

Autotranslucence

I'll work out what I'm writing about once I've written it.

≡ Menu

Becoming a magician

□ Essays □ March 30, 2018August 8, 2019 □ 9 Minutes

When I was a teenager I often used fantasy as a vehicle for escapism. Some people, when they fantasise, think about sex or dragons or wildly unlikely events like winning the lottery. I fantasised about things like having a family of twelve children, designing my own octagonal house and being an adult artist who lived with her friends. The last one morphed one day into a detailed imagining of myself as an adult, in a way that seemed incomprehensibly beautiful and liberated to fourteen year old me. Things like living with friends I cared about, having multiple partners who cared about each other, riding my bike everywhere, and making a living as an artist seemed as unattainable as slaying dragons might've for teenage boys. The description was about five or six handwritten pages long, and at the time, it was a manifestation of desperate longing to be somewhere other than where I was, someone who felt free and cared for. At the time I saw that description as basically an impossibility; my life could never be so amazing in reality.

Fast forward about seven or ten years and I rediscovered the description when I was moving old notebooks and journals from one dusty storage spot to another. As I read through it, I discovered that 90% of the statements I had made in that description were true (or true in spirit). While I didn't technically live with my partner, he stayed over most days and was close friends with all of my housemates. At the time I was throwing weekly dinner parties where friends would invite random newcomers to attend and I never knew how many people were coming until we actually sat down to eat. Some statements were true down to the suburb I lived in. As I read through the piece with the eyes of 24-year-old me, I felt that it captured with extreme precision the way my life was at that moment. I should point out that after I wrote it, I didn't ever look back on it. I basically wrote it and then stuffed the notebook in a drawer somewhere and forgot about it. It was incredible to me, despite all the changes that had happened in my life since when I wrote the passage, that I had basically become the person whose life I had dreamed of living as a teenager.

That's pretty fucking cool.

But what I realised was that while that vision had been compelling up until that point (24 or 25), in the literal sense of having compelled me forward through life, my fantasies had changed and expanded in the intervening time. If I read that description at 24 as something to aim towards I would have felt bored. Feeling free, loved, cared for, and able to express myself artistically? Sure, that was great. But I felt then (and feel now) that that is a solid baseline for my current adult life – that I would in fact find it surprising if I went for longer than, say, three months without any one of those needs being met. So the challenge now is to write a new version of this fantasy that describes the version of myself that currently feels impossible, and then simply orient myself towards that until it becomes true.

...

Not only is any sufficiently advanced technology indistinguishable from magic; any sufficiently advanced technologist seems like a magician. In order to write the new version of this life description, I need to imagine a version of myself who, by definition, I cannot understand. If I understood her she wouldn't be magical.

...

For several years I competed in bodypainting at the highest level of competition in the world. Every year I would fly to Austria and compete in the World Championships and by the latter years I would consistently rank in the top four or five. This wasn't unusual; I was aiming for first place and never got it, but most of the time I understood pretty concretely what a first place piece would look like. It felt like incremental improvements from where I was at that point; faster painting, more detailed realism; a competent assistant, some element of luck in how my presentation was perceived by the judges and how everyone else performed that year. I knew the styles, strengths and weaknesses of the other people who consistently ranked in the top ten pretty intimately; I often predicted accurately whether they would move up or down in the rankings each year. You could say that my model of 'how to succeed at a bodypainting competition' was technically sufficient, and the thing I needed to work on was merely fine-tuning all the pieces until I ranked higher than everyone else one year.

And then came Sanatan Dinda. An Indian visual artist from Kolkata, he didn't even make the finals the first year he competed, and the next year he placed second with a style that broke half a dozen of the implicit rules of 'good artwork' at the competition. He used a monochromatic or even black and white palette. His pieces weren't flashy, sparkly, or even very 'pretty' in a standard sense. He left vast parts covered in brown, or muddy purple, or some other unappealing background colour. But yet the third year he came he won the entire competition by something like ten percent of the total awarded points over the next artist in second place.

His first piece brought people to tears. It was brutal and glorious and technical perfection, but not just that. There was some sort of soul in it that suddenly made all the other bodypaint works seem lacking. His second piece did something similar. I didn't win that year (obviously; he did) but I didn't even mind because I was so glad that work like his existed and that the World Bodypainting Festival had, in some way, helped facilitate that art existing.

The thing that confused me though was this – I could not work out how he did it. Like, I had zero mental model of how he created that piece in the same timeframe we all had; how he came up with it, designed it, practiced it. Even though he placed first and I placed fifth and logically we both existed on a scale of 'competence at bodypainting' it seemed like the skills required were completely different. You could not simply scale up my abilities and get Sanatan's. You would have had to step back and build something completely different altogether. When I speak to Sanatan (I haven't picked his brain relentlessly, but I have asked him a bunch of questions when I've had the chance) I don't get any closer to a mental model that would allow me to paint like that. It seems to require completely different mental inputs entirely.

The feeling I get, as a very good bodypainter looking at Sanatan's work, is that I am looking at magic. And that, in fact, is my definition of magic – competence so much more advanced than yours with such alien mental models that you cannot predict the outcomes of the model at all. If you asked me to imitate the work of any of the top 20 bodypainters, I could give you a fair imitation, given enough time and access to reference images. With his work I have no idea.

And yet, ten years ago when I encountered the website of the World Bodypainting Festival, as not-yet-a-bodypainter, literally every image on the website was in that category for me. I look at those pieces now and could replicate any of them, but at the time they seemed incredibly complex, technical and inscrutable – I couldn't break down what steps the artist might have taken or why. I just saw them as unattainable.

...

One of my heuristics for growth is to seek out the magicians, and find the magic. Often without noticing, your progress in aspects of life or all of it unconsciously becomes linear. You made a certain amount of money last year, so you aim to make some 'reasonable' proportion more this year. But you are largely using the same tools to get 2x as you used to get x, and so you end up with diminishing marginal returns as you wring the remaining juice out of the initial strategy. The 'describe the version of you that seems impossible right now' trick I described above is largely an attempt to bypass that part of my brain that dismisses the work of magicians as crazy and starts allowing it to make the necessary shifts required to become the kind of magician I am envisioning.

The way to extraordinary growth and changes often involves a fundamental ontological or 'lens' shift in how you see the world. Magicians are wearing not just better, but fundamentally differently shaped lenses to the rest of us. And regardless of your skills and experience, it is likely that you are a magician to someone else. As someone who has a well-defined felt sense of how various foods affects their body, and can cook simple, healthy food well, I can seem like a magician to someone lacking a similar mental framework who ricochets between spartan self-denial and uncontrollable junk binges.

Meeting magicians is the first step to becoming one – when you are attempting to learn implicit knowledge that by definition you don't understand, it is important to have a bunch of examples in front of you to feed your brain's pattern-recognition systems. This will start to change your worldview without the controlling 'you' explicitly approving or denying every new belief or framework. Magicians or their work often seem to have a subconscious glow that I am drawn to, particularly if they use a type of magic that I recognise is on my critical path and thus something I'm currently seeking. Concrete steps I take to find them include asking my most interesting friends to introduce me to their most interesting friends, going down similar rabbit holes with the bibliographies of books that excite me, and generally living in 'explore' mode at various points in life, while recognising that not every avenue will lead to a jackpot.

Trying to envision magicians feels less clear, at least for me. My vision is likely to stem from a combination of a bunch of people or concepts I've encountered, so the same strategy applies as for finding magicians (giving my brain a lot of examples to work with). Questions I like to ask myself include:

- 'What is the most capable version of me that I can imagine?'
- 'What would I be like / spend my time doing if all my current major problems had been solved?'
- 'What are the things I say I value but don't act as if I value, and what would my life feel like on inside if I actually acted as if I valued those things?'
- 'What am I afraid of doing, and what would my life be like if I wasn't afraid of doing those things?'

I think an important part of imagining this version of yourself is forgetting it.

You can't keep your gaze tightly fixed on the outcome you want because it will lock your mind onto the strategies you currently have for meeting them, which by definition probably don't work (otherwise you would have succeeded already and you wouldn't need to use the strategy).

You can tell for yourself whether a strategy you're currently using seems to be a crutch or actually helping; often in areas when you are actually making progress you won't be able to imagine a nonlinearly better version of yourself, only one who in fact followed the current strategy to its logical conclusion and is now about as great (at the thing the strategy is for) as you expected to be. This is fine. We don't necessarily need to make nonlinear jumps in all aspects of our lives, particularly if (according to your values) making such a jump would require a sacrifice you don't endorse. But for the things you care about most, or are causing you the most suffering, there is probably a nonlinear strategy that you will miss if you pay too close attention to the linear strategy you current have or that people recommend. Sometimes, jumping ship and having no strategy for a while can be better, and allow you to clarify what you want, in the same way that being single for a while can allow you the space to look at who you are in a relationship and improve it.

So, in short, a helpful strategy for becoming a magician: Surround yourself with people who look like magicians to you. Then imagine yourself as one, older and wiser, in great detail. Imagine yourself as the person you would be afraid to say you want to be out loud to others (because it seems so ridiculously impossible right now). Write it down in great clarity and detail, then forget it. And let the part of your subconscious mind that still remembers lead you to becoming the things you want, and maybe, years later, check if it did.



Published by autotranslucence

Some buzzwords: metarationality, systems theory, buddhism. No idea what I'm doing yet. We'll know what this blog is about hopefully when there's more on it. [View all posts by autotranslucence](#)

7 thoughts on “Becoming a magician”

Shatner's Bassoon says:

December 16, 2018 at 10:11 am

Reblogged this on [shatner's bassoon](#).

☐ Reply

Pingback: [Hitting a target you can't see – Curated Intelligence](#)

Pingback: [» My Top 10 List for 2018: Books, Videos, Articles, Blogposts ankur Warikoo](#)

Pingback: [Links and Bits from the back half of 2018 – Connor Waldoch – Medium | Coding Videos](#)

Pingback: [Newsletter Issue 19 - Know Your Team | Blog](#)

Pingback: [Color, Church, Chinese – Jordan Gonen](#)

Pingback: [Leaving Our Bodies Behind – Autotranslucence](#)

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)