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Staying Afloat on a Sea of Noise

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“What’s new?” is an interesting... question, but one which, if pursued exclusively, results only in an endless parade of trivia and fashion.

—Robert M. Pirsig¹

I invite you to recall one of your get-away vacations, perhaps spending three days at the beach or a long weekend in the mountains. Remember how you could dream and drift, resting your body and your brain. Remember the delicious food and the fresh clean air. Ahhh!

Next, remember how it felt to come back: emails to process, phone calls to make, “statuses” to update, blogs to check, fires to put out, content to produce. You have to get back up to speed, back on the wheel, back to the grind. Uggh.

I wanted to begin the chapter with this “memory experiment” to make three points. First, it really does feel better to be on vacation, to rest and reconnect, to taste your food, to be “unplugged.” Second, “life at speed” has become the new normal, which means that everyday life has a low-level, chronic “uggh” to it. Third, it is exceedingly easy for this to leak into our time with magic.

Here is the irony: most of us get involved in magic to have experiences such as the get-away vacation, but much of the magic culture around us feels like the daily grind. In magazines, online, in posts and tweets, we are drowning in magic news and trends, the relentless selling of endless products, and more content than we can possibly ingest. It is easy to become numb or superficial, lost in the sea of noise.

It is easy... but not necessary. In the spirit of helping you surf and sail over the waves, here are a few practices I use to keep the magic alive in my life and in my work as a magician.

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1. Less is more. Look at the clutter. Look at all the unread books, the unused tricks, the un-viewed DVDs. Remember them the next time someone is getting their sales hooks in you. Give some of it away to young or developing magicians who need access to resources. (This is great for them, and it will feel good to you.) With what is left, honestly ask yourself, “Will I ever read or watch this (again)? If the answer is no, then sell what you can and throw away the rest.

2. Just say no... and yes. Turn off the TV, get up from the screen, unplug from the phone, turn off the “ping.” Screen life is mediated life. Further, addiction to checking devices for the latest email, tweet, or post turns us into *Homo Interruptus*. Instead of that, just say “yes” to real face time rather than Facebook time. Have lunch with a magic friend. Spend time with a wise, real teacher of magic. Pick up your props and practice rather than post. Having “big yeses” in our lives make it really easy to say “no.” Which reminds us that so much screen time is simply a boredom default.

3. Cleave to quality. Part of what makes it “noise” is all the junk: low-quality tricks and books, poor writing, undeveloped content, superficial thinking. So here is one rule that I follow: as soon as I realize I’m bored or turned-off, I instantly stop reading or watching and move on to something good. Here is another one: I spend a large majority of my time and money on the work of proven, dependable, high-quality magic writers and creators. With both rules, the principle is simple: “Life is too short!”

4. Re-Read a “Book of Gold.” All of us have “books of gold,” ones that have a special place in our hearts.² These are books that inspired us in magic and have a strange power to instantly reconnect us with positive feelings and productive insights. (A few of mine are Bert Allerton’s *The Close-up Magician*, Eugene Burger’s *The Experience of Magic*, Dai Vernon’s *Inner Card Trilogy*, and Tommy Wonder’s *The Books of Wonder*.) Re-reading a book of gold is always good for the soul.

I hope you enjoy these practices! I hope they help you make every day feel a bit more like that get-away vacation.

Notes

¹ From *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (HarperCollins, 2005), page 8.

² This idea of a “Book of Gold” comes from the Grand Master science fiction author Gene Wolfe. See his *Castle of Days* (Tom Doherty Associates, Inc., 1992), pages 211-212.