

Ordinary Magic: What Descriptive Psychology Is, and Why It Matters

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Abstract

Human competence exercised at its highest levels can look a lot like magic. A person's core competence—the competence at being a person in a world of persons and their ways—is, like competence in one's native language, developed naturally in the course of growing from infant to adult. While its exercise is ordinarily adequate in adults, this core competence is essentially “invisible” and taken for granted. Increasing this competence to high levels is greatly facilitated by using the practical and intellectual discipline of Descriptive Psychology to make the “invisible” competence visible, thus describable and open to development. Examples of this “ordinary magic” in performance, relationships and living are given using some conceptual tools of Descriptive Psychology.

Human competence exercised at its highest levels can look a lot like magic. Consider:

- Tiger Woods needed to make a very tricky putt on the last hole to win yet another tournament. The putt was 25 feet, downhill and over a ridge with a nasty double break; Tiger had not sunk a putt over 20 feet the entire tournament but—predictably!—he sank this one to win. All the announcers could say was: “That’s just not humanly possible.”

- Meryl Streep in the film *The French Lieutenant's Woman* portrayed two roles: the 18th century title character, and a modern actor performing that role in a film. At one point the modern actor was discussing the 18th century character with someone, and to illustrate a point she became the character. One moment we saw the modern actor; the next, as if by magic, she transformed into a wholly different person. And it wasn't a trick of editing; the scene was shot in a single continuous take.
- Paganini wrote and performed violin pieces of such fiendish difficulty that he was rumored to have made a pact with the Devil himself. And Franz Liszt amazed (and sometimes annoyed) his contemporaries with his ability to sight-read any piece of piano music, no matter how complex, while carrying on a running commentary on the composition and suggesting improvements. He was reported to do this occasionally with the music turned upside-down.
- Anna Pavlova was world-renowned for her performance as the Black Swan in Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*. Eye-witnesses reported that she transformed herself on-stage; her elegant movement and "boneless" arms seemed more swan than human.

Obviously none of these individuals were actually engaging in magic: no spells, no incantations, no trafficking in supernatural powers (although some violinists still wonder about Paganini.) They are "ordinary magicians"—people whose competence produces results so far beyond what the rest of us are capable of, it might as well be magic.

Interesting, you might say, but so what? Professional musicians, actors, dancers and athletes clearly need to be interested in competence, and in taking their own competence to the highest level, but how about the rest of us? Why would competence matter to us? What sort of ordinary magician might we aspire to become?

As it turns out, competence matters a great deal to all of us. We exercise competence constantly, and at a high level, whenever we interact with other people. Competence is required to accomplish

anything in life, from following a simple routine to building and navigating our most complex relationships. Because this competence is so pervasive we rarely notice it; like the air we breathe, it tends to be invisible to us. But try going without air for a while, and you notice how crucial air is for life. The same is true of our core competence: We only notice it when it falls short and leaves us struggling to cope.

Our core competence, which pervades our lives and actions, is simply our competence at living, as Peter G. Ossorio once put it, “as a person among persons in a world of persons and their ways.” (Ossorio, 2006, p. 3) Like competence with our native language, we develop this core competence naturally in the course of growing from infant to adult, and are reliably fluent in its exercise. In other words, with the exception of the developmentally-challenged, we are all competent enough to fare reasonably well as a person in our world of persons and their ways.

But suppose we are not satisfied with being “competent enough” to get by. What if we want to take our competence as persons to extraordinary levels? Is it possible to become an ordinary magician in dealing with our life and people?

Yes. Like any competence, our competence as persons can be taken to levels that look to the rest of us like magic. Because this competence is typically invisible to us, we may not have noticed the magicians among us; their accomplishment is not played out on a public stage like musicians, athletes and other performers. But they are ordinary magicians nonetheless. Consider:

- A well-respected political leader, “Charlie” has developed an extraordinary ability to read and react to groups. I once saw him walk into a room full of strangers at a conference coffee break, look around genially and immediately walk over to and greet the true power figure in the room—not the distinguished-looking executive surrounded by a coterie in the middle of the room, but an unassuming looking fellow standing by himself along one wall. Afterward Charlie reconstructed for me the non-verbal signs he read that told him who had the real power in the room.

Turns out it wasn't a guess or intuition, but it also hadn't been visible to me at the time. (Charlie is a real person by the way, with real accomplishments; in respect for the privacy of people who are not already public figures, I have changed some names, including his.)

- “Anne” has been called a “magician” many times by her peers because of her competence at building high-quality business relationships. She routinely and consistently is invited for that all-important second business meeting with top executives, and it rarely takes more than three meetings before they ask for her firm's help with an important matter. This in an industry where fewer than 15% of first meetings ever lead to a proposal, let alone a contract.
- The renowned hypnotist and therapist Milton Erickson was able to vary the pace and pitch of his voice in conversation to send powerful and very specific messages to the subconscious of his client. This resulted in significant behavioral changes by the client—but listeners heard nothing but simple conversation. Erickson once demonstrated this technique by deeply hypnotizing one specific, unsuspecting member of a large medical audience who, like the others, was merely listening to the lecture.

Some people have an extraordinary ability to “calm the troubled waters”; simply by how they carry themselves, they are able to seemingly drain anger and tension out of difficult situations. Most of us know at least one person of whom we might say, “He never meets a stranger”, whose cordial and engaging manner quickly leads to friendly exchange and genuine good will with virtually anyone on first meeting. And some people have an unshakable knack for remaining steady and cheerful no matter what life throws at them; they treat negative experiences and emotions as simply a part of living, accept and deal with them as they arise, and then move on. We shall meet one such individual later in this paper. Ordinary situations; extraordinary results; ordinary magic.

How do we get there? Perhaps we should talk with these ordinary magicians, find out how they do it and copy their methods in our own lives. This has been tried on many occasions, but it has proven considerably less useful than we might hope for, for two reasons:

- Core competence, as noted before, is invisible. Our ordinary magicians frequently are not aware that their competence is in any way extraordinary. They assume that everyone can do what they do, and if they have noticed their difference, they are puzzled about why everyone can't do what is so obvious and simple to them.
- Those who have tried to figure out “how they do it” invariably tell us their methods as they see them. Even if they are good at describing methods—which is a different competence, at which they likely are no better than ordinary—what they describe is what *they* do, and that depends greatly on their particular personal characteristics, many of which we do not share. Thus, what works reliably for them is highly unlikely to work as reliably—if at all—for us.

Obviously there is a missing piece here. We need something that will enable us to make the invisible (our competence at being persons in a world of persons and their ways) *visible*, and therefore describable. In addition, we need something that can help us sort what we see into the specifically personal on the one hand, and the reliably common on the other. Given both of these, we can discern how to develop this core competence to higher, perhaps even extraordinary levels.

Fortunately, we have that missing piece. It is called Descriptive Psychology, and for over forty years it has served reliably as the foundation for creating ordinary magic.

What is Descriptive Psychology?

Descriptive Psychology is a practical and intellectual discipline founded by Dr. Peter G. Ossorio, who laid its conceptual foundations

in a series of books, papers and seminars beginning in the 1960's. (A complete list of Ossorio's sole-authored publications can be found at www.sdp.org/sdp/papers/PGO_Sole_Authored_Publications.pdf) He taught, trained and mentored a core of practitioners of Descriptive Psychology, who along with Ossorio have extended the discipline into virtually every aspect of persons and their worlds.

But all that is just history. What is Descriptive Psychology, really? Descriptive Psychology is a complex conceptual framework which articulates—makes clear and visible—the competence of persons living as persons, in a world of persons and their ways. As we shall see, having said that we have said a great deal indeed. (And having said that, henceforth we shall adopt a shorthand notation: We shall use “the competence of persons” in place of the longer, more exact “the competence of persons living as persons, in a world of persons and their ways.”)

Ossorio took as his foundation the undeniable competence of persons as persons. That competence importantly includes competence in using a set of interrelated concepts: behavior, person, language, and world. Ossorio set out to articulate these concepts and their interconnections in sufficient detail to enable making that invisible competence visible, thus describable and potentially the proper subject of scientific inquiry.

Rather than elaborate that conceptual system at this point, which is a long, complex and difficult task that Ossorio (2006) himself has accomplished in his *The Behavior of Persons*, we shall for now take Descriptive Psychology as given, the missing piece we need to make it possible to develop ordinary competence to extraordinary levels. As we go along, we will bring in those aspects of Descriptive Psychology we need for the task at hand; eventually, we can bring it all into the picture.

By now it should be obvious that the scope of this topic—ordinary magic, and how to become an ordinary magician—is more properly suited to a book than a single paper. Accordingly, today we must carve off a few juicy pieces for an in-depth look, which are meant to illustrate both the approach and its efficacy. Specifically,

we shall look at three arenas for ordinary magic: performance, relationships and living. Some parts of Descriptive Psychology will be brought in and illuminated, as needed. And since we require a more visible arena in which to highlight some aspects of competence, we shall also, along the way, spend some time together contemplating ordinary magic in the game of golf. My apologies in advance to those who, inexplicably, find golf uninteresting. Kindly bear with us.

Performance Magic

The Professional Golfers Association for some time has run a series of amusing ads in which a touring member of the PGA nonchalantly performs some ridiculously difficult golf feat, capped with the slogan, “These guys are good.” In truth, it’s an understatement; as millions of golfers can attest, these guys are extraordinary. They do nothing that a duffer doesn’t do—they just do everything so much more competently that they might as well be playing a different game. Since their performance is so visible, and so extraordinary, it can serve as a springboard to understanding what is required to take any competence to a very high level.

To hit a golf shot all you need is a ball, a club, and somewhere to aim your shot. You grip the club, address the ball (“Hello, ball”), swing the club and hit the shot; the ball goes somewhere and lands. For the millions of everyday golfers that’s literally all there is to it.

Perhaps surprisingly, PGA golfers do much the same thing. Granted, they make better choices than we do regarding which club to use, based on better information than we have on how far they need to hit the ball, and their ball usually lands quite a bit closer to where they aimed than ours do. But they also do something that the rest of us simply have no clue about: they choose what shot to hit, and adjust their swing to hit it.

Tune into any golf broadcast and you will hear announcers (themselves former PGA players) say things like: “Looks like he’s setting up for a high, hard fade into the green.” “He hit a draw around the dog-leg ... a high pitch with backspin ... a nasty low

stinger ... a soft flop out of the bunker ...” They are describing the specific shots they see, that is, the specific path of the ball when struck and what happens when it lands. The announcers share a set of distinctions—concepts, if you will—by which they can accurately describe a shot and distinguish it from others. They have words or phrases to use in making these distinctions. And—most important—these concepts and locutions refer to actual shots that are routinely and consistently made by PGA golfers. (Contrast this with: My friend Wil has devised a splendid golf shot called the “Comeback”. It looks like an ordinary shot until, in mid-air, the ball reverses course, comes back about 30 yards, and lands without rolling. A very useful shot indeed, but, as his friend Gil points out, nobody—not even Tiger Woods!—can actually make that shot.)

These PGA announcers illustrate what is needed to make competence visible, thus describable and available for discussion (“He didn’t hit a draw—he was trying a straight-on shot and just hooked it.”) Descriptive Psychology neatly summarizes this in its formulation of verbal behavior:

$$VB = \langle C, L, B \rangle$$

That is, verbal behavior consists of concepts, locutions and behaviors—the distinctions we make, the words or phrases we use in making those distinctions, and the behaviors of actually doing what we are say is done. (Remember the “Comeback”—C and L, yes, but no B, and therefore no actual shot we could describe.)

Hold on now, because we’re about to make a big step. This verbal behavior formulation of Descriptive Psychology is the essential key to making visible our core competence as persons. Just as most golfers just hit their shot and have no concept (let alone mastery) of the possible shots available, so too do most people, in their day-to-day lives, do what they do with very little concept (and therefore very little mastery) of the possible behaviors available. And the remedy is the same in both golf and in life:

- articulate concepts to distinguish behaviors,

- develop shared locutions for describing what you see using these concepts, and
- learn to recognize instances of the behavior when you see it.

Descriptive Psychology has already done the work of articulating the concepts needed to distinguish behaviors, along with the locutions needed and what it takes to recognize instances. These locutions are not technical or theoretical terms; they are drawn from ordinary usage of our common language.

This is how we make our invisible competence visible. But the true payoff for our efforts is not just that we can accurately observe and describe what people do (including ourselves). Once visible, we can learn to increase our competence to a considerably higher level. To see how, let's go back to golf.

When the LPGA announcer tells us that Lorena Ochoa hit a perfect high draw, she's simply describing the shot Lorena hit. This is a crucial point. The real importance of knowing the shots in golf is not so an announcer can describe them; it's so the golfer can hit them. Lorena Ochoa considers where her ball is lying, where the hole is located, how far she is from the hole, the wind conditions and temperature, what distance she can comfortably count on with her available clubs, and then *chooses her shot*. Her club choice, her grip and stance, how she addresses the ball ("Hola, pelota!") and how she swings the club are all specifically done in order to hit the specific shot she has chosen. That high draw was the shot she chose and the shot she was making; she hit the high draw with a specific trajectory and speed designed to put the ball where she intends it to go. If she did not know about high draws, and did not have that shot in her repertoire, she literally could not have made it except by sheer chance.

That is the pay-off for articulating behavior and practicing it: You have that behavior available when you need it. As it turns out, the behaviors that are in fact available at any given time in virtually any aspect of living as a person are significantly greater than the behaviors most of us actually do. If you don't know about draws and

fades, you just pick up the club and swing. That will get you around the course, but won't win many club tournaments.

By now it should be clear that increasing our competence as persons requires deeper and more articulated concepts of behavior to make the competence visible; these are provided by Descriptive Psychology. But what about that second issue we ran into before: sorting the specifically personal in performance from the reliably common? This is where some of the more technical contributions of Descriptive Psychology make the crucial difference. Let's explore how.

Here we are on the eleventh tee. Clearly the best shot is a hard fade, between 250-300 yards, and fortunately every golfer on the PGA tour has that shot. So we are about to see a series of really similar swings, right? If you believe that, you *really* don't know golf. Except for the occasional butchered shot that reminds everyone how hard golf really is, we are about to see a series of shots that land in remarkably similar places, the trajectories will be similar with interesting variations, and the swings—ah, the swings!—will be amazingly different. Some golfers' swings are so smooth and easy that the common response is "Butter!" Some swing with almost robotic efficiency; some strike the ball as if it had just insulted their mother. Compare swings on the slow motion swing-cam and you will find that no two golfers swing the club the same way—nor should they. Every excellent golf swing is the result of many factors which are personal and specific to the individual.

But they all, reliably, achieve the same result, and it's the result, not the specific procedure for getting it, that matters. The same is true—fortunately!—of what we do while living our lives as persons. Increasing our competence is a matter of increasing our awareness of what we can and want to achieve in any given situation, and developing our own, personally specific ways of achieving them. In other words, we need easy ways of describing our behavioral options—our "shots" in life, if you will—that let us see both what we might achieve and what we need to do to achieve it: the reliably common, and the personally specific, respectively.

Let's now look in some detail at how Descriptive Psychology helps us with this.

Intentional Action

When we describe a golf swing, we observe and describe a number of different aspects: grip, stance, take-away, pivot, follow-through, velocity, etc. Think of these as parameters of the golf swing. Every actual swing has a particular grip, etc. and describing the swing in terms of these parameters gives us a complete description of the swing. These parameters are also useful in comparing swings because they delineate the ways in which two swings can be similar or different.

The same is true of human behavior in general. When we describe behavior, we observe and describe parameters of action, and those parameters enable us to specify precisely what the action was, as well as how it is similar to or different from another action.

Descriptive Psychology provides a detailed articulation of the parameters of action, called the Intentional Action paradigm:

$$IA = \langle I, W, K, KH, P, A, PC, S \rangle$$

where

- I = Identity
- W = Want
- K = Know
- KH = Know How
- P = Performance
- A = Achievement
- PC = Personal Characteristic
- S = Significance

The Intentional Action paradigm has been articulated, elaborated and used by Ossorio and his colleagues over the past 40+ years. A detailed substantive account can be found in the third chapter of Ossorio's *The Behavior of Persons* (2006, pp.45-52).

For now, let's take a quick look at four parameters: P, A, S and PC.

Performance is the observable aspect of action, what we could reliably see and hear from a good videotape. "P" is what the person does as a means to "A", the Achievement, which is the actual outcome of the action (and typically the intended outcome as well.) By the way, in much contemporary behavioral science "P" is taken to be all there is to be known about the action, which partially explains the current sad state of contemporary behavioral science.

"A" gives us access to the reliably common aspects of behavior. Using a form of behavior description known as the Achievement Description (Ossorio, 2006), we can pass on specifying all parameters except A—thus, we include any action that has this Achievement as its outcome, regardless of who did it, why they did it or how. Achievement descriptions are central to developing competence to a high level, since they both specify what we need to accomplish and give us something against which we can assess actual outcomes.

"P" gives us access to the personally specific: It is what this person does, in these circumstances, to achieve "A". "P" is conceptually and practically connected to the person's Personal Characteristics (PC). Just as a person's height, weight, strength, flexibility and so on enter into how they swing a golf club, a person's attitudes, skills, knowledge, status and so on enter into their specific performance. And of course these Personal Characteristics must be taken into account in developing competence of any sort.

"S" enables us to do justice to the often complex nature of Intentional Action. P, the observable performance, is typically a means to accomplishing some end, A, that is not always immediately obvious. When we observe an action, it is frequently reasonable to ask, "What is she doing by doing that?" Our answer to that question is what we take to be the action's Significance. This can be a straightforward "means-end" relationship; for example, buying my wife flowers on her birthday is a commonly understood means of showing that I care (and that I remembered!) Showing that I care is

the Significance of buying the flowers. And since behavior typically occurs in the context of a larger pattern known as a Social Practice the behavior can be seen as participating in this larger practice in one of the ways available to me.

Here's an example of the complex nature of behavior reflected in the Significance parameter. I walk over and take a drink of water—that's my observable Performance. If you notice that it was Carolyn's glass I drank from, you might describe my behavior conservatively as "intruding on Carolyn's personal space." (This is an example of the Descriptive Psychology form of behavior description known as an Activity Description, in which we describe what we saw but with no commitment regarding "W", the Want parameter.) Some of you may have seen Carolyn snatch the last danish at the breakfast buffet this morning just as I was reaching for it; knowing that you might describe what I was doing as "getting even with Carolyn" (thus providing the "W" we chose to leave out in the Activity Description.) Since it's widely known that Carolyn and I have been close friends since we were teenagers, you could reasonably take it that what I was doing was playfully teasing my friend, instead of, say, making a hostile and provocative gesture. Finally, should you ask me what I was doing, I would say: "I was illustrating a point about the everyday complexity of behavior. All the rest of this was just my particular way of doing that in these circumstances."

Notice that none of you had any difficulty following this explanation, and most of you saw what was going on as it was happening—at a glance, as it were. As noted before, we are all highly competent as persons in this world of persons and their ways, and while we may not typically describe things in terms of performance and achievement and significance, we all routinely and competently act on these distinctions. If this is an example of everyday competence as persons, what would extraordinary competence look like? Let's conclude this section on Performance Magic by taking a detailed look at one such example.

Performance Magic in Marketing

It has been my privilege over the past 20+ years to help hundreds of professionals and small business owners become highly effective marketers of their own services. Marketing is one of the more important and difficult tasks for business owners, particularly in service businesses, and it calls on significant portions of our invisible competence. The first step in improving that competence, of course, is to make it visible, and that requires some Descriptive Psychology to bring it off.

Consider the common question we all encounter from time to time: “What do you do?” We have our characteristic ways of responding, and we usually don’t give it much thought. No worries; we all know how to do this. In that way, we are like the weekend golfer who picks a club, takes a swing and hits the ball. But people who want to be effective at marketing can’t afford to just “take a swing” at that question. I call “What do you do?” the marketer’s “moment of truth” because how you respond makes a huge difference in how effective you are in marketing.

Here’s why. “What do you do?” is the first step in a significant pattern of behavior called a “Social Practice”. A Social Practice consists of a set of linked actions typically involving two or more people. One person acts, the next person acts in response, and the back and forth continues until the Social Practice is played out. On reflection you will notice that virtually every action you see in real life takes place as part of a Social Practice; our invisible competence as persons is essentially exercised in Social Practices. (For more on Social Practices—and there is a lot more to be usefully known—see Putman (1990) and Ossorio (2006, pp. 170-183.))

But our competence is a great deal more than knowing how to do our part; it also includes recognizing what’s going on and what our options are. We aren’t given a script before we walk in that tells us what the social practice is and what our part will be. In fact, we *actively make it up as we go along*—and that’s where conscious competence can make a huge difference. (This is another recognition

that sharply distinguishes Descriptive Psychology from the social-deterministic approach typical of current psychological theory.)

“What do you do?” is an initiating action—call it Move 1—which calls for a response. But what response? As it turns out, that depends on what social practice we are engaging in, and *that* is essentially determined *by* the response! In other words, our choice of Move 2 is largely determined by what we see as going on, but what is *actually* going on is largely determined by our Move 2.

“What do you do?” can initiate quite a few different Social Practices. We can treat it as part of the practice of “making social small talk” or “impressing each other with our importance” or “exploring for mutual interests” or “selling my wares in the market.” Which practice you decide is going on guides you in what you do and what you will count as success.

Highly effective marketers treat “What do you do?” as a genuine inquiry and answer it clearly, authentically and in a way that engages the other person (without putting them on the spot!) Success with this Move 2 consists of sorting people into one of two groups: “That sounds interesting, tell me more” from people who might in fact need and get good value from your services, or “Interesting! So, how about those Cubs?” from people who are not good candidates for your service—and the sort is accurate.

This marketing Move 2 defines your shot, as it were: It is clear what your action must accomplish. Very few people already have that shot in their repertoire, but they can get it with proper coaching and practice.

As a coach, when I listen carefully to my client’s “moment of truth” response I hear those places where the voice loses confidence, or goes flat because they are saying what they think they should say instead of what is real for them. I won’t bore you with the details; suffice it to say that we work on those places to fix whatever is fuzzy or inauthentic or off the mark. We go through as many iterations as we need, and sometimes it takes a few sessions to get there. But eventually when they say what they do, they light up with excitement: ‘That’s it! That’s exactly what I do!’

And very soon their business begins to grow—almost like magic.

Let us now turn to another arena in which ordinary competence can become ordinary magic: relationships among people.

Relationship Magic

Can you bear just a little more golf? I promise you, it's worth it.

Tiger Woods is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest putters ever to play golf. He routinely sinks a few “impossible” putts in every tournament. Even more impressive, when putting within 9 feet he misses about one putt in sixty. He does miss—he's an *ordinary* magician, after all—but his putting competence is clearly extraordinary.

It is also instructive, and not just for golfers, because his putting magic consists of two distinct yet related competences: striking the ball, and reading the green. A quick look at each of these, perhaps surprisingly, yields some useful insight into something of interest to all of us: developing our competence in human relationships.

Tiger has spent countless hours practicing and refining his putting stroke, and it's a thing of beauty. He uses an old-fashioned “flat stick” putter with the classic overlapping grip. His head and hands are absolutely still. Only his shoulders move, in a precise pendulum swing, and when he strikes the ball it immediately begins to roll with no skip or skid, just significant forward spin to keep it on course. (Forgive me if I have gone a bit overboard on this description; you really have to have tried putting to appreciate just how extraordinary Tiger's stroke is.) But all of this is just performance. It would matter not at all except for the fact that this is Tiger's way of accomplishing a simple and very specific end: to make sure that when he strikes the ball, it goes precisely where he is aiming it, and at exactly the pace he intends.

By the way, Tiger is not the only great putter in golf. There are others who can equally reliably hit the ball so that it goes precisely where they are aiming it, and at exactly the pace they intend. But,

as with golf swings, so with putting strokes: They are all different. Some use long “belly” putters, some use putters with heads the size of bricks, some use a “claw” grip to keep their right hand still. What they have in common with Tiger is just one thing, and it’s the only thing that matters: Their putt goes precisely where they are aiming it, and at exactly the pace they intend.

Let’s pause to extract an insight here. Relationship magicians, like great putters, all have their own precise and specific ways of acting to create and act on relationships. What one relationship magician says and does may well be quite different from what another says and does. If you recorded them in action and compared, you might see very little in common. But again, that’s just performance. What they actually have in common is this: What they say and do creates precisely the relationship they intend to create, at exactly the intensity they are aiming for. (That last sentence opens a long and substantive conversation to which we will return a bit later.)

So far this is just performance magic revisited. But we’re on new ground—forgive the pun—when we look at the other part of putting: “reading the green”.

To putt the ball precisely where you are aiming it, and at exactly the pace you intend, you first have to decide where to aim, and at what pace, to sink this putt. Tiger does that by reading the green. To observers it looks like an arcane ritual; he stands well behind the ball, facing the hole, and peers intently at the ground; then he walks all the way around behind the hole and peers through the hole to the ball. Some golfers hold their putter before them at arms length like a plumb-bob; one exceptionally flexible young pro drops into a lizard-like pose and sites along the green with his eye a few inches from the ground. All are attempting to read the green, i.e. figure out how much and in what direction their ball will break (deviate from a straight line) once it starts rolling, and how fast it will travel. Both are crucial. Some putts are “straight in” while others break so severely they must start out perpendicular to the straight line between ball and hole. Some short uphill putts must be struck very firmly while some long putts must be barely tapped before the slope

of the green takes over. And experience matters here; some greens are very hard to read, and anyone who has putted this hole before has a potential advantage by remembering how to compensate.

Reading the green is far more difficult than putting the ball. We can easily construct a putting machine that will reliably strike the ball so that it goes precisely where we are aiming it, and at exactly the pace we intend. Nobody has even a clue how to construct a machine that can reliably read a green well enough to tell us where to aim and at what pace.

The same is true of human relationships: the hardest part by far is “reading the green”. Relationship magicians are highly adept at discerning what their existing relationship is with this individual, what relationship they intend to have, which next actions move the relationship in the intended direction, and at what pace they can safely proceed without triggering backlash or resistance.

All of this and more is spelled out in practical detail in Descriptive Psychology’s articulation of relationships, relationship change, and the communities and cultures within which they take place. Even a basic articulation of this topic would require several hours; actually raising one’s competence to an extraordinary level is a matter of study, coaching and practice over at an extended period. For now, we must be content with looking at a few aspects of relationships that point the way toward developing extraordinary competence.

Relationships are not written into the fabric of the universe. Relationships are built, sustained and changed through the everyday process of action and interaction. I do or say something, you do or say something in response, and after a very few moves of this sort we have a relationship that both of us are competent to navigate—even if we began as total strangers. Once established, the relationship sets boundaries regarding what behaviors are called for, permitted, or out-of-bounds, and we act accordingly. This all occurs almost automatically; like breathing or walking, we do it competently without thinking about it and we might in fact have some difficulty

giving an account of what we were doing and why. This is yet another instance of our invisible competence.

But just because building and acting on relationships typically occurs without deliberation doesn't mean it must. Not surprisingly, the key to increasing relationship competence is to make that invisible competence visible. In doing so we must articulate:

- where the relationship begins,
- what we want the relationship to be, and
- what we do to build the intended relationship.

Where the relationship begins

Every relationship takes place within the context of a community. Accordingly, our first task is to discern what the community is, and what our respective places are within that community. The community in a business organization is significantly different from the “two-person community” in psychotherapy, and both are quite different from the social community of New York theatergoers. Further, if our context is a business organization, it matters a great deal that you are the CEO and I am a prospective service provider, or that you are a systems analyst and I am a loan officer whose work depends on your software. And clearly it matters which of us is the therapist and which the client.

This is rarely a source of confusion. We typically know where we are and who we are, and unless this is our first rodeo, so to speak, we know how to act and we do well enough to get by. But relationship magicians do much more than just get by. They build powerful relationships from their first move.

To begin with, relationship magicians recognize that relationships almost never begin as a truly blank slate. Within a given community, any two places within that community define a specific relationship, and members of the community have a shared understanding of what that relationship is and what actions are congruent with it. Following Ossorio's lead in articulating culture without stereotyping (Ossorio, 1983), we can call this shared understanding the Standard Normal

Relationship, and remind ourselves that this does *not* take the form of a list of expected or disallowed behaviors. Instead, it takes the form of competence in recognizing congruence between behaviors and relationship. This would be (and for computer simulations, is) a tremendously daunting task except for one fact: We all do it all the time. People are, metaphorically, relationship supercomputers, and generally have little trouble sorting these matters out.

The first key to building a powerful relationship is to ensure that your initial moves are congruent with the Standard Normal Relationship you find yourself in. This affirms and strengthens the relationship. Of course, like the golf pro reading a green on her home course, experience gives you an advantage. Your behavioral choices will be more precise the more you know about the community and the individual with whom you are interacting.

But relationship magicians know that their initial moves must also serve another purpose: to move the relationship from where it starts—the Standard Normal Relationship—to where they intend it to be. To do this accurately and efficiently, they need something we generally don't have and can do without: a detailed relationship description.

What we want the relationship to be

In day-to-day relationships most of us are like the weekend golfer in that we don't need, and probably couldn't use, the highly technical stuff about swing and shots that are the stock-in-trade of golf pros. Our common language used to communicate about relationships consists of a very few words or phrases that mostly point to important ways relationships can go wrong, and that's enough for us most of the time. But when we decide to take our relationship competence to higher levels, we require more exact language for describing relationships: We require relationship descriptions.

A relationship description is a small set of specific ordinary language sentences that allows us to define the complete core of a relationship. It defines the essence of what the people in the relationship expect and even require of each other, and serves as

both a standard for assessing where we currently stand, and a reality check on what we need to do next.

Descriptive Psychologists for many years have used relationship descriptions to elevate relationship competence in a number of contexts. Ray Bergner (2006), in his book *Status Dynamics: Creating New Paths to Therapeutic Change*, articulates in specific detail the therapeutic relationship required to support clients in re-constructing their worlds. That is relationship magic, indeed. Joe Jeffrey (Jeffrey & Putman, 1994) teaches his system analysis students to use relationship descriptions in creating system specifications and requirements. In my own work with professional service businesses, I have used relationship descriptions to create highly specific targets for the marketing efforts of my clients. (See chapter 5 of *Marketing Your Services: A Step-by-Step Guide for Small Businesses and Professionals* (Putman, 1990) for a detailed method of creating relationship descriptions.)

Relationship magicians work from relationship descriptions of the Standard Normal Relationship along with a very specific relationship description of the intended relationship. They then act from the beginning to build the intended relationship. Let us conclude this section with a quick look at how they do that.

What do we do to build the intended relationship?

Peter Ossorio articulated two simple but very powerful aspects of relationships: the Relationship Formula, and the Relationship Change Formula. You can find the complete and technically exact statement of these two formulas on pages 230-241 of Ossorio's (2006) magnum opus, *The Behavior of Persons*. Taken together they provide the framework for relationship magic.

The Relationship Formula essentially says that my behavior toward you will be an expression of my relationship with you. Of course there are never any iron-clad guarantees here. It's possible that I may have misread the relationship, or not have the skill to act on it successfully, or I may have some other more important priority

right now, but very typically the Relationship Formula describes quite exactly what happens.

The Relationship Change Formula says that if my behavior toward you is *not* an expression of our relationship, but rather is an expression of a *different* relationship, our actual relationship changes from what it *was* toward the *different* relationship. Again, I may be wrong about our relationship or act clumsily, or you may reject my move—relationship magic requires some skill and there are no iron-clad guarantees of success—but very often the Relationship Change Formula describes quite exactly what happens.

In summary: Relationship magicians develop high levels of competence in describing relationships, both initial and intended; they are skilled at affirming and strengthening relationships through congruent action; and they competently act in ways that change their relationship toward what is intended. Clearly, relationship magic requires some initial talent and substantial work to develop this competence, and few people will choose to make that effort. But just because of that, people who do make the effort have a tremendous advantage over those who don't in the relationship arena. Let's face it: The only way a weekend golfer will ever beat a golf pro is with a great day and a huge handicap. Golf allows for those big differences in competence; life doesn't. That's the difference between golf and life.

Living Magic

No more golf. Just living. Consider:

- Jack worked hard to earn promotion to his dream job. It came down to Jack and one other. When the decision was announced he was very disappointed to hear he was not the one chosen. I joined him for a drink after work, expecting to commiserate and lend a sympathetic ear; instead I found myself enjoying his obviously genuine good humor. I commented on his mood, and he said: "I really wanted that job—but I didn't get it. That door

is closed. But I know that whenever a door closes, another opens, and I'm eager to find out what that door is."

- Barry was invited to a meet-the-parents dinner at his soon-to-be in-law's house. His future mother-in-law had prepared a huge spread and as soon as he sat down she loaded his plate with brisket, chicken, dumplings, vegetables and salad. Barry gamely worked his way through every morsel, praising each dish extravagantly as his nervous bride-to-be beamed her approval. Having emptied his plate he courteously helped himself to another slice of brisket and some more potatoes. As he took his first bite of the brisket, his future mother-in-law frowned and said: "So—you didn't like the chicken."

For Jack the world is a place of constant opportunity, where you do your best, accept whatever happens and look for the door that is open. For Barry's mother-in-law, the world is a place where your best efforts are never good enough and they invariably lead to criticism and disappointment. The differences between how they see the world clearly make enormous differences in how they live their lives, and the satisfaction they derive from it. In fact, their differences are so great, and so significant, they might as well be living in different worlds.

Actually, they *are* living in different worlds. Literally. Descriptive Psychology's conceptualization of worlds makes clear how this is so, and helps us understand how a person's world can in fact change or be changed for the better. Competence in changing worlds is ordinary magic, indeed.

Peter Ossorio, in *The Behavior of Persons* (2006), distinguishes between two types of worlds: the Observer's world, which is the public world we all share and which we know by observation and participation, and the Actor's world, which takes the form of a dramaturgical pattern we essentially create as we go along. The difference between the two is both subtle and profound, and is well illustrated by one of Ossorio's classic images briefly retold here:

The Picture of Winston Churchill

Wil hands Gil a picture and asks: “What is this?”

Gil takes one look and says: “That’s a picture of Winston Churchill.”

Wil: “Hold on a minute. How do you know that’s not a picture of someone else who looks a lot like Winston Churchill?”

Gil: “You got me there. I can’t be sure it’s Winston Churchill.” Then Gil picks up a pencil and draws something on the paper. He hands it to Wil and says: “That’s a picture of Winston Churchill.”

Wil: “Hold on. How can you be sure that’s not a picture of someone else who just looks like Winston Churchill?”

Gil: “I’m sure it’s a picture of Winston Churchill because I produced it, and that’s what I produced it *as*.”

The Observer’s world is what we see around us. The Actor’s world we create as we go along, and it *is* essentially what we produce it as. Becoming consciously aware of how we are producing our own world, and intentional about what we produce, is the key to producing ordinary magic in our own lives.

Of course we usually do not see ourselves as creating our own world—yet another aspect of our competence that is invisible to us—and we must be very careful here because the potential for vanishing into mumbo-jumbo is very real. A well-known saying captures both the actual potential and the traps: *The world is as you see it*.

It’s easy to dismiss this saying as either a trivial reminder that we know the world through observation, or as a weak-minded attempt to paint the world in your preferred colors. In fact, when your only concept of “the world” is the Observer’s world, it’s hard to see any sense here at all. When we recognize that the saying refers to the

Actor's world, we can see it as providing a guideline for how our world can change, and for the better. (This is yet another instance of Descriptive Psychology's conceptual articulation making competence available to us that we just don't have without it.)

Note what this does not say. It does not say that the world is as you say it is, or believe it is, or want it to be, or intend it to be, or affirm it to be. It's not a mere matter of knowledge or intention; it's a matter of behavior. The world you *see* is the world within which you act, and paradigmatically, in which you succeed. To paraphrase Yoda: "Not try. Do."

Discerning what your world is, and discovering how to change it, is a profound undertaking, not to be taken lightly or done easily. But it can be done; it has been done, and the means for getting there are known. Let's explore a bit further this most profound ordinary magic.

The late Randy Pausch, whose "Last Lecture" moved and inspired millions, provides an interesting case in point (Pausch and Zaslow, 2008). A vigorous 47-year-old professor of computing science, happily married and the father of three young children, Pausch was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. He delivered his "last lecture" ostensibly to the Carnegie-Mellon academic community, but actually as a legacy to his children. In it he describes his world in ways which many have found inspirational. We may find it instructive.

Pausch acknowledged the pain and difficulty he faced in coming to terms with his imminent and untimely death. But he insisted that he was in fact a happy man, full of enthusiasm for living the life that remained to him, and he appears to have been telling the truth, according to those who knew him then and in his last days. His world, clearly, was a place where opportunities for happiness constantly present themselves, and he embraced them enthusiastically. How could this be? And how can one change one's own world to be more like his?

Pausch himself accounted for his world as the result of a choice made early in life. Drawing on his early reading of *Winnie-the-Pooh*,

he said that he noticed that in life you could either be an Eeyore or a Tigger—and he chose to be an enthusiastic, energetic Tigger, a choice he affirmed for the rest of his life. (His parents confirm Randy’s early Tiggerishness.) It’s as simple as that—Eeyore or Tigger. Choose.

This account is persuasive to many; some people who were depressed and even considering suicide wrote Pausch to say that his example inspired them to embrace life. But his account is flatly unpersuasive to others, who say no choice was involved. They insist that Pausch’s genetic inheritance and early life experience made him a Tigger, just as theirs made them decidedly not. You are what you are, the critics say, and there’s not much you can do about it.

So who’s right: Pausch, who says you choose your world, or his critics who say you can’t? I suggest that both are right, and neither is right. The actual story is more complex than either account. It both allows for and constrains ordinary magic in living. Let’s dig a bit deeper.

Possible, Actually Possible, and Real

Ossorio observed that the real world divides into facts, not things (an observation he shared with Wittgenstein and several other philosophers.) The real world consists of all facts and all possible facts. Thus, as observers and critics our accounts rely both on what actually happens and what could have happened but did not. Often, like the dog who did *not* bark in the famous Sherlock Holmes story, the significance of what took place may be seen more in what did not happen but could have.

As Actors navigating our world, we continuously determine what we will pay attention to and how we will cast our drama. Every situation presents both opportunities and obstacles to action. What we see depends on the place we currently occupy in the community in which we are acting, what we want, what we know how to recognize, and our habits (Significance, Want, Know and Personal Characteristics parameters of Intentional Action, respectively). Each of these is a potentially fruitful avenue for changing how we

create our world. We can act from a different status or community, acquire or lose reasons for acting that change what we want, learn to recognize new opportunities or obstacles, or notice our habitual patterns and actively seek to change them. But our behavior and world construction also depend on another, less obvious but nonetheless powerful factor: we act on what is real to us. Changing what is real to us is perhaps the most direct and powerful means of actually changing our world.

“Real” in this instance contrasts with “true”. Whether a fact is true is a directly part of the Observer/Critic world, a matter open to negotiation and resolution. It’s either true or not, and we have serviceable ways of working out which it is (of course sometimes we don’t know enough to be sure in a given case, and our Observer/Critic practices allow for that.) “Real” as used here is part of the Actor’s world, and contrasts with “merely possible” and “actually possible”. Ossorio’s “4 Bridges” heuristic (*The Behavior of Persons*, pp. 266-267) succinctly demonstrates these issues. Essentially, he points out that if you have had the unfortunate experience of having three bridges in a row collapse just as you are reaching the other side, no amount of statistical evidence or engineering analysis will convince you that bridges are safe. You are likely to say, “That may be true, but the bridges I cross over are dangerous.” Likewise, if whenever you go for a walk on a mountain trail you are actively afraid of being mauled by a bear, statistics that show this happens perhaps twice a year worldwide are unlikely to help. Again, “That may be true, but for me the fear is real.”

With the bear example we can gain some ground in understanding how the Observer’s world links to the Actor’s world, and thus how we might change our worlds. “Bear attack on the trail” is a possible fact, and for most of us that’s what it remains: merely possible. That is, if we thought about it at all we would acknowledge that, yes, that could happen, but it never actually enters into our behavioral choices. We literally don’t give it a thought. Suppose, however, you see a video of such an attack, or you know someone who was attacked by a bear. In other words, it moves from something

you have merely heard or thought about to something you have in some way observed. This can result in a change in your world. “Bear attack” may well become an *actual* possibility for you, one that you take actively into account in appropriate circumstances. And if the experience was particularly strong—say, you yourself barely avoided a bear attack, or when you observed the attack you felt almost as if it were happening to you—it may become *real* for you, that is, something that in relevant circumstances is automatically part of what you consider, with the directness we associate with emotions and feelings: “It feels real to me!”

(Lest we get stuck on attacking-bears here, recognize that what has been said could as easily apply to rape, assault, being mugged, having your laptop stolen, having your home invaded, etc. And lest we get stuck on issues of danger, recognize that what has been said also applies to making a successful public speech, falling in love with someone who loves you, experiencing ecstatic bliss, or any other state-of-affairs which you have heard about but never before experienced. Merely possible facts become actually possible or real when they become in some way part of your actual life.)

Now let’s loop back to Randy Pausch. Did he actually *choose* to be a Tigger? Of course he did. But in order to do so, Tigger had to be an actual possibility in his world, that is, he had to have *experienced* approaching life with enthusiasm and energy so that he could chose to do it again. And from there it was a matter of developing Tiggerishness as a habit, choosing it routinely and consistently long enough that it became real for him, an automatic part of what he considered in choosing what he paid attention to and in casting his drama.

But notice the part Randy’s essential capacity and learning history played here. Descriptive Psychologists understand essential capacity as providing boundaries on what a person can become, and learning history as required to turn capacity into an actual person characteristic. If you do not have the essential capacity, no amount of learning will result in skill at tensor calculus. Likewise, if you have never had the necessary learning experiences, the capacity to develop

trust in others will not develop into actual trust. Obviously, Randy had the capacity to become a Tigger. Equally obviously, he had learning experiences that turned that capacity into actuality. It seems that many people lack that essential capacity for enthusiasm and energy, or else—and I personally believe this to be far more likely—they have never had learning experiences that develop the capacity into actuality. In either case, they are not in a position to choose to be a Tigger; it's simply not real for them and they understandably might be skeptical about it being *really* real for anyone.

How, then, do we change our worlds and for the better? One way looks a lot like certain forms of therapy. Help people discern the parts of their world that are real but not true, and which restrict their ability to engage in their lives with satisfaction—the unsafe bridges and bear-attacks, if you will. This is a sound and useful approach.

But ordinary magicians in living take a different approach: from among the possible facts in this world, they choose those which are most personally desired because they create the greatest behavior potential. Then they set about finding life experiences that can make them actual possibilities, and with some habit-building work, real. How exactly this is done is well beyond the scope of this paper. We can conclude, however, with an exercise that illustrates some of the ground to cover.

First, a limbering-up exercise. Kindly bring your full attention to where you are and what you are doing. Take a deep breath or two and allow your awareness to simply be here in this room.

- Now, take a moment to look around and see what is in the room. Just *notice*; you don't need to *do* anything about it.
- OK, now take another deep breath, clear your mind and look around again, this time seeing everything in the room that uses electricity.
- Good, now one more time look around the room, this time seeing everything that is blue.

What did this little experiment bring to your attention? Some things stood out as you looked for electricity that you barely noticed

the first time around. Blue things just seemed to pop into existence when you were looking for them. This is a very simple reminder of something we all know: What you see depends on what you are looking for, that is, what you expect to see. And since what you are able to do, and are inclined to do is strongly connected to what you see around you, what you actually expect to see in the world has a strong connection to what you do, and therefore to what satisfaction you can derive from your actions.

Our little experiment was meant to be a limbering-up exercise, a parlor trick if you will. Let's conclude this paper by raising the stakes just a bit to see how you can change how you see the world in a significant way.

Again, please take a couple of deep breaths, and allow your attention to be fully present in this room. Now, think of every person in your life who has done something for which you are grateful. Take your time, look around and look back in your life, and become aware of everyone who has done something for which you are grateful.

- Now, pick one such person to focus on.
- Focus your attention on that person.
- Remind yourself in specific detail what they did that you are grateful for.
- As you recall what they did, allow gratitude to arise within you. Don't force anything, just allow gratitude to be there.
- Become aware of what you are inclined to do.
- Now, notice: Your world right now is a world in which gratitude has a real place. Does this seem different from how you usually see the world? If so, how?

The world is as you see it. We are all competent at changing how we see our world, and Descriptive Psychology makes it possible for us to attain extraordinary competence in making our worlds rich and rewarding places. It's almost—but not quite—magic.

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