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**PAUL DRAPER**

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# THE UNCONVENTIONAL MIND OF PAUL DRAPER - MENTALIST, MAGICIAN AND ANTHROPOLOGIST

BY DAVID GOODSSELL

Photo by Richard Faverty



Not long ago, Paul Draper was performing his stage show in a large theater in his hometown of Salt Lake City, Utah. He brought a man up from the audience and, as he always does, he engaged him in conversation. This way the spectator becomes comfortable with Paul, and the audience gets to know the spectator. In doing so, he is treated as a person, and not a prop. He truly becomes their representative; thus, the entire audience is engaged.

*"Where are you from?" Paul asked.*

*"Iran," the man replied.*

*"Are you Sufi, Sunni, or Shi'a?"*

*"I am Sufi," he said.*

*"Oh, you're my favorite," said Paul, "the singing, dancing, Mystical Muslims."*

*The man laughed, and said, "Yes."*

*"My best friend from childhood is half Iranian, said Paul. "His father's family was from there."*

*Paul then addressed the audience directly. He said, "Look! It takes Utah for the Jew and the Iranian to be best friends, and that is the solution to the Middle East!"*

*Turning back to his new friend Paul said, "You and I, here, on this stage, we can be friends starting now; and we can be friends tomorrow and forever."*

*The man smiled and said, "Can I hug you?"*

*Paul said yes and gave him a hug in front of over a thousand people.*

A pleasant enough story, a "feel good" story...but actually much more.

The story emphasizes an important part of Paul Draper's approach to magic and mentalism. Whether performing a single trick or his ninety-minute *Mysteries of the Mind* show, his goal is to interact with his audience so that they become the stars of the show. In this case the spectator went on to help blindfold Paul in layers of steel, leather, cloth, and duct tape. Paul emphasized that he depended on him to keep Paul safe through the experiment. Paul asked the audience members to hold out unusual objects and the man led Paul around the room to individuals. Paul received a sense from them and described



Artwork by RBlack

the objects and their owners. Paul's audience participant became an important character in the show, his uniqueness helped build and add to the struggles and comedy in the routine. Since he represented the audience, they cheered for him and shared in the experience.

But it also gave Paul a chance to "do some good."

"One of the things I relish about being a performer," says Paul, "is interacting with the audience. While the magical and mental stunts are basically the same from show to show, no two performances are identical because I am so engaged with the interaction and improvisation with my audiences. If I bring a lady who is from San Antonio up on stage, I want to be able to chat with her about the Alamo and the River Walk. This makes her feel important and helps the audience understand that I care about her experiences as a person. If someone says he is an engineer, I want to find out exactly what area of engineering and share my knowledge base in his area of expertise. Therefore, when I travel to a new city, I visit the art museums, the zoo, and the historical sites and I always ask the locals what the "thing to do" is in their town. Every town has that one special thing, from the world's largest Abraham Lincoln statue to the dinosaur tracks at the Johnson Farm. It is part of being fully prepared and it is something I am passionate about doing."

This comfortable audience/performer relationship enables Paul to do more than just entertain. If his friendly encounter with the Muslim gentleman softened the heart of just one member of the audience, lessened fear, or mistrust, or prejudice for a person of another faith or ethnicity, then Paul has done some good. This is not by chance; it is by choice.

Paul Draper started out to be a cultural anthropologist; he holds advanced degrees and taught at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas with the idea of becoming a full professor. He is fascinated by people – who they are and why they behave in the ways they do. When he left the world of academe to pursue a life in magic and mentalism (the "calling," as Eugene Burger has put it), he brought that fascination with him. It is fundamental to his approach to performance.

"When I work on a new piece," says Paul, "whether for a close-up show at the Castle or for a stage presentation of *Mysteries of the Mind*, I outline the emotions and messages I hope to convey. I want my audiences to be a part of the performance. Like any routine in magic or mentalism, once it is internalized the performer is free to interact with the audience, to converse with them, to ad lib, if you will, adding to those emotions and messages as the occasion permits. This enhances the audience experience without diminishing the moment of awe when the magic happens.

"Back when I was starting my professional career, I had the occasion to ask Max Maven for advice. 'Read everything,' Max told me. 'What do you mean, read everything?' I asked him. His reply was classic Max Maven. 'Had I felt it required more words, I would have utilized them.' I now understand. It is important to who I am as a performer to be well read, to be able to converse with great breadth and depth about the world in which we live, about the strife and turmoil, about the remarkable goodness in all people, and most especially about individuals, us, and how we live. This has accomplished two things. It has enriched my mind, and it allows me to share my perspective as the occasion permits – and, I hope, do some good."

Magic and mentalism are fun. They should be. It is fun to surprise and delight people, and, if performed with skill and sensitivity, it is fun for the audience as well. But if magic and mentalism are to be your life's calling, Paul believes that considerable thought and hard work are necessary for lasting success.

"Life is more than the next show," says Paul. "No matter what



Photo by Dave Tada

your career choice, life demands that we consider what it is our presentations will provide. What are our basic needs that we need to fulfill? I am not talking about food and shelter. This goes much deeper. I initially came up with my personal list of four and then added one more a few years later." These are Paul's needs:

- To educate others.
- To entertain others.
- To be financially free from want.
- To do things that my grandmother would find respectable!
- To build healthy relationships.

Paul decided that in his career as a professional performer, speaker, and trainer he needed to educate others, and he means that in the broadest sense. Yes, he can instruct people at a trade show about a new product. Yes, he can instruct others in interpersonal relationship skills workshops because of his background in anthropology and use magic and mentalism as the means. But in the broad sense, he can by design and by happenstance lift the mental, moral, or social capabilities of one or more members of his audience through interaction, and he consciously looks for those opportunities. Think of his Muslim friend. If nothing else, we believe that person felt Paul's sincere desire to share his respect for him.

Paul answered the call to be a magician. Many will recall that the great illusionist, Howard Thurston, would stand behind the curtain saying over and over, "I love my audience!" because that is what he really believed. Saying this over and over energized his

performance, helping him give his best effort.

“We entertainers have this inner need to reach out to people,” says Paul. “In my case I use magic, and especially mentalism, to touch the lives of my audiences. When we create that moment of magic that puts the audience member into a state of awe, where their jaw actually drops, and the universe is suddenly different from what he or she thought it to be, we have a unique opportunity to make a difference. At that moment the mind is open to new ideas, to change, to meaning. I love that inspirational moment. This is what Jeff McBride, Eugene Burger, and Bob Neale mean when they talk about magic and meaning. This transformative moment where we can do real good in the world is the essence of entertainment for me as a magician. It is what drives my art.”

There are many ways to make money, and many of them are far easier than being a magician. In some ways the amateur has the right idea. He earns a good living at something he is good at so he can pursue magic as his passion, his or her love, and perhaps dream of being a famous magician. But for some, that is not enough. “From the first magic book my uncle Richard Block bought for me at Disneyland and the first magician I saw live (Paul Brewer), magic has been a beautiful focus of my life.”

When Paul decided to be a magician full time, he realized success would require treating his career as a job, six to eight hours a day, even on those days when he had performances. Marketing, sales, cold calls, promotion, product creation, follow-ups, press releases, social media, etc. He has said that working on his show and performing have become the equivalent of hobbies and pleasure time. The show itself is not his job; performing the show is his reward for all of his hard work. Like all great entrepreneurs, he is salesman in chief because no one else will ever be as passionate about his success as he is. And success has come.

In addition to hard work, and the talent and skills to be a magician, of course, another essential requirement is confidence. When Paul was teaching college in Las Vegas at UNLV a past student asked if he would be willing to conduct a séance at her parent’s home for Halloween. Her father would call him, she said. Paul was not really interested. Halloween is his birthday, and he preferred to spend it in other ways. Rather than turn her down, he decided to quote a price that was fifteen times his standard performance fee. When the student’s father called, he did so. The man didn’t blink. He was a vice-president of a casino on the strip. He was used to high fees. Paul performed the séance, everyone was delighted, and Paul learned some valuable lessons.

“I realized that value is in the eye of the beholder, that there

are venues where high fees are the norm if the performer, the mentalist, the keynote speaker, the trainer, delivers value for the price. And I learned that my confidence in my ability to deliver high level entertainment and content goes a long way in persuading clients to hire me.”

Growing up, Paul was greatly influenced by his grandmother, “Grandma,” as he calls her. She was born in 1919, and had her ninety-seventh birthday this past year. She was raised on a cattle ranch in northern Utah with seven brothers. She is from a sensibility that dates before the Great Depression, and was influenced by World Wars One and Two. She connects Paul to that time, a simpler time, a more human, less mechanized time.

“I had strong bonds with both my mother and my grandmother,” says Paul, “but especially my grandma. Maybe it’s the anthropologist in me, and maybe it was the values she shared with me from her unique pioneer upbringing in a solid, tight, self-reliant family unit. They had such a strong impact on me that I wanted to live up to her expectations. She set them high. All through my childhood years I strove to do my best. I starred in drama and musical comedy productions. I was a champion in debate and original oratory at the state and national level. I graduated college with more hours in Musical Theater than in my Anthropology major and Communication minor combined. Does my grandma approve of what I do today? She still does, I’m happy to say. Not because I do tricks, but rather because I present magic that lifts people’s spirits and touches their hearts with story, laughter, magic, and song.”

The newest core need that Paul has added to his list is the need to build healthy relationships. As mentioned above, Paul came to see life as more than one year, and more than the next show.

“We should never steal a show from another magician, because we are all in this together for life,” he says, “Ten, twenty years from now, you and I will both be performing magic and mentalism. That connection has great value, and we should take pride in the way that magicians treat one another. We look upon the elders in our profession with sincere respect, magicians like Eugene Burger, Juan Tamariz, and Johnny Thompson. We should live our lives to be worthy of that respect when our time comes. More and more, social media plays a role in community. A posting on my page might bring up to a thousand likes and responses or more. Why? Because authenticity and personal engagement is what friendship means in the world today. It’s not the specifics, it’s the principle. Live the old adages by Twain & Emerson: Live your life so that even the undertaker is sorry, and know that at least one



Photo by Dustin Bolt



Paul with his grandmother and mother.

Photo by Richard Faverty



**The Bubble Catch in action. Photos by Stephan Starnes.**

life has breathed easier because you have lived.”

Whenever Paul approaches a new business endeavor, no matter how small or how large, he measures it against his list of five needs. If it does not match with at least four of them, he turns it away. He challenges us as magicians, as people, to do the same. The great philosopher Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” That is how we improve and grow, and Paul’s list of five primal needs is his way of doing this.

“While I am pleased with my success,” says Paul, “I have much to learn and many ways in which to grow. We all do. I am becoming the performer and the man I hope to be, and becoming never ends. The key to unlocking this is in continuous improvement. That is, when I become the person I currently hope to be, I will have undoubtedly found many new ways in which to improve. We need never and should never become complacent!”

For many, the fun of performing magic is simply learning tricks and surprising our friends and family, the members of our local assembly. Done well, it lifts the spirits of those who perform and those who observe. If that is enough, that is actually quite fine. It’s okay. It is not necessary to look deep within ourselves.

But for others, the challenge stands. Think about Paul’s list of primal needs, determine your own needs, and consider how they can be met through your magic. Above all else, enjoy the journey.

It is productive to analyze one of Paul’s favorite routines with this in mind.

“The Bubble Catch is now a favorite of mine,” says Paul. “I bring a child on stage to ‘help me with this effect,’ – someone quite young, between the ages of five and seven. There is a sweetness to that age, before the age of ‘I know how you did it.’

“I use the old gag of asking the child how old she is. Now I am down on one knee, on eye level with the child. I am not standing over the child. I am avoiding any aspect of dominance. Whatever the child states, I quietly, sadly, say (but so the audience can hear), ‘Oh, you have to be (one year older than the child says) to do this trick.’ For example, if the child says she is seven, I say, ‘Oh, you have to be eight to help me with this...how old are you?’ I want to see if the child will say, ‘I’m eight.’ The adults in the audience remember that when they were that young they would not lie. This is what I want them to remember. It is planned. Sometimes the child will quickly say, ‘Oh, I mean I am eight in order to help with the trick.’ Often the audience will tell the child to say she is eight. If this happens, I look at the audience and say, ‘Teaching your children to lie, one trick at a time.’ The audience laughs,

but it is an uncomfortable laugh, because there was just a loss of innocence on stage. The child learned that through deception he or she could get what was wanted.”

I asked Paul if that was a good thing to do, whether there might be those in the audience who would resent that.

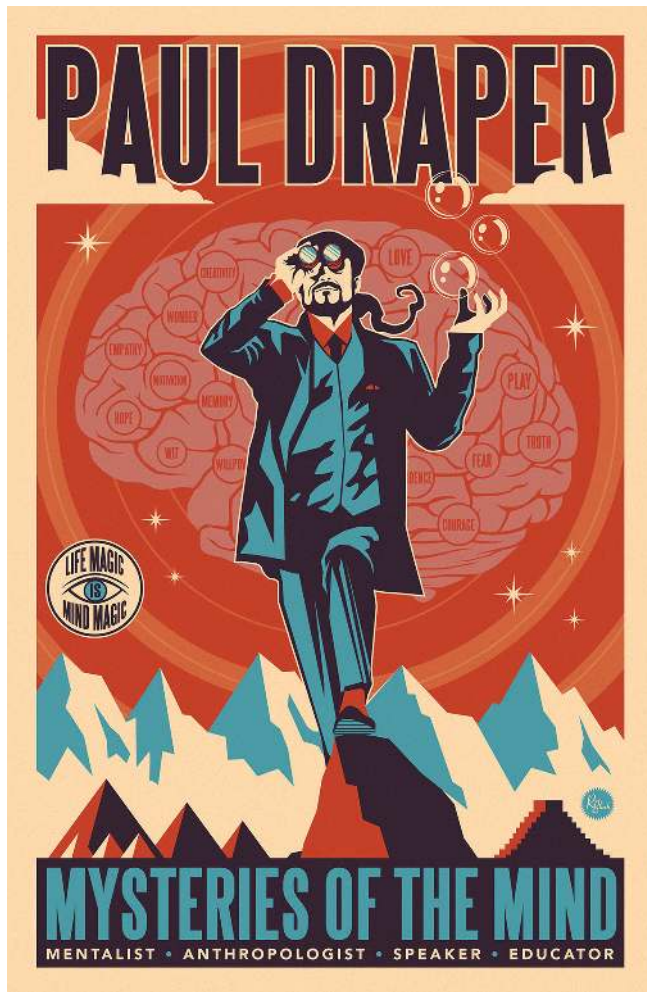
“I think it is an interesting thing, engaging” Paul replied. “I’m not sure it is a kind thing to do, but I think it is a theatrically interesting thing to do and will make the adults reflect on their own lives and think about loss of innocence. It is a way of emphasizing that using deception for gain is not a good thing, and maybe it is something parents should talk about with their children. Magic has both of those pieces in it. It seems the work of the devil at times, but it also reminds us of childhood imagination and fun. The routine is far deeper than just doing a trick.”

Paul also suggests that whenever a performer considers adding something to his or her act that might be sensitive, it is imperative that he or she carefully script how it will be treated. Give thought to how to bring up the subject, what should (and should not) be said, what audience reaction is desired, what negative responses might occur and how those should be handled. If you are going to add meaning to your magic (and he does encourage this), you have a responsibility to do good and not harm.

“As an example,” says Paul, “I ask the child if she believes in magic. One time in an orphanage around Christmas the child said, ‘No. Magic isn’t real.’ I had to quickly turn everything around and talk about how the child has magic within her that makes her an amazing friend and then I had the entire audience cheer for her inner magic that they have all grown to know and love.

“Next I ask the child if she knows how to blow bubbles, and giving her a small container of bubble fluid, I have her start blowing bubbles. ‘You are very good at that,’ I say, and the audience applauds. The child is rewarded for doing something good. I talk about when I was a child and I wanted to be a magician when I grew up, ‘...but like these bubbles, being a magician is ephemeral, it’s not a real job...that’s what everyone told me.’ And I start to pop the bubbles as they float away. ‘It’s something we dream about doing as a child, like being an astronaut or a ballerina. But very, very few grow up to do those things and the time comes when we are told we do have to get a real job. But if we believe in ourselves, and we work for it, anything is possible.’ And I reach up and catch a bubble.

“This is the first moment of magic. I caught a bubble. Everyone knows this is impossible, and the audience responds to that. I



Artwork by RBlack

hold very, very still with it. Many magicians make the mistake of reaching up, grabbing the bubble, then tossing it up and down, or perhaps throwing it onto the floor, or just get rid of it because they think the trick is over. But, that kills the magic.

“I lean down, hold the bubble out between my fingers, and have the child blow on it. Her breath turns it into a solid glass

ball. It doesn't pop! She did the magic, not me, and I spin the ball when she does that. Now I toss it into the air and catch it on the flat palm of my hand. That is the second piece of magic. Often the child will now reach out and touch it and experience a third moment of magic.

“I say to the child that this is a magic wishing bubble, and whoever looks at it and dreams about what they want to be and is willing to do what it takes to become that will have their dreams come true. Now I add another touch of drama. ‘Which would you like to have,’ I ask in a serious tone, ‘the wishing bubble or the bottle of bubbles?’

“The whole audience holds their breath for a moment. They wonder: will the child choose the bubble or the bubbles? The child usually looks back and forth between the two for a minute of anxiety, because she has to cope with a dilemma. The child wasn't expecting either. For most of their young lives children are powerless. Their parents give them things or not. They don't get many choices at that age. I break this moment at the peak by telling the child that she has been so good that I want her to have both. I can always audibly hear the audience release their breath. This is a very nice moment. The child has struggled with which to choose, wanting both, and now she receives both. This is by design. I set a lower expectation and then give more. The child skips away with both presents and the audience enjoys a feeling of relief and relaxation – tension and release.

“That's theater.”

Years ago, Paul performed this routine in the first show he ever did for magicians, for the Salt Lake City Magic Club. It was always his mother's favorite trick. But when Paul decided to focus on mentalism, he took it out of his show. It wasn't mentalism. At that time Paul set up an appointment for shooting publicity photos with the excellent celebrity photographer Richard Faverty of Las Vegas. His mother went with Paul down to Vegas. As he was packing, she grabbed the bubble and said, “Oh, Paul, bring the bubble.” He said, “No, momma, I'm going to be a mentalist (he was twenty-three years old). I'm a mentalist, not a magician, and I'm not going to do the bubble anymore.” “Oh, do the bubble, Paul. I love the bubble.” “No, I'm not doing the bubble.” “Oh, just bring it.” “No, I'm not going to bring it; I'm going to be a serious mentalist.”

Paul and his mother went to Faverty's studio and he did the photo shoot. “At the end, my mother pulled the bubble out of her



Photo by Bao-Khang Nguyen



Photo by Richard Faverty

purse. She said, ‘Richard, could we take one photo with this glass bubble?’ I said, no, Momma. I’m not going to do that. But Richard said, ‘Look, Paul, it’s for your mom. We can take one or two shots.’ That shot with that darn bubble became the primary shot that I’ve used in my career these past fifteen years. Mothers know best!”

Paul kept that effect out of his show for a long time, but after his mother passed away, he put it back in the show. “Interestingly enough, even though it is not directly mentalism, it is one of the most talked about pieces in my show, and one of the

most photographed pieces in my show. It has not changed much over the years. A few years ago, in a conversation with British magician Paul Daniels, I asked how he felt about mixing magic with mentalism. He gave me the best answer I’ve ever heard on the subject: ‘If the audience likes it, do it.’ I decided that I would rather be a personality whom the audience likes than be pigeon-holed by just one area of our art.”

I asked Paul why he was willing to share a routine from his current show. First of all, he said that no one will do it the way he does. More important, it helps explain his approach to performing magic. The routine is carefully constructed. There are at least two elements of magic to it – catching the bubble, which he does, and turning it solid, which the child does with her breath. Parents are encouraged to talk seriously with their children about right and wrong, about dreams for the future, about what is required to achieve such dreams. If that happens, he has done some good. As a magical entertainer, a mentalist, Paul hopes this routine will help readers to understand how important it is to allow the magic to happen without cutting it short, to create a sense of awe, and to give it time to develop and register in the minds of the audience.

“Don’t step on the moment of magic,” Paul cautions. “Magic is a wonderful and profound experience for the audience. It’s our job and our opportunity to make it that way.”

You can see a portion of Paul’s bubble routine, and several other performance pieces, by searching Paul Draper on YouTube and all over the Internet. ❖

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