

## “The Magic of Magic”

By Harrison R. Greenbaum, who attended a mid-sized public school in Cedarhurst, New York.

I'd love to demonstrate for you the feelings I'll be describing in the coming paragraphs. You'll need this box below:

<b>an</b>	<u>the</u>	<u>a</u>	<b>I</b>
<u>me</u>	<b>you</b>	<b>be</b>	<b>he</b>
<u>them</u>	<b>she</b>	<u>it</u>	<u>his</u>
<u>mine</u>	<b>her</b>	<b>yours</b>	<b>to</b>

*(As originally submitted, this was in color with the words in red and blue type.)*

I would like you to concentrate on any underlined word. Think about it, visualize it, and place your finger on it (don't worry—I won't look). This has been a free choice, one I could not possibly predict. I'd like you to make another unpredictable, free choice by moving your finger left or right until you hit a word in boldface type. Let's make this more interesting and randomize the outcome further. Would you please move your finger up or down to the nearest underlined word? Let's make this really impossible now—move your finger again, but this time diagonally, in any direction, to the nearest word in boldface. Finally (we're almost there!) move your finger right or down to the nearest underlined word. Concentrate on it. Wait a second! I believe that that's what you're doing right now. Concentrating on “it.”

Right now (hopefully) you're experiencing a moment of astonish-

ment. If you are like the hundreds of spectators I've entertained as a magician, you are probably asking yourself, “How did he do that?” Those are five simple words I have heard over and over again, the universal response to any stimulus that does not fit into the boundaries of perceived reality. Although the outside observer might believe that the question is posed to me about my methodology, I know that the five words call into question everything that the witness to the magic had conceived was possible and impossible. But even though I am often asked the “How” question, I have never been asked the “Why.” It is this question I would like to answer.

“Why do I do that?” I should probably start by explaining why I became a magician. Magic combines everything I love and requires everything I have to offer. Magic is one of the most intellectual of the arts, requiring creative solutions to creative problems. It is a performance art that requires stage presence and the ability to socialize with people. It requires reading and studying, playing and experimenting. Magic can be improvised or scripted, can stand alone or be incorporated into a routine. It requires dedication and practice, even when most of the products of this labor are never seen by anyone. Magic must be a passion, a part of a person, in order to be performed as it should. The magician is the sum of a great number of parts.

So why do I do it? What's the point? When does a card trick stop being a card trick? I perform magic to give what I believe is one of the most precious gifts I can give to others—the gift of astonishment. I am, in the words of Paul Harris, as he wrote in his magnum opus, *The Art of Astonishment*, “an astonishment guide.” Performing magic forces the spectators to re-evaluate their pre-established conceptions and beliefs. I strive to demonstrate that people should be more open to others and others' ideas. I strive to demonstrate that nothing is impossible. I strive to demonstrate that real magic occurs around us everywhere, every day. I endeavor to pass on to people the teachings that the practitioners of this great art have been giving people since the beginning of time,

from cavemen to shaman to wizards to modern-day magicians. So, why do I do it? Because life itself is magical; it is magic within and upon itself, inherently. That is why I do magic and why magic is a major part of what I am—because showing someone magic is so magical itself.

## ANALYSIS

Greenbaum's essay is immediately striking because it's creative and different. Complete with a colorful chart, it invited the reader in the Harvard Admissions Office to actually participate in what Greenbaum is describing. Everyone who reads this essay is going to follow the instructions in the first paragraph, and end up exactly where Greenbaum says they will be: concentrating on the word "it" and probably a bit surprised. This being Harvard, the admission official is also likely to try to figure out the logic behind the "magic" and, of course, realize that the essay's series of instructions all end on the same square.

In explaining why magic is to him more than just entertainment or a hobby, Greenbaum conveys the personal qualities that he considers important and that he strives to inculcate in others and himself. Magic, through his essay, becomes a stand-in for the virtues of creativity, open-mindedness, preparation and hard work, intellectual exploration, and maintaining positive relations with other people. Dropping in the title of a book that he has read on magic, Paul Harris's *The Art of Astonishment*, is a good way for Greenbaum to make clear that he takes magic seriously and considers it an intellectual endeavor.

The first section is also entertaining stylistically; just as the example trick attempts to let readers in on the thrill Greenbaum feels at figuring magic out, his choice of prose conveys his excitement when actually performing it. By writing as if he were actually speaking and administering the trick to an audience, Greenbaum sets the stage for his later discussion of how magic builds his interpersonal skills and presence.

As he moves into the more serious part of the essay, though, Greenbaum's style is at times repetitive and awkward. He unnecessarily repeats some variant on the question "Why do I do it?" multiple times; throughout the essay, he relies too heavily on rhetorical questions. Similarly, he resorts to clichés at times, particularly in the last two or three sentences as he tries to move beyond his own personal experiences with magic to make a statement about its broader meaning. The essay is best where it deals more specifically with what Greenbaum gets out of magic, and what he hopes his particular audiences will, as well.

—Elisabeth S. Theodore