

Magic Thoughts

Anne Emerson, February 2023

The “Magic” series of essays about money and the pandemic appeared to have been completed with *Magic Growth Part Two*. However, there are other ways to see magic in the world. Consider the magic of human ingenuity and what it can do. If there is any expertise to acknowledge here, it is that I am a senior who has lived long, perhaps too fearlessly, and observed plenty.

This essay is about how I personally find beliefs and culture to be intertwined, so much so that we have the potential to bring to pass what looks impossible, just by trusting that it can be done, and pursuing all avenues to get it done.

Beliefs, culture, and behavior interact. As these three evolve over time in building a society, or subculture, so they reinforce or challenge one another. Consider, for example, the clashing cultures portrayed in the TV series, *Downton Abbey*. Much-admired beliefs and behaviors may sometimes take a society to the point where creative spirit gets lost in a comfortable pursuit of accepted rules and customs. Such societies may resist change, while the rest of the world embraces it.

It can be easy to believe that behaviors are built on universal values, if no-one questions them. For example, how many of us believe that “good value” means high quality and a relatively low price? How many of us believe that “good service” means that the customer is always right? How many of us believe that “progress” is synonymous with more and better machines, enabling higher standards of living and easier work?

Who believes that the political challenge of the day is “autocracy” versus “democracy,” and that we live in a free, democratic country? Or that the environmental challenges of the day are whether and how to address climate change, habitat destruction, mass extinctions, and social dislocations? How many of us believe that the social challenge of the day is divisiveness, with various types of intolerances and ignorance high on the list of causes? Or that educated immigrants are OK but “unskilled” ones are not? Or, that education and equality of opportunity will solve these many challenges?

These are beliefs with a somewhat definite nature. Yet, there are other ways we can think about life and living. For example, we can say that the human condition is cyclical – associated with rises and falls, one system giving way to another as

night gives way to day, to night again – and ineffable. How can the rational mind account for and comprehend mega-trillions of events occurring all around us in each moment?

Or we can believe that for each positive there is a negative, and vice versa. For each time of death and dying there follows renewal of life. For each apparent image of perfection, its negatives hide beneath the surface. A fault in one environment may be a talent in another. A good intention can have an unfortunate consequence. Or, we can believe that everything is linked to everything else (quantum entanglement), and that an arrow shot carelessly into the air today may be found, figuratively speaking, at journey's end, somewhere unfortunate.

To learn to see all and accept all is the challenge embraced by advocates of “mindfulness.” I believe that, if human ingenuity can put a rover successfully on Mars (*Good Night, Oppy*), then it can bring Earth's current conflicts safely into a new tomorrow. We need only to believe it can be done, and to find the will to do it. Taking beliefs from dreams, through action, into reality is Magic Thoughts. If you find this mere wishful thinking, I invite you to watch *Good Night, Oppy*, where one person's dream brings others on board, and eventually the dream comes true.

Let me end with a story from my memoir. My High School used to promote formal debates among students. Once we debated the following: “This House Believes that Science Does not Improve the Quality of Life.” I was selected to oppose the motion because I was taking classes in Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry. (In England back then, the last two years of High School were specialist years in preparation for University entrance. Students either studied the humanities to “A-Level” – Advanced Level – or the sciences.)

I thought that opposing this motion would be easy. My father was an aeronautical engineer in a research wind-tunnel. He and his colleagues were tremendously excited about development of the Concorde (the e was added later, at the insistence of the French; there might have been, almost, a diplomatic incident over that letter e). We saw many fabulous flying machines at the Royal Aircraft Establishment's Open Days, and we enjoyed at home the convenience of a dishwasher and vacuum cleaner, not to mention the radio and TV. I thought that all I had to do, to defeat the motion, was to list the joys of these and similar devices.

So, the person proposing the motion started out by acknowledging all of that, adding, “But we don't think any of that makes a difference to a person's enjoyment of a walk under the stars.” She may have added that scientific devices actively

interfere with a pleasant walk under the stars (light pollution; noise pollution; air pollution; fear of weapons deployment, to name a few) – I do not remember the details. And, of course, there are arguments against her position: When machines do our work for us, we have more leisure time for walks under the stars. Or, walks under the stars don't count for much in the grand scheme of things.

Yet, I not only saw her point, but also was appalled that it had never occurred to me. I did not use my prepared speech, but floundered around trying to come up with something else at the last minute. Needless to say, my team lost the debate.

To add insult to injury, the next time I was invited to speak at a debate, the teacher who had seen this debacle prepared a speech for me! “This House Prefers Eccentricity to Mediocrity.” (I was the “second,” on the team opposing the motion. I had prepared a speech, but in my remarks took the advice of the boy leading the team, and we again lost. However, that motion would have been hard to defeat, among independent-thinking, fair-play-believing, upper-middle-class English teens.)

Discussion. I am not opposed to science and technology in their own rights. Tools, such as machines and knowledge, can be used for good or ill. I ask, rather, that we reconsider whether science and machine technology may offer the best solutions when others are available. The human condition remains the same across time and geography – although it manifests differently in different cultures, of course. Perhaps there are less expensive or environmentally-destructive ways to manage the human condition than to try (and fail) to protect ourselves from it by means of machines. “Magic thoughts” may bring about a better solution to current challenges!