

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ATW-23

Now You See It, Now You Don't - III: Doubt

Eugene, Oregon

October 18, 1973

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

For six weeks in June and July I was out of the country. When I returned in August, Uri Geller was even more famous, and word was out that he would appear on national television again. On the Tonight Show he was unable to do much of anything. He tried to detect telepathically one of ten metal film canisters containing water and tried to bend nails but could not. Johnny Carson became impatient and urged him to try other things. Uri balked, saying he could not be rushed. It was painful to watch. At the last minute he claimed that he produced a slight bend in a spoon held by actor Ricardo Montalban. But the camera did not show it well, and Carson said he could not see it. A few nights later, on the Merv Griffin Show, he bent a large nail very successfully. Griffin introduced him by saying that the failure on the Tonight Show proved that Uri was real. After all, a stage magician would succeed every time. One of the most interesting of Uri's talents is to create belief even when he fails.

In yoga philosophy, powers like telepathy and psychokinesis are called siddhis and are accepted as routine acquisitions in the course of self-development. Patanjali, the ancient writer who codified the principles of the even older system of yoga, wrote in his aphorisms that the siddhis may be obtained as a result of birth (that is, of actions performed in past lives), by means of drugs, by the power of words (that is, by the prolonged repetition of certain sacred syllables or phrases), by the practice of austerities, or by the development of concentration.

If Uri Geller is a man of siddhis, he must have acquired them as a result of meritorious work in previous lives. He certainly does not practice austerities, has never used drugs, does not engage in any spiritual disciplines, and says he has no interest in meditation because he cannot sit still for more than a few seconds.

After I saw Uri perform his miracles on the Upper West Side, when I was fairly sure his powers were genuine, I began to worry about him. According to masters of yoga and other systems that acknowledge the reality of siddhis, these extraordinary mental powers are very dangerous to their possessors. In particular, they tempt one into using them for self-centered purposes -- such as the pursuit of wealth or control of other persons -- goals considered unhealthy from the spiritual point of view. True magic -- the conscious manipulation of reality by psychic means -- becomes black magic when practiced by someone who has not purified himself of ego.

Uri Geller makes no secret of his personal ambition. He speaks of his success in Israel as "small time" and says he has come to this country to make a great deal of money and convince everyone of his powers. Listening to him talk that way, I fear for him.

One danger is that he might make some bad enemies. He told me himself that some people who see him believe in his powers but consider them evil. Other people simply do not want to see metal objects bend in response to his mental commands. When I told people what I had seen Uri do, some of them got upset. A young doctor, who was a roommate of mine in college, said: "I don't want to know about that; it challenges all of my understanding of how the universe works." But Uri is going to show people what he can do -- all the people he can, whether they want to see it or not.

He, himself, says he has poor control over what he does: things happen sometimes when he doesn't intend them to and sometimes do not happen when he wants them to. By putting himself in positions where he has to produce phenomena on demand, he must be tempted to resort to trickery to satisfy his paying audiences.

The possibility that Uri Geller might be nothing but a trickster did not enter my mind for some time. When it did, it came by way of an amazing man named James (The Amazing) Randi, a stage magician and

escape artist, who lives in New Jersey and is well-known in New York from a radio show he used to do for children. I heard by chance\* that The Amazing Randi was out to expose Uri Geller as nothing but a stage magician and that he could duplicate most of Geller's demonstrations. I thought that was worth a phone call at least.

When I told Randi I was writing an article about Uri, he was only too happy to tell me his views. "That guy is dangerous," he said. "He's a good magician, nothing more, and he's going to go on a messiah trip or get into psychic healing. That's what bothers me." I told Randi what I had seen Uri do. "Of course, it looks real; that's the point of magic," he said. But how could Uri have bent the keys, I asked. "He didn't," Randi replied, "they were bent already; he just reveals the bend by sleight-of-hand movements that make you think it's bending." That did not sound very convincing. After all, I had seen the key when it was straight, and I had seen it in the process of bending.

"What about the scientific tests?" I asked. Randi guffawed. "Scientists are the people least qualified to detect chicanery," he told me. "They're the easiest to fool of all. If you want to catch a burglar, you go to a burglar, not to a scientist. If you want to catch a magician, go to a magician." That sounded reasonable.

"Do you know why Geller couldn't do anything on the Tonight Show?" Randi went on. "Because Carson used to be a stage magician, and I got to Carson, and we figured out exactly how to safeguard the props that were going to be used. All Geller needs is thirty seconds alone with those props and he can tamper with them. But we fixed him good."

"Well," I said, "I want to see Geller do some more of his stuff, preferably alone and with objects of my own."

"Go ahead," Randi said. "Just remember -- he's good, and he knows how to fool people."

"O.K.," I said. "And maybe after I've seen some more, I'd

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\*Thank you, Eden Lipson!

like to visit you and see what you can do."

"Any time," Randi agreed. "I'd really like to see the truth on this come out in the open."

My conversation with The Amazing Randi left me a little confused. I could not really see how Uri had produced the effects I saw by means of trickery unless he had accomplices in the room who supplied him with phony keys and rings. And Uri certainly did not have the manner of a magician. Also, I know that stage magicians are the worst skeptics around. Because they do everything by trickery, they see trickery everywhere. Randi, for example, thought psychic healing was all fraud. But what if Uri Geller were a fake? What would that say about the Stanford Research Institute and other scientific experts who backed him and were thinking up explanations of the mysterious "energy" he uses? What would that say about my own credulity?

A few days later I met with Uri privately at his apartment on East 57th Street. I told him I wanted to see more of him and hoped he would not mind if I tagged along at some of his performances. He said he would not. I asked him what he thought about people who said he was a magician.

"I am not a magician," he said vehemently. "Look, the people who are supposed to see these things will see them, and those who don't don't. I don't care if people say I do magic tricks. I know that it's real. And it's all good publicity."

I wanted to ask Uri to bend a key for me, but it did not seem like the right time. We had a pleasant talk, and I told him I would try to attend his upcoming shows in Texas; after that I might want to see him in private again. He was charming, as usual, and very un-magician-like.

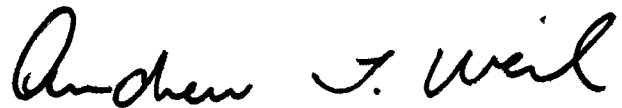
At the end of September, I traveled to Houston and Austin, but because of a mix-up in travel arrangement, I arrived in both cities a few hours after Uri had left. The only evidence I found of his visit was a front-page story in THE DAILY TEXAN, the University of Texas newspaper of September 20th. It read in part:

During an interview Wednesday, Geller, in town for his second performance here in three months, bent a

heavy metal key to almost a 45-degree angle by stroking it lightly. When he slid a steel spoon through a circle formed by his fingers, the spoon began to bend visibly. He then sat the utensil on the carpet at his feet, where it continued to bend the better part of an hour without anyone or anything touching it further.

The TEXAN reporter and photographer present could see no possible way the Israeli psychic could have used fakery to bend the objects.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned centrally below the typed name.

Andrew T. Weil

Received in New York on October 24, 1973.