

Need Some More Energy? Make Believe

It was hot. The line at the Montrose Post Office curled like a long whip around the table in the middle of the room. I got busy waiting, shifting my weight from side to side, feigning interest in stamp displays and the menagerie of stuffed toys hanging on the wall.

Finn, my toddler, got busy, too. He saw the room for what it really was: a court for playing a few solo rounds of Ring Around the Rosie.

The central table, long and narrow, made a perfect Rosie, and Finn proceeded to race as he chanted the familiar nursery rhyme.

No one in line seemed bothered by his antics, which relieved me, though I also noticed that when he sang “Ashes, ashes, we all fall down,” no one joined him on the floor.

“I wish he would give me some of that energy,” rued the middle-aged woman in front of me. She announced it not so much to me as to the room.

Hearing her request, Finn stopped in front of her on his next circuit, reached his hand deep in his pants pocket, pulled it out as if cupping something precious, and extended the make believe gift to the woman.

“Here’s some energy,” he said. And then continued his circular trajectory around the room.

Though the woman accepted the invisible handful, I didn’t detect any immediate change in her demeanor.

I wondered, later that day, did she feel just a touch more energetic? If she believed his gift would work, might it not have some placebo effect?

My friend Michelle and I call this the “Act As If” Principle. It works great for writers. Asked to write a book on Christmas angels and don’t know anything about them? Then do a bunch of research and Act As If you are the expert while you’re writing. The irony: by writing the book, you become the expert. I’ll become an expert on Christmas angels later this fall.

The Act As If Principle also works in any office, at least to a point. Dismayed with doing “busy work”? Act As If it matters filing papers or answering the phone, and sometimes you can figure out just why the job you’re doing is important and feel good about where you’re at that moment. What I’ve come to see recently is that Act As If and Placebos are just adult forms of childhood Make Believe.

Though the idea of make believe brings to mind Peter Pan and Never Never Land, the words themselves are potent, especially when we dig up their deepest roots.

Make comes from the Indo-European root *mag-*, meaning “to knead, fashion, or fit.” Other etymological cousins include *magma*, *mason* and *mass* (as in a kneaded lump of barley clay).

Believe comes from the Indo-European root *leubh-*, which means “to care, desire, love.” It comes to English through the Germanic *galaubjan*, or “to hold dear, to trust.” Other etymological cousins include *love*, *livelong* and *libido*.

If we think about make believe in terms of its linguistic heritage, we see that it’s about fashioning a kind of a trust with the world, a trust that things might be other than what they seem. We could loosely re-translate make believe to mean kneading the moment into something we can hold dear, a moment worth loving.

I think about the film “It’s a Beautiful Life,” in which a father and son are in a concentration camp, and through elaborate ruses, the father manages to keep this fact hidden from his son so that the boy’s innocent eyes might remain uncorrupted. What a lovely, dramatic example of kneading the

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moment into a moment worth loving. Making believe. Making the self accept something as real or true—crediting it with veracity.

So I tried it out. While driving home I was exhausted from lack of sleep. I asked Finn if he had more energy to spare. His face lit up with a wide-eyed grin and he dug into his pocket with great effort to produce another precious handful, dispensing it to me from his car seat. I tried to eat it. “No, don’t eat it!” he chided.

So I tried rubbing it like salve over my face, neck, forearms and chest. And sure enough. I began to giggle, wriggle and rouse riotously in my seat, straining against the seat belt, just as he does. I had to manufacture some of the energy myself, but who said you could just sit back when it comes to make believe?

I’ve since made a bunch of bottles of the stuff, and I am willing to sell them to you for the low low price of \$299.99. What a deal for an endless supply, and each bottle comes with a money back guarantee. Feeling broke? Pay me with make believe money. I don’t mind. If the energy salve works, and I believe it does, we’ll both feel much richer.

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