate?"

-- Vivekananda, Raja-Yoga*

*Vivekananda, Raja-Yoga, (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, rev. ed., 1955), from Author's Preface, p. 1

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