

Reader Question: "What's The Closest Thing To Magic You Believe In?"

(Question asked in a letter from the UK)

When I think about magic, what comes to mind is something that has the power to alter one's consciousness. There is a very specific moment during my last few years in prison that I can look to and say, this happened. In some ways, it was a moment of alchemy. It required the mixing of various elements; one of which begins 93 million miles away from earth and takes 8 minutes to travel here. I'm referring to light from our star, the Sun.

The Sun discharges 386 billion billion megawatts of energy every second. Life as we know it, would not exist without our Sun. It's been a source of comfort and inspiration for humans for millennia. It's also been a source of much drama and suffering for us too. Galileo taught that the Sun was the center of the solar system, which outraged the Roman Catholic Church (who believed that the earth was the center of the solar system). At age 69, Galileo appeared before the court of Rome and was found guilty of "defying doctrine". For his teachings about the Sun, Galileo was sentenced to life in prison. Later, his sentence was commuted to house arrest. He died in his home 8 years later, under the watch of Inquisition guards. I'd like to think, with a great deal of certainty, that during those 8 years confined to his home, Galileo had an experience that altered his consciousness, similar to mine here, while under the watch of the Federal Bureau of Prison's guards.

At any given moment, about 3,100 cubic miles of another element is swirling and dancing through the atmosphere. I'm referring to water (mostly water vapor). When water and Sunlight alchemize in just the right way, something beautiful appears as if out of nowhere. A rainbow!

The English poet William Wordsworth said, "My heart leaps when I see a rainbow in the sky..."

Ancient Greeks once said that Iris was the deity of rainbows and messenger to the Gods.

When I walked the track here in prison with my friend Doc, he once said, "Rainbows are God's way of communicating with me."

Here's what I can say about rainbows. They are the result of Sunlight passing through water in the air and bending in the process. This bending of light is known as refraction. Rainbows occur between 40 and 42 degrees above the horizon and the center of the arc is always directly opposite the Sun. At Sunrise and Sunset, the angle of the Sunlight allows a person to see a complete semicircle. At noon, it is impossible to see a rainbow because the Sun is directly overhead. If you are in an airplane, you would be able to see a full circle of a

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rainbow because there is water and light above and below you. Also, at 6:17 AM one morning, a double rainbow appeared over the Federal prison in Lewisburg, PA that altered the consciousness of many of us prisoners.

Double rainbows occur when Sunlight is reflected inside a water droplet twice. Some of the Sunlight bounces around inside the water droplet and exits at a different angle. Because of this double reflection, the second rainbow's colors are always in reverse order and appear fainter.

Prison has a way of flattening your relationship with anything beyond its walls. But the morning the double rainbow appeared, it stood in direct contrast to this flattening as its arcs curved their way across the morning sky.

Aboriginal Australians give great significance to the phenomena of the rainbow. The "Rainbow Snake" that arcs up into the sky and dives back into the earth, is said to possess all the hazardous and all the life-giving forces of the land. The "Rainbow Snake" also acts as a border between the land we inhabit and the dream world and it allows unconscious potentials to take a form that can be seen with the human eye.

It didn't matter if you were a drug dealer with dreadlocks halfway down your back, a clean-cut white-collar guy, or an addict missing lots of teeth - those of us who saw the double rainbow that morning were shaken awake from our prison bunks by the sensuous world. The language of the rainbow spoke to us. It told us of possibilities that exist beyond prison walls. And we responded.

Some of us stood suspended in awe, as if mesmerized by a magic trick. Others rushed to tell a friend, while some stared in silence, attempting to listen more contently. All of us who heard the language of that double rainbow were transformed that morning. As it brought us back into our senses; the prison itself became less flat. It might have only been a subtle shift in mood, but a subtle shift of mood amongst a large number of inmates can transform the texture of a prison. And it did! The rainbow spoke to us. It nourished our collective souls and made visible the potential for a life outside of prison walls that we all held well confined within our unconscious. Then, for a few moments, the prison faded away.

That is the closest thing to magic that I believe in.