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On creating a foundational practice

Magician and podcaster Alexander Eth discusses the inherent complications of talking about magic, learning how to listen deeply and give people the space to elucidate their ideas, and building a foundational practice that will allow you to grow.

We often judge an artist solely based on the final product without knowing about their process, where they began, or how they learned. In the arts, TCI tries to undo some of that. The same happens in magic: overwhelmed beginners with no idea where to start can't turn many places for advice from working magicians. Meanwhile, *Glitch Bottle* is seeking to undo some of that.

For sure. I started *Glitch Bottle* in the first place because I kept having follow-up questions to conversations taking place on forums that were exploring things like, "Western ceremonial magic," or "Grimoiric traditionalism," or specific magical techniques. Eventually I was asking so many followup questions, I thought, "Okay, I'm going to do something kind-of-maybe crazy, maybe strange, but what if I started following up via audio and started a podcast on it?"

I realized there was this huge disconnect between pop culture, religious institutions, the general understanding about magic and what magic is, and what magic *actually* is. For instance, modern religious institutions going back hundreds of years will say, and Hollywood will say, "Magic is evil. Magic is selling your soul to the devil. Magic is making pacts with demons. Magic means you have to debase yourself or sacrifice animals at midnight and bathe in their rejuvenating blood and rub graveyard dirt all over yourself all the time--"

I like where we're going with this.

--and yet when you read the actual texts, these Grimoires that go back three, four, 500, 1,000, or 1,700 years, as in the case of the Testament of Solomon, it's the exact opposite. You're not selling your soul to the devil. In fact, you are working with spirits in a mutually-agreed-upon ritual, that executes mutually-agreed-upon terms, to fulfill things on both sides.

You don't have to debase yourself. In fact, it's the opposite. You have to spend days, according to some

texts, in a purification state where you're fasting and cleansing and praying or connecting to the divine. So I saw this huge disconnect—and I think it's because it's sexy, because Satan has a very real presence in terms of the magical practices that engage with that. But there's been this overemphasis on magic being *explicitly* and *exclusively* a spooky thing, as opposed to a very uplifting and powerful way to engage with the spirits.

So I was nervous when I first started it, like, "There is no way in hell that any *actual* ceremonial magician, someone who goes through the Grimoires, who practices things, who might spend a *significant* amount of time tracking down specific *Materia Magica* or some kind of magical implements, would agree to speak with me."

Much to my surprise—they said yes. Truly I am the eternal student, so if there's ever an opportunity to learn something from a guest, talk about a specific book, refine a practice, something that can help forward the conversation about *what magic actually means*, how do people actually practice 600 year old Grimoiric traditionalism or books in 2020—that's definitely always been the goal for sure.

Outside of your experience as a student and practitioner of magic, you also had a background in audio when you started *Glitch Bottle*. Besides the obvious skills, how did that background factor into launching the podcast?

Yes—ever since high school I was involved in radio, and I was a radio journalist for many years. I started at my high school radio station, going in and learning audio editing, recording interviews—using Cool Edit at the time and then learning Pro Tools and Adobe Audition and all these audio editing softwares. That was a really interesting time, all the way back in high school.

And that's when it was drilled into me that, both from a radio perspective and from a journalistic perspective, if you're going out there with a microphone in your hand to interview a city council member or the mayor or whoever it may be, you're always subconsciously listening for sound bites. You're listening for hints: it might be an innocuous thing brought up in the interview, but it opens a door. Something that wasn't planned at all opens an entirely new door.

It comes down to listening, giving the space, creating the space—but also, I'm having a conversation. What is the essence of the conversation afterwards, what were the main themes? I have this three-hour interview with Josephine McCarthy and she's amazing. She is incredible, that is also an understatement. How do you then take that chunk—that three hour conversation—and understand what the basic themes are, the real points emphasized, what does Josephine want listeners to walk away with?

Then it's putting that into a format where listeners can immediately understand, within the first 30 seconds, "Here's our guests, here are the main points, here are the things that you can expect in the interview," then going from there. But you're right. I would say this whole thing started way back in high school!

When did you realize *Glitch Bottle* had an audience? How has your audience grown, responded to the podcast, influenced it—shaped you?

I've always had a continual sense from listeners that they appreciate a couple of things. The first, from what I hear, is that they resonate with the questions that I ask. Sometimes when I'm interviewing a really well-known author and practitioner, like Josephine McCarthy or Aidan Wachter or Dr Stephen Skinner, I'm having conversations in my head and thinking, "Oh, this might be a total amateur question, but I'm really curious about it." What's awesome is hearing from listeners, "Oh, I'm so glad you asked that question. I had that exact question on my mind." It was so cool and rejuvenating to hear from people when they said, "I'm so glad you asked that question. I'm so glad you take the time to break things down into the basics," the 'base of the pyramid,' so that there's a general understanding.

The other thing I hear listeners saying is something I never really noticed until later on: they appreciate a conversation where as the host, I don't constantly interrupt the guests. I'm not constantly asking followup questions in the middle of their point. They're like, "Oh, we appreciate you letting the guest actually talk and finish a thought." When people tune in to the podcast, my goal is for them to benefit from the wisdom of whichever guests, whoever they are, taking the time to share about it.

Just giving guests that space to make a point is something perhaps not as emphasized in other podcasts, where the host has to feel like, *well hold on now, let me just assert myself in this kind of weird way.* No, you don't need to do that. Just let the guests talk. Those would be the two biggest things for sure.

How do you start in podcasting, in radio or audio, and what are the basic skills you need? What skills in magic and audio do you think benefit each other, and could be applied to both?

The biggest thing is something that I know Josephine McCarthy has said. I know Aidan Wachter, Frater Ashen Chassan, Dr Stephen Skinner, Jake Stratton Kent, most guests that I speak with on the podcast, when I ask about advice they have for magic, have said similar things.

The number one thing I would say applies to both magic and audio is: just do it. Driving a car, for example. If you want, whether it's a podcast or magic or driving a car, you could spend 10 years reading the instruction manual of how to drive a car, or how to do a podcast. You really could memorize everything, know all of the different techniques, the brakes, all this stuff. But what you're losing is, you're not able to get behind the wheel. So you can be a kinda-master of some things, but if you don't take the active kinetics to do it, you will actually not learn much at all.

With podcasting, you need both the will to think big, and to break things up into small steps. I know people have heard that before, but for me at least, it's totally true. Even though I was in radio, I was like, "I don't know what a podcast is... how do you do a podcast? What is an RSS? Wait, how do I do this thing on Spotify and then also push out to Apple?" So, take things in small steps.

Then there's recording software. It sounds very basic, but if you have any computer, there's free software. Just something that can record conversations. Getting a free Skype account definitely helps because you're able to talk to people all over the world, and you're able to record conversations.

And then start small, I would say. If you want to do a podcast or engage in some kind of audio art that involves recording people or talking to people, just take the time to say, "Alright, forget about everything else. I've got some recording software, I have a basic microphone, I'm just going to sit down with my friend, record a 10-minute conversation and see how that goes." That's what I did for the first episode of *Glitch Bottle*. It helped so much because it took the pressure off. I was able to see how it goes recording something, getting the file, working it and editing it. I think starting small is totally key.

So for magic, it's the same thing. Start with a daily practice, a daily ritual. Don't worry about getting a lion skin belt and a consecrated iron blade engraved with the holy names of God. Just focus on a daily ritual that clears mental space and, most importantly, builds momentum each day you do it.

Then, breaking it down: say, "I want to host a podcast," then take that big idea and create a mini version of it. So go from "I want to host a podcast" to "I'm going to get the basic equipment and I'm going to talk to my friend for 10 minutes." And then see how that works. You learn so much kinetically from going through the motions and doing it that you eventually create your own idiosyncratic system, where you're able to understand how things work, how to talk to guests, how to see if guests are interested. Magic is totally the same way because through doing incremental things, you all of a sudden go, "Hey, I've been doing this thing for a week and this is good, but now I feel like I can build a little bit on top of that." And before you know it you, you start to fill out the base of the pyramid.

One technical procedural thing magicians have been doing for thousands of years, reflected in the Testament of Solomon, technically considered one of the first Grimoires ever, is—you have one [intermediary] spirit that King Solomon, for example, bound and worked with. Then that spirit introduced King Solomon to other spirits for Solomon to work with, who then introduced Solomon to *other* spirits, effectively creating a positive Ouroboros where it leads to this or that, which leads to better magic, better magic leads to better results, et cetera.

In podcasting it was the same way. Once I talked to my friend, I got enough courage to talk to Frater Ashen Chassan who is an incredible ceremonial and angelic magician. Once I spoke with Frater Ashen Chassan, then I said, "Hey, what if I try and reach out to Aaron Leitch?" All of a sudden you create this positive momentum that is ironically also reflected in magic as well.

How do you know, when you're in conversation with someone, if it's going well? How can you reroute if not?

One of the biggest things I notice is, when I put out a podcast with a return guest and I hear people say, "Oh my gosh, I'm so glad, I loved when you brought up this topic and I'm glad you went deeper into it." That's one sign that I know a conversation went really well. But that's more after the fact, when I hear feedback from listeners about, "I really liked this" or "Have you considered having so and so on" or "Hey, I really loved this. I love this guest, next time can you chat with such and such a guest on this topic?" I jot that down and say, "Okay, so that's good." But when I'm in the conversation itself if I'm interviewing a guest, what I notice is this almost free-flowing exchange where nothing feels forced, nothing feels artificial.

And then it feels like... How should I put this, like when you bite into a peanut butter cup—oh, this is such a dumb analogy, my gosh—like when you bite into a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, it has that "natural" texture to it, natural meaning, "Darn it, that felt exactly like it was supposed to." I think conversations are like that. When you have an author or a scholar who isn't used to presenting their research on a newly discovered manuscript from 1453, maybe they're a little nervous at first. But then once you get talking, you can tell a conversation is going really, really well when you forget you're recording, when you forget there's a tape rolling.

Or like my little thing there, where I got self-conscious about peanut butter cups! You actually notice there's just beautiful, natural back and forth. I feel that with a lot of the returning guests on the podcast because there's just a natural familiarity there. To answer your question though, about when you notice an interview is going south, things that could help an interview when you can tell it's not as you'd expect... Well, one of the things that can never hurt as a host of a podcast to say is, "All right, correct me if I'm wrong here" or "Please forgive my ignorance here but," and then go off and explore a topic.

In Chicago, back in the radio days, a reporter taught me one or two questions you can always ask: "What do you think most people misunderstand about your book, or your topic, or about X?" And then you can always ask that in its reverse: "What are two or three things you wish people understood about X?" Those are very open-ended questions, but they're really good questions because they engage the guest at a different level.

Years and years ago when I first started interviewing people, it was really jarring to me when after the interview, a guest would tell me, "Oh, it was great, but I really wish you would have asked me about this or that." I realized then that people may be a little bit nervous, but they really do want to talk about things. They're just waiting for you to ask.

So I think a third question, in addition to the previous two, would be: "What haven't we talked about already that you really want listeners to know about? What haven't we discussed that you think is really vital for them to better understand or engage with your book, topic, music, et cetera?" You could definitely throw those out in a "break glass in case of peanut butter cup Dr. Stephen Skinner emergency." For sure you can throw those in there.

With the podcast and work, plus the time demanded by a sorcerous lifestyle, how do you strike a balance and maintain so many projects and hobbies? How do you stay invigorated to all these things that clearly bring you joy?

Striking a balance is so important. You definitely need to do things and read things that are outside of a consecrated magical circle with an iron blade or arranging your seven planetary incenses according to the day and hour and planning out your rituals. All of that is amazing and all of that is important; however, I think having experiences outside of, say, magic or podcasting, actually enrich magic and podcasting way more.

Read Emily Dickinson, read poetry, go walking in the woods. There might be some people reading or listening to this later who say, "Well okay, yes, I understand the basics." But one of the things podcasting and magic have taught me per my own, as Terence McKenna would say, felt presence of direct experience is: the basics are the big things. The base of the pyramid is the big thing. And so like Josephine McCarthy mentions, the things you do outside of your esoteric pursuit are actually the things

that augment it, and add to a better understanding.

If you want to get involved in Graeco-Egyptian Magic and the PGM, you could spend 10 years and memorize every single spell until you could recall everything by memory. But what if you actually traveled to the pyramids, or read an entire history on Egypt from a bunch of different perspectives? All of a sudden your mind—how it interacts with the Greek world and Alexandria and all of that stuff—is making these connections. Synapses and neurons are connecting that didn't connect before. And then all of a sudden, when you step back into the circle, you have this benign weight, this cloak of history and this cloak of understanding you're wearing inside the circle, and it's a positive weight. It doesn't weigh you down; it adds a specific gravity of consciousness if you will.

When you learn things it adds to your own esoteric gravity, especially if it's outside of esotericism, much like a sun at the center and planets orbiting around. What you'll find is, when what you're doing is augmenting your own esoteric gravity, things start orbiting around you. It's not because you're forcing them into your life. It's not because you are grabbing them and throwing them into your life. It's not because you're lassoing them much like gravity. It's just a helpless thing that, when you start learning both in esotericism and way outside, once you start generating that gravity, things just naturally start to orbit around you.

You can engage with spirits in any capacity you wish, but if you don't make your life magically enchantable first, it's going to be a serious problem. What you're doing is denying specific channels of potential that the spirits can operate towards. So for example, if you desire wealth but you don't have a job and you don't do anything and you literally just sit there and you do nothing and you ask the spirits for \$1 million or X thousands of dollars—the channels that are there, esoterically, are limited. Whereas if you've made your life magically enchantable, you maybe started a band or you are managing a really important company or doing side projects. Then, something [author and Glitch Bottle Guest] Jason Miller talks about is making goals: instead of asking for 60 jillion dollars, you say, "My life is magically enchantable at this point. I'm asking for a 20% growth in the next however many years," or "I would like to engage a specific amount of people." Then all of a sudden the spirits have more channels.

This leads to something really important that applies to podcasting, it applies to magic, and it's an old adage, but: be careful what you ask for, and make sure you know what you're asking for. I had Rufus Opus on the podcast, who wrote the book *Seven Spheres* that talks about planetary magic, and he shared a story: He needed \$4,000 and so engaged with a spirit for \$4,000. His specific instruction to the spirit was, *I adjure you here now, et cetera, to deliver unto me \$4,000 but do not hurt any of my family, any of my friends or anyone. Don't hurt any living creature, et cetera.* And much in kind of a Macbethian sense, a couple of days later he got \$4,000 and no one was hurt. No living creature, no family, no friend, nothing. What happened was, a part of his house caught on fire: the insurance check.

Just know what you're asking for. I think it was Dr. Skinner who said, "If you ask for generic things, if you ask for love or wealth, you're going to get screwed really bad." The spirits will deliver things to you exactly how you asked for them, which is why you have to be careful. For example, from something Dr. Skinner said: Imagine if you had a bunch of books on the ground and you told a person, "Hey, put those up on the shelf." And they put the books up on the shelf, but the books are sideways, they're backwards, they're upside down. Well, you can't get mad because the person's going to go, "Well, I put them up on the shelf. I did what you asked me to do." But it wasn't what you thought it was.

So in podcasting, in magic, be aware of phrasing. Be aware of how you ask things, how you petition things. Or in podcasting, to kind of bring this back, if you're working to schedule a guest or approaching a guest for a new time, make sure that you're very explicit about what you're asking, or why you want to tell that story.

Everyone in this field is asked to define magic/k at some point, leading to centuries of argument over what all of magic actually is, or means. But specifically in the context of *Glitch Bottle*, which purports to be a show about magic, mysticism, and the generally misunderstood, what is magic? What is the *Glitch Bottle* definition of magic?

In the context of the podcast itself, I would say magic is "using the amazing energy that's generated through a conversation on the podcast to create an effectively exponential curve upward of other

conversations that spin off into new directions." The magic first comes into play where an idea or some kind of re-imagining of an idea, or a challenging of an idea, is first presented. Then the *real* magic happens among listeners in forums or one-on-one conversations and messages, on social media taking pictures of their practice based on specific things that happened during a conversation, sharing them with others.

To me, *that* is the magic of the podcast. My hope is, each episode of the podcast is essentially a wave where, if there is any resistance, the waves will keep subtly hitting you with different ideas and different conversations. Eventually some sharp edges might slowly be diminished over time. It's been really cool to hear from listeners who thought one way or who maybe came from a different tradition, whether strict divination or Wicca, listening to a conversation on the podcast and then all of a sudden having their own ideas, theories, trying things out and, most importantly, putting them into practice in their lives. That's been amazing to see.

Even the best neuroscientists today have recognized consciousness is effectively a mystery. Just like the very word *occult* means *hidden*, there are hidden energies, hidden forces, hidden "persons at work," and hidden consciousnesses. A lot of the work I do is with Mercurial spirits, obviously the Kabbalistic sphere of Hod, dexterity, communication, and exchange of ideas. There is an element of healing as well, which is another interesting thing. But to me, the magic is using those latent *occult* or *hidden* properties of conversation and just seeing the ripples go out.

Alexander Eth Recommends:

- 1.) Having one daily ritual involving meditation and controlled breathing
- 2.) Picking one grimoire or magical book that interests you, and chanting it aloud
- 3.) The magical works of Dr. Stephen Skinner, Josephine McCarthy and Aidan Wachter
- 4.) Reading the poems of Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens
- 5.) Backyard beekeeping

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Fact

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