Harvard Business Review

CREATIVITY

Life's Work: An Interview with Penn Jillette

by Alison Beard

FROM THE OCTOBER 2016 ISSUE

MICHAEL LEWIS

Penn Jillette is one-half of the magic duo Penn & Teller, who launched their act to great acclaim in the 1980s but have never stopped changing it. A performer on stage and screen for more than 40 years, he recently lost 100+ pounds, an experience chronicled in his new book, *Presto!*

HBR: Over such a long career, how do you stay on the cutting edge?

Jillette: I think that if you worry about staying on the cutting edge, you're less likely to stumble onto it. To have any chance at innovation, you have to start with passion. Sometimes that means new stuff, but sometimes it means we do something 100 years old. Many, many acts achieve a certain level of success and then come to Vegas to do the same show, play golf, and die. The audience changes, so there's very little economic pressure to change the show. But my idea of fun is not golf; it's writing and rehearsing. So we develop new material—not for the audience or to keep it interesting for us, but because we've got ideas.

Tell me a little more about your creative process. How do you and Teller develop your act?

Every Tuesday we get together, usually at a coffee shop, and we sit with our computers in front of us and knock around ideas. We are not in any way supportive. As soon as the germ of an idea comes up, the other person tries to crush it. But we are brutal because if there's something bad about an idea, we want to find out as soon as we can. It has to survive that process. That doesn't mean the idea won't come up another hundred times, but it will come up differently. We never, ever compromise, because that can only lead to mediocrity. If one of us doesn't like something, we try to come up with another idea we both do like. We almost always start with a pretentious intellectual thought—for example, what do we have to say about the TSA and freedom? Then we add a trick, and the very last thing we add is jokes. Our conversations about magic are really about what we're reading, doing, studying. We never say, "Well, I heard Copperfield has this trick."

Early on, you rejected the label "magician" and did unorthodox things like revealing how tricks were done. How do you see yourself fitting into the industry now?

When we hit the scene, in the 1980s, magic shows were a place where divorced fathers would drop their children for a matinee. A magician was a greasy guy in a tux with a lot of birds, torturing women. We wanted a different audience, so we avoided that word. Of course, we then won every award in the community. Hack magicians hated us because, they said, we were giving away secrets all the time. We had one guy come up to us after a show, very angry, and say, "Whose side are you guys on, anyway?"—implying that there's some battle line between magician and audience. But that kind of thinking is toxic and anti-art. Can you imagine Keith Richards saying to Eddie Van Halen, "Why are you on the audience's side? What's wrong with you?" Or Ginsberg saying to Kerouac, "What—you're writing for the people?" Our goal was to explore how people ascertain truths in a lighthearted way. The show wasn't "We know something you don't." So when no one knew who we were, we said, "We don't do magic." Once we were known, we could embrace being magicians. There's a lot to be said for sniffing around to find something different and then going back to your roots.

What advice would you give our nonmagician readers about how to connect with an audience?

I've never been able to get an audience interested without being interested myself. I find that if someone is talking about their passion—whether it's horizontal oil drilling, Spanish nurse porn, or stamp collecting—I get sucked in. Steven Pinker makes me care about grammar because he cares about grammar. If Nicholson Baker, my favorite living writer, cares deeply about the Dewey Decimal System, I can too. The monologue I did on Broadway about the carnival sideshow was

not something the audience had given the slightest indication they wanted to hear, but I cared about it very much, and it got the most comments. People say to me, “How can I make this particular idea play in front of the audience?” But if they’re phrasing the question that way, they haven’t got a chance. It has to be “I have something I desperately want to say. How do I say it?” Then it comes down to mechanics: “Are your sentences clear? Are you making eye contact? Is your body language doing this and that?” But you can’t talk about those things until you think what you’re saying is the most important thing in the world. I grew up in a dead factory town in a school system that taught absolutely nothing. But there was one substitute teacher, one time, who told me a valuable thing. He said, “No one cares about what you write or say. They’re looking for any excuse to not read or listen. You have to make sure they don’t have one.” And boy, that applies to everything. No one wants to hear your stupid speech. So if you stutter, or ramble, or if the sound system is bad, everybody in the audience is relieved; they think, “Oh, good, we can go on daydreaming.” When you go out on stage, you’ve got the opening two minutes to get the audience thinking, “This is the most important thing I’ve ever heard” or “This is grabbing my heart and changing my life.” So it’s passion and mechanics. If someone is phenomenally skilled, we watch. And if someone has unbelievable passion, we watch. Very rarely do we get people who do both at once, but when we do, they’re remembered forever. What makes Bob Dylan not do the same show that Paul McCartney does—slick, perfect, exactly what people want—but instead go out and do a show nobody wants? His passion and skill drag you through it. It’s the same thing that made Miles Davis go, “I invented four kinds of music, but guess what? I’m inventing a fifth.” The same thing that made Picasso say, “I can draw better than anybody, but I’m going to draw different than anybody too.” Those two things do fight, by the way. Skills will make you cynical (“I’ve got this shit down”); passion will make you sloppy (“I don’t have to stay in the light and talk into my mic”). And none of us will ever hit the Dylan, Miles, Picasso level. But even in a simple presentation, you’ve got to be going for it—with your passion and your skill at the highest they can be.

How do you maintain that over so many shows?

You have to have discipline. Every performance teacher will tell you that you must be in the moment. You must be mindful. That’s really, really important. Of course, I’ve also seen and experienced situations where automatic pilot takes over and the performances are perhaps better. There’s a story, certainly apocryphal, but I heard it was Laurence Olivier: After a performance of Shakespeare, he was trashing his dressing room. A friend came backstage and

said, “Why are you so upset? I believe it was the best performance of your career.” He responded, “Exactly. And I don’t know what the f— I did.” The moments I feel best onstage, I can’t really tell you what combination of mindfulness, flow, and automatic pilot makes it work.

How did your partnership with Teller start, and how has it developed over the years?

Some people you have an immediate affection for. You want to hug them. You want to be in their presence. You like the way they smell. The terms we usually use for that are sexual, but sometimes it doesn’t manifest itself that way. With other people, your relationship is completely intellectual. You have no natural affection for them at all. I have that with Teller. But we became partners because we absolutely respected each other and we felt we did better work together than separately. Most of your performing groups are almost romantic, you know. Lennon and McCartney, Jagger and Richards, Gilbert and Sullivan, Lewis and Martin—they fell in love. But those things blow up. It turns out that respect is more durable than affection. There’s no better partner than Teller. He’s not the smartest or most creative person I’ve ever been around, but he’s the hardest working. He will not give up; you can put him on a simple task and in the middle of it hit him with a baseball bat square in the face, and he goes right back to the task. He never makes mistakes. He’s always on time. He never drinks or does drugs; neither of us do. So all our attention can go toward doing the best art we can. We argue constantly and cruelly, but only about the show. We don’t ever have disagreements about our personal life. We do not socialize. And yet my heaviest and most important conversations are with Teller. When our parents died, we were the first ones we went to. When I was going to have children and get married, he was the first person I talked to. On all the milestones that really matter, he’s my closest friend. For hanging out, he’s not even on the list. When I come home from work and my wife asks, “How’s Teller?” I’ll say, “I didn’t see him.” What I mean is we showed up, we were in our dressing rooms, we performed onstage, we left afterward. It’s not avoidance. There’s no anger. But I certainly don’t know on a micro level whether he’s in a good mood or a bad one. We’re doing what we’re doing in that frame, and when we work, we do it really intently and intensely.

You’ve said that the biggest illusion of all is that it’s a two-man show. How do you lead the larger team?

Teller and I are the two worst bosses in the world. Teller’s a micromanager, and I won’t talk to anybody. So we have a group of people who have been with us for 20-some years and who can work with those two personalities and be happy without real leadership. Another way to put that is, we’ve hired our bosses: Glenn Alai, who manages us, and Kathleen “Burt” Boyette, who runs the show. Of course, they work for us; our names are on the marquee. But if you were to follow us

around and listen to every conversation, I don't think you'd be able to tell they work for us. They are the ones who can tell you how employees are dealt with, how schedules are made, how things are accomplished. Teller and I were able to find and keep them: That's our management style. I should also mention Johnny Thompson, who is 81 and the best magic mind alive today. He is at all our rehearsals and all our writing sessions. Teller and I both respect him so much that we don't argue about stupid things if he's listening. He does not buy any of our pretentious bullshit. He can say, "Joke's not funny" or "That trick isn't fooling anybody" or "Penn, you need to do something amazing here or the bit's going to suck." He also knows exactly what brand and color of Mylar thread to use so that it won't show up onstage. Johnny is the grown-up, the arbitrator. So we have this group of people, many of whom started with us when they were 18. I was once told by a very wise person in business, "You don't find people for the job, you create them." Our people are not fit to go work with someone else. They don't know any way for an operation to run except our way.

You've said that you love the strategic constraints of a street show. How do you operate in an environment where you're less constrained?

The nice thing is that time and physics you cannot overcome, and that's what we're battling against to make things that look impossible happen onstage. Money won't solve that, and that's really invigorating.

Your new book focuses on your weight loss. Did you approach that personal challenge in the same way you approach professional ones?

I was at least 110 pounds overweight. I didn't mind being fat, but my health was not good. This fellow Ray Cronise, who I call Crayray, came to me and said, "You know, if you want to lose weight, you can do it, but it's hard—hard like learning how to juggle five clubs, or doing a magic trick that's never been done before, or learning to play 'Cherokee' on the upright bass," and boy did that kick in. No trick, no illusion, no jive. Just hard. He said, "You're not going to eat in smaller portions. You're not going to walk a little more. You're going to limit your food to 1,000 calories a day and lose a pound a day for three months." And in that three months I completely reset my taste buds and habits. Now I eat no animal products, no refined grains, extremely low salt, sugar, and oil. And when people say, "Boy, I can't imagine how hard it was to lose that weight," I say, "It turns out hard things are fun, and easy things aren't." I'm proud. I also learned that when you haven't eaten, you can focus. You get a kind of clarity by fasting. So now if I've got an important gig coming up, I do not eat before. Also, in business meetings, if you're the one not eating, you win. They're multitasking; you're not.

A version of this article appeared in the October 2016 issue (p.128) of *Harvard Business Review*.

Alison Beard is a senior editor at *Harvard Business Review*.

This article is about CREATIVITY

⊕ **FOLLOW** THIS TOPIC

Related Topics: ARTS & CULTURE

Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

1 COMMENTS

Bella Sarah 21 days ago

It's extraordinary how much he wanted to make this change and improve his health. I just listened an hour long interview with him on AoC, and he speaks about his weight loss and how that improved his life.

REPLY 0 0

JOIN THE CONVERSATION