

Appendix: *Geller the Paranormal Superstar*

One might also gain some insight into how a real psychic might act by studying the notorious 1973 appearance of Uri Geller on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. Leading up to this segment – which came on the heels of an alleged exposé of Geller by *Time* magazine – Johnny Carson enlisted the help of the rising paranormal investigator and skeptical debunker James Randi. Randi, who had assisted with the *Time* magazine exposé, provided suggestions to prevent artifice on the part of Geller. By following Randi's protocol, Carson created conditions in which – as it is widely reported – the humiliated and exposed Geller was unable to demonstrate any psychic abilities. According to *The New York Times* 'the result was a legendary immolation, in which Geller offered up flustered excuses to his host as his abilities failed him again and again.'¹

It is also widely reported, that rather than destroy Geller's career, this failed appearance actually catapulted Geller to international stardom as a 'a paranormal superstar.'² Geller claims that he initially saw this performance as a disaster, explaining that he 'sat there for 22 minutes, humiliated' and 'went back to [his] hotel, devastated' thinking 'that's it – I'm destroyed.'³ Geller claims that he was 'about to pack up the next day and go back to Tel Aviv'⁴ when he was booked for *The Merv Griffin Show*. In retrospect, Geller describes Randi as his 'most influential and important publicist' and states that his appearance on *The Tonight Show* 'made Uri Geller.'⁵

The New York Times surmises that 'to an enthusiastically trusting public, his failure only made his gifts seem more real: If he were performing magic tricks, they would surely work every time.'⁶ Thus, Geller's failures were apparently viewed by many as an indication of Geller's genuineness. Similarly, in *Psychology of the Psychic* David Marks and Richard Kammann write that 'Geller is the only magician performing today whose public image goes *up* by failures, because these help convince people that he is *not* a magician.'⁷

¹ Higginbotham, Adam. 'The Unbelievable Skepticism of the Amazing Randi.' *The New York Times*. 7 Nov 2014.

² Higginbotham, Adam. 'The Unbelievable Skepticism of the Amazing Randi.' *The New York Times*. 7 Nov 2014.

³ Higginbotham, Adam. 'The Unbelievable Skepticism of the Amazing Randi.' *The New York Times*. 7 Nov 2014.

⁴ Higginbotham, Adam. 'The Unbelievable Skepticism of the Amazing Randi.' *The New York Times*. 7 Nov 2014.

⁵ Higginbotham, Adam. 'The Unbelievable Skepticism of the Amazing Randi.' *The New York Times*. 7 Nov 2014.

⁶ Higginbotham, Adam. 'The Unbelievable Skepticism of the Amazing Randi.' *The New York Times*. 7 Nov 2014.

⁷ Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *Psychology of the Psychic*. 2nd Ed. 2000. p. 71.

Having read many times about Geller's failure on *The Tonight Show* – always being described in roughly the manner above – I decided, one day, to watch the footage out of curiosity. I was stunned by what I saw. Far from failing, Geller actually successfully completed a portion of a water dowsing test – eliminating three out of ten empty cans – before switching to a different test in which he appeared to slightly bend a solid spoon without touching it directly. Geller did not definitively fail either of the demonstrations which he attempted.

This is all the more extraordinary since Carson's implementation of Randi's protocol prevented any possibility of Geller's tampering with the spoon ahead of time. To put this in perspective, I am at a loss for how Geller might have accomplished the spoon bend under these conditions.* Given the significant discrepancy between how this appearance is commonly reported, and what I observed, I have transcribed several portions of the segment at length below.

Carson began by respectfully, but fairly, introducing Geller, observing that 'some people have said he's a fraud. A lot of other people have great belief in what he does.' Carson also observed, 'It's fascinating. They've done a lot of research, and some of it they just cannot explain. So, tonight we hope he will show you something that will leave you wondering.'⁸ Geller, after taking his seat and noticing the testing paraphernalia, mentions that he feels 'scared.'⁹ When Carson suggests that Geller can feel free to give a demonstration at his convenience, Geller launches immediately into several plausible defences and counter attacks, stating, for instance:

I'll try when I really feel up to it, okay?... I really have to be in the mood to do things and have them happen. And many times nothing really happens. And it doesn't really matter if I'm in front of 3,000 people or 10 people, I do my best. And, of course, I'm really talking about time now. For instance, if I had time to bend a nail – an hour, or two hours, or unlimited time – they will happen in the end...¹⁰

Geller wisely latches onto the time constraint early on and runs down the clock (to use a sports analogy) by prolonging the water dowsing test – taking a significant amount of time to eliminate three of the ten canisters – and encouraging side conversations. When the question of skepticism arises, for instance, Geller takes a break to discuss this point, claiming (as Callahan did decades

* Presumably, Geller may have noticed that the spoon was already slightly bent, as many spoons are, and took maximum advantage of that fact.

⁸ 'Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).' *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

⁹ 'Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).' *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973..

¹⁰ 'Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).' *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

later) ‘I’m also a skeptic.’¹¹ He elaborates: ‘If you tell me there is someone else who does it, I will also want to see to believe. I’m sure there are other people.... I’m sure I’m not the only one. Maybe there are other people who have these powers but do not know them and are not developing them.’¹² Carson engages politely with the conversation, but consistently returns to the question of the “tests” as in the following exchanges:

Carson: Would you like to start with that one?

Geller: When I feel ready.

Carson: Would you like to try anything here?

Geller: Why don’t you ask some more questions?

Carson: (Later) Are you feeling in the mood yet? More questions? What’s the capital of South Dakota? I don’t mean to pressure you.

Geller: Let me rest a little? All right? You know, I’m surprised. Before the show your producer came and he read me at least 40 questions you were going to ask me.

Carson: Well I can ask you questions if you’d like me to ask you questions. I don’t want to push you but obviously we don’t have unlimited time on a television show... (Later) How are you feeling Uri?

Geller: Well, first off I don’t force anybody to come to my appearances and believe me. You see. There it is. And I’m trying to do and succeed. Usually, of course, I don’t walk into an audience and they say, “Here. We laid down 20 cans. Find it!” I can’t work that way. Neither at where I do the experiments. I have time. I sit down. You feel. Do it. In an audience I feel much more free. I know that nothing will happen to me if it won’t happen.¹³

The incident of the spoon bending is fascinating, as Geller clearly does not physically bend the spoon, yet when shown closely to the camera (after the “process”) it does have a very slight bend. Panellist Riccardo Montalban, who was holding the spoon when Geller allegedly caused it to bend, is quick to verify that the spoon was straight, then was bent. He further specifies that he felt it bending:

Geller: See if it’s bent there?

¹¹ ‘Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).’ *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

¹² ‘Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).’ *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

¹³ ‘Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).’ *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

Montalban: Yes it is. It is. It is very much bent. I should say. It was very straight.

Carson: Where? – It does look like there's a slight bend there.

Geller: No. It will keep bending. It bends more. It usually bends more after it happens. And this is one of the thickest points of the spoon. And you felt it?

Montalban: Yes, indeed. Yes I did.¹⁴

Later, Carson again returns to the tests seeking stronger or further evidence. He mentions, for a third time, the drawings in 'double sealed envelopes'¹⁵ which were made at Geller's request (but presumably not under Geller's usual conditions). The exchange, by this point in the segment, was typical:

Carson: You don't feel, what, strong tonight? Is that –

Geller: I don't feel strong... Right now I'm feeling being pressed, and that I can't...

Carson: I'm not trying to press you, I'm really not.

Geller: No, you're only telling me to try that or maybe that.

Carson: Well, I thought that was the idea of – (laughter and applause) I'm not trying to put you down. I didn't mean that patronizingly at all. Because I have seen you on shows, and I thought the idea was to show, if you possibly could, some of the things that you claim you can do. And I certainly don't mean to press you, and if you feel you can't do it tonight, or don't wish to try, I certainly don't wish to make you feel uncomfortable. I'm not trying to be skeptical. I would love to see these things. I really would.¹⁶

After Carson mentions the 'double sealed envelopes',¹⁷ Geller attempts to explain himself:

Geller: Well, let me tell you again. This didn't bend much. And right now here I'm stuck. I don't feel for it. And I don't want to be stuck further on an envelope. I'd rather tell you that many people are skeptical about these things... They see something happen and they want to see them closer and closer... But I've been working with science quite a lot and, uh, by doing what you see here under controlled conditions, because this is not a controlled condition.

Carson: What do you mean?

¹⁴ 'Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).' *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

¹⁵ 'Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).' *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

¹⁶ 'Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).' *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

¹⁷ 'Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).' *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

Geller: Well, this is not a controlled condition. What I mean is, for instance, in experiments, it's covered with bell jars and there are cameras running and many scientists looking at every point. And although you're trying to do the same – but this is not really a controlled condition. But again, it's quite difficult for me and I won't go on something I don't feel strong for.

Carson: All right. That doesn't leave us much then. Umm. Umm...

McMahon: We do have three empty canisters.

Carson: We do have – [The available footage of this segment ends there.]¹⁸

Reading between the lines, one gets a sense that Geller was expecting to be treated like a celebrity and instead was being tested, put on the spot, and treated like a fraud. Whether Geller truly felt this way, or just adopted this attitude on the spot as a defensive strategy, cannot be known, and does not matter. The important thing is that Geller's position – whether feigned or genuine – is a solid one. Geller had been tested extensively by credible (at that time) researchers Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff at the Stanford Research Institute, and the results they had obtained seemed to indicate extra-sensory perception. Why then, would a talk show host feel the need to take it upon himself to subject Geller once again to these experiments? Would Carson interview a famous and successful actor and subject him to tests to prove that his acting ability was genuine?

The fact, of course, is that Carson *was* challenging the competency of the SRI researchers. From a certain perspective, such a challenge may be seen as being in poor taste. And from a different perspective, of course, one might view this as the epitome of good taste. Yet, Geller is correct to point out that the tests at SRI took place over a prolonged period of time. In fact, Puthoff and Targ observe that Geller spent long periods of time complaining before many of his drawing duplications. In their words, his successful duplications were 'usually preceded by several minutes of, "I can't do this. It's impossible. I want to stop. Let's wait"' before suddenly claiming to "feel it".¹⁹

Additionally, of course, prolonged laboratory experiments allow for many failures, without discrediting the subject. With dice, for instance, one can be incorrect on 4 out of 6 guesses, but still be twice above the expected outcome. On *the Tonight Show*, there would be no time for, what

¹⁸ 'Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).' *The Tonight Show*. *YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

¹⁹ 'Uri Geller - SRI Part 2.' Stanford Research Institute: Experiments with Uri Geller. *YouTube*. Nov/Dec 1972.

Carson referred to as ‘the law of averages’²⁰ to play out. Consequently, Geller found himself risking glory or ridicule over, essentially, a single rush dowsing test or PK demonstration. In retrospect, one might expect even someone with genuine psychic abilities (should such a person exist) to object to such out of context and high-stakes tests. The problem, however, is that Geller had appeared on TV numerous times before and managed to provide powerful demonstrations without much apparent difficulty.

Geller also fails – again, only partially, and very sincerely – in a rare piece of footage from an unidentified program on WNYC-TV Channel 31 in the early 1970s. What makes this footage particularly unique is that Geller was on a panel alongside the rising star of magic and illusion David Copperfield as well as actor Omar Sharif.

Near the end of this segment – after a fascinating and mutually respectful conversation – Geller offers to try to read Copperfield’s mind. Copperfield is instructed – under conditions with which he is satisfied – to ‘go anywhere’²¹ and draw something on a notepad. Geller explains: ‘I don’t care if I fail... Draw something simple. Don’t complicate what you draw. Don’t give me the pad because some people say I see imprints or all of that. You try to [mentally] pass it to me, all right? And let’s see if I can get it? ... I have a feeling it won’t work. But don’t be negative.’²² When Geller continued to hedge, Copperfield interjected, ‘Can I tell you something? I want you to get it.’²³ The interaction which followed was quite nuanced. Consequently, I will describe it at some length below:

All right. Exactly. Don’t try not to want me to get it. Just visualize what you drew... If it comes it comes, I’ll feel it. And by the way, what I’m doing – I don’t have to go into any meditations or concentrations – I have to see it in my head. And if it doesn’t come, then it doesn’t come. If it comes, then it comes. Start drawing it in your head...²⁴

Geller tells the host and other guests to carry on with their conversation. After an unknown amount of time, the host checks in with Geller, who replies:

²⁰ ‘Uri Geller on the Tonight Show (Full).’ *The Tonight Show. YouTube*. 1 Aug 1973.

²¹ ‘Uri Geller and David Copperfield.’ *YouTube*. 1963.

²² ‘Uri Geller and David Copperfield.’ *YouTube*. 1963.

²³ ‘Uri Geller and David Copperfield.’ *YouTube*. 1963.

²⁴ ‘Uri Geller and David Copperfield.’ *YouTube*. 1963.

I have to be honest. I'm not getting it. I don't know what you drew, but what I was getting is letters and not a drawing. That's the first thing that came into my mind. Letters, that's all... There's no drawing. I was getting letters, and I was getting "M" but letters, not figures. (scribbling on a pad) Something like that. And one other thing, underneath what I was getting, was totally different. I was getting a spiral and I was hearing an instrument in my head. I'm not making anything up. Now, I could be totally wrong, and I'm sure you'll be happy to say that I am wrong...²⁵

Copperfield responds that he would not be happy if Geller fails. Geller asks to see the drawing and Copperfield displays his simple drawing of a circle. At this point, the host references an incident which was not included in the partial recording of this segment, saying (to Copperfield presumably), 'You psyched him out. You son of a gun! You gave him that big thing about how everyone draws circles and triangles.'²⁶ I gather from this that Copperfield must have discussed population stereotypes and suggested that such a test might be biased by the fact that many people draw similar objects or shapes, such as circles and triangles. He then opted to draw a circle.

Copperfield explained that he decided to make a drawing that 'was either going to be completely devoid of circles and triangles, or a circle.'²⁷ At this point, one might take Geller's guess as a miss. He specified, not a figure, but letters, and specifically the angular letter "M". He further specified a spiral and a musical instrument. Here, Geller has several big misses (no letters, no triangles, no musical instrument) and one partial hit (spirals and circles are both curved).

Geller immediately begins to reframe the situation, attempting to transform misses into hits. He states, 'All right, well, that's not bad, but look what I got... Now let me ask you this. Be honest with me, didn't you want to draw a violin before? An instrument?'²⁸ Copperfield responds in the negative. Geller elaborates, 'And see. When I got the spiral, these many circles, I thought, he's gonna' say now, that here I am drawing circles, but this is what I was getting. I don't know why I was getting letters. But I didn't get a triangle at all. And I didn't get a square or a car or a house.'²⁹ Copperfield responds, 'I think you're terrific.'³⁰ To which Geller replies, 'Thanks. And thanks for not being hostile.'³¹

²⁵ 'Uri Geller and David Copperfield.' *YouTube*. 1963.

²⁶ 'Uri Geller and David Copperfield.' *YouTube*. 1963.

²⁷ 'Uri Geller and David Copperfield.' *YouTube*. 1963.

²⁸ 'Uri Geller and David Copperfield.' *YouTube*. 1963.

²⁹ 'Uri Geller and David Copperfield.' *YouTube*. 1963.

³⁰ 'Uri Geller and David Copperfield.' *YouTube*. 1963.

³¹ 'Uri Geller and David Copperfield.' *YouTube*. 1963.

One can surmise therefore that Geller, for the most part, had no real strategy other than to guess and hope for the best. Given his experience on *The Tonight Show* in 1973, Geller was no doubt aware that even a partial success would be a huge boost to his credibility, while failure would only prove the sincerity of his efforts. Of course, he employed certain cold-reading tactics, such as offering multiple guesses (Letters? An “M” made of triangles? A shape consisting of all curved lines? A violin or hourglass figure? A musical instrument? Music? Noise?). He next reframed, attempting to find connections between his guesses and objects which may have been considered or dismissed prior to the creation of the drawing. He also redefined a spiral as ‘many circles’³² and announced that he would probably fail throughout the experiment. I have elaborated on Geller’s approach to performance in ‘The End of Mind-reading’ and on the ethics of Uri Geller in the introduction of this dissertation.

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³² ‘Uri Geller and David Copperfield.’ *YouTube*. 1963.