A Visit with Uri Geller

Richard P. Feynman

WHILE I was out at Malibu [in 1975] using [John] Lilly's tanks,* all sorts of people came through who were connected with the "mystical" world. One man began talking about Uri Geller, who was supposed to be able to bend keys through some kind of supernatural forces, and could bend a wire inside of a tube, et cetera. This man told me that Geller had convinced some people in England—for example, physicist David Bohm—of his supernatural powers. He thought I should like to investigate this, and would I be interested?

I of course said yes, indeed, I would be interested. I told him, "I think the laws of physics are supposed to describe all phenomena, and I don't see how Geller can do those things, according to the laws I know. So if it's demonstrable, then it means I don't know all there is to know in the directions that I *think* I know, and therefore it would be interesting to me." Of course I've lived a long time, and what I said was a little bit what you would call dissembling. I dissembled slightly. You see, I had been through a lot of experiences, and I knew that time and time again these things don't work. I had read a lot of stuff about extrasensory perception and studied what was known because it was very interesting to me, but it always ended up in a tawdry nothing. So I had every expectation that this was just some kind of a trick. But I'm still very interested; I mean, I'd like to see how he does it, for the fun of it. So I said, "Yes, I'd like very much to meet Uri Geller."

The guy went on about how "skeptical" professors had studied the keys bent by Geller under an electron microscope to understand the forces that might have bent the key, and how it might have melted or not melted—all this nonsense.

I knew that a magician is very clever, and that it's easy to fool me, so I told the man, "Listen, I want very much to meet Uri Geller, but I'll tell you something that's different about me: I'm smart enough to know that I'm dumb."

I had read a lot of stories about extrasensory perception, and I knew that the weakest position to be in is to think you are cleverer than the other guy, and that *he* can't fool you. Because a good magician can do something shouldn't make you right away jump to the conclusion that it's a real phenomenon; you need a helluva lot more rigidity. And you'll find out that

*See "Altered States," in R. P. Feynman, *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman* (New York: Norton, 1985).

99.9 to 100 percent of the time it's *not* something strange, it's not something mysterious, but something ordinary, a trick! But it's fun to *find* the trick, and the only way to find the trick is to be damn sure it's a *trick,* and not be ready to think that it might not be, because otherwise you slip too easy.

A good example of this business about not being smart enough to know how dumb you are is a story about two boys in France, which came out during one of the extrasensory perception phases. They were two simple farm boys who did something or other and told the Signor, who told the priest, who told the mayor, and finally the professors from Paris came—the great psychology professors from Paris—to watch the two boys, and the professors became convinced that the boys really *had* some special powers.

What happened was that in the beginning the boys simply faced each other, and just by moving a little bit, or jiggling, or doing something, they were able to signal each other. Somebody caught on to that and turned them around so they couldn't see each other; then a screen was placed between them; all kinds of stuff, and they were still doing it! It turns out that the last trick was being done with the assistance of an uncle, who was up in an attic and could see both boys, transmitting the signal from one to the other. The boys were getting so much attention, and hearing that the professors were going to come see them the next week, they had time to think about how to improve their trick. Since the boys kept changing the way they signaled each other, and since the professors assumed that the boys were transmitting their thoughts to each other always in the same way, they couldn't figure it out. And the most significant thing is that the professors kept saying, "These are *simple* folk: they're just boys from the farm. We can't imagine that they could be clever enough to fool us; we're not so foolish as to be easily fooled. . . ."—but that's exactly what was happening. The small boys from the farm were fooling the professors from the University of Paris.

So I *knew* that I could be fooled in this way, and figured that guys like Bohm must not have felt they could be as easily fooled as I can be.

A few weeks later my phone rings, and it's Uri Geller. He's in Hollywood, and I can come and see him at his hotel. I asked if my friend Al Hibbs, who was interested in making television programs (and who is a lot quicker at spotting a trick than I am), and my son, Carl, could come. Geller said yes. He particularly liked that my son was coming, because he is especially good in front of children. Carl said, "Great! Great! I'll invent some tests for him to do."

So Carl put together a package. He got some very soft, easy-to-bend pieces of lead from an adding machine that he was taking apart—much easier to bend than a key. He put a piece of carbon paper in an envelope—all Geller has to do is make a mark on the paper. He got a tube made of glass, with stoppers at each end, and put a thin piece of wire inside that Geller was supposed to bend. So Carl invented all these tests which would be *easier* than bending a key, if the bending were done by mental effects, as Geller claimed.

. . . We went to Geller's hotel room and found a very nervous man,

walking back and forth, answering the phone, which rang often. Carl gave him his box of simple tests, and Geller put it aside—he didn't even look at it. Between telephone calls he explained to us that sometimes the power comes, sometimes it doesn't, and he doesn't know where it comes from. He told us various theories that people have suggested: so-and-so says it might be such-and-such; so-and-so says it might be extraterrestrial. Of course, I'm just sitting there and this fog is passing by.

Then Geller handed each of us a little pad of paper and a pencil, and asked us to make a drawing: He's supposed to guess what it is. It was easy to see how he was going to do that, because the top of the pencil moves when you make a drawing, and he guessed in the way a fortune teller does, by suggesting that it might be "this-ish" or "that-ish," and looking at our faces for a sign of excitement, showing that he's on the right track. Of course he had his hands over his head, but what do we know about that? He said things like "There are circles involved . . . (he saw the pencils move) mechanical." It didn't work with us because we were all absolute poker faces.

So Geller's mind-reading didn't work. He then picked up a key, but said the power wasn't coming. We were watching him like hawks. We shouldn't have done that: We should have let him get away with his mind-reading trick, become relaxed, and let him do his stuff. He answered the phone a few more times, saying in between that he didn't have the power right now.

Then he says, "Hey! It often works better under water. Let's try it under water." I don't know what he means, but he goes into the bathroom with a key, and he turns on the faucet. We quickly follow him in there. Al's on Geller's left, Carl's on his right, and I'm behind—all four of us are crowded into this tiny bathroom—the three of us looking down to see if he's got a tool to come out of his sleeve, or what! Nothing happened, I was a bit disappointed: He wasn't able to do one trick; he was not a superstar magician, as I had hoped.

. . . Al called me up later with a hypothesis about the key bending under water. We were all looking for a tool, and saw none, but if Geller could distract us for a moment, he could slip the key into the pipe and quickly bend it, and with all the water rushing down, it would be hard to see. I don't know if that's the way he was going to do it, because we never gave him a chance. •