

Speaker 1: The Window Podcast is a service of the Belin-Blank Centre for gifted education and talent development in the University of Iowa, College of Education. The Belin-Blank Centre offers comprehensive programming for students with talent in academic areas, visual arts, writing, inventiveness, and leadership. The centre serves teachers of gifted and talented students through professional development available both online and onsite. Go to the BelinBlank.org for a complete listing of resources. The Belin-Blank Centre is part of the University of Iowa, College of Education, Leaders, Scholars and Innovators since 1847. Learn more about the top-rank college of education in the state of Iowa at education.uiowa.edu.

Speaker 2: Welcome to The Window.

Speaker 1: Our guest today is Nate Staniforth. Nate is a magician, performer, writer, traveller, and former host of the Discovery Channel's international hit show *Breaking Magic*. For more than a decade, Nate has toured the US as one of the busiest working magicians in the country. His philosophical underpinnings are all about connecting awe and wonder to the idea of magic. His newly published book is titled *Here is Real Magic*. It's not only a biographical book, but it also marks his total respect for magic and for the connection to wonder. It's a book that is absolutely wonderful, and it brings out the heart of the author. So, please welcome graduate of the University of Iowa, currently living in Iowa City, Nate Staniforth.

Nate Staniforth: Thank you. Thanks very much.

Speaker 1: Nate, today we're going to talk about magic, and wonder, and awe. But before we get into some of that, how about talking a bit about how you get started as a magician. What first attracted you to magic in those early days in Ames?

Nate Staniforth: It was an accident. When I was a little kid, I read *Lord of the Rings*, the books. Movies hadn't come out yet, but I read the books. Nine is that curious age where you're old enough slug through 1,300 pages of pretty obscure writing about magic and then still hold out hope that you can go to the book, the library, and find a book of actual spells to cast afterwards. That was my plan. I finished *Lord of the Rings*, and I was going to go to the library and find a spell book so I could do that thing that Gandalf did where he shot fireworks up and impressed everybody. This is what I had in mind. But, that's not how it works. I found a book of sleight of hand instead, and I just became really taken with this idea that even if you can't do real magic for people, you can still show them something that they think is real, and I love that.

Speaker 1: I know you were doing some things out on the playground. You said it kind of disarmed bullies, impressed the girls, and [crosstalk 00:04:00]

Nate Staniforth: Yeah, that was my plan, yeah. No, I mean, the first really great piece of magic I ever performed was very simply you put a coin in your hand, you close your

hand, and when you open it, the coin was gone. In the same way that kids become obsessed with games, or football, or basketball, for me, this coin trick was my thing. I went home from school and I practised it for hours.

My mom got a carpet sample to put on the bathroom floor because I'd stand in front of the mirror and practise over and over. But at first, I would drop the coin every time, and it was driving everybody crazy. So, she thought, "Okay, we're going to at least put a carpet sample on the floor so it doesn't make so much noise." But in the same way that if you practise anything for thousands and thousands of repetitions you will get better at it, there was a point where it didn't look like a coin trick anymore. It looked like a miracle. I close your hand, and when I opened my hand, the coin, it really just looked like it disappeared. So, I wanted to see how people would respond to this at school.

The thing that I didn't understand that I've learned since then is that at a magic show, there's sort of a ... There's a societal and culture context in place that helps people understand what they're watching. You were watching a magicians. These are tricks. Nobody on the playground knew that I was a magician. They didn't know what they were seeing. They just saw something disappear, so they didn't clap, or applaud, or laugh. They just started screaming and running away. I think, "I like this. This is for me." But the teacher on duty at the playground was this stern, authoritarian woman. I was terrified of her. She stormed across the playground and demanded that I show her whatever it is that I showed them. So, I made the coin disappear again, and I will remember the look of just like white-light-through-the-clouds astonishment on her face for the rest of my life. I was hooked.

Speaker 1: Yeah, I can understand that. But you know, age 10, you declare, "I'm going to be a magician." That's pretty cute. But at age 18, less cute.

Nate Staniforth: It's less cute.

Speaker 1: Yeah, yeah. So, you went the University of Iowa. Tell us a bit about how was it being in college and working at your craft.

Nate Staniforth: Sure. I came to the University of Iowa on an acing scholarship. I knew from the beginning that I had no interest in the university for any other reason than to become a great magician. I would suck as much out of the theatre programme as I could. I performed on the Ped Mall. I worked through school by performing at frat parties and sorority parties. You know, just sort of took every opportunity I could to practise doing magic for people. If you can perform for drunk frat guys, you can perform for anyone on the planet. That is the hardest audience in the world.

But, I got a weekly show above the Deadwood bar downtown. Every week, people would come to see my show. The problem was they were the same people who would come back every week. So very, very quickly, classes fell off

my priority list. I was a bad student, but I was spending all of my time inventing magic to perform for these people every week, and I learned very quickly how to do that in a timely manner, and that was really essential for me, so ...

Speaker 1: I hear you about working magic to drunken frat guys, you know, tremendous capacity there. I think you also met the woman that you married in college, so that must've been a little interesting to go home and say, "Mom, Dad, I'm dating a magician."

Nate Staniforth: Yeah, yeah, for her, certainly yeah. I think Katherine, she thought for about a week that I was really interesting Charles Dickens, because I kept going on about how great David Copperfield was. She didn't have any background in magic, so she didn't ... She wasn't, I think, impressed by it. She wasn't put off by it. It was just this sort of strange thing that I did, but I think she realised very quickly that it meant a lot to me, and that was enough.

Speaker 1: As you were developing as a magician, I'm sure you had some heroes or people that had impact on you. They might not even have been magicians, but can you talk a bit about the impact of heroes or mentors on your life?

Nate Staniforth: Sure, yeah. I joked about being a bad student here at the University of Iowa, but I learned a lot watching professors try to communicate with their students. My favourite professor's Jay Holstein in religion department, because he faced an enormous task. How do you take a room full of jaded cynical undergraduates and communicate something that you care about to them in a way that will resonate with them? Watching him just throw himself at the audience, or at the students, it's was like watching a boxer in the boxing ring. It was and is one of the greatest performances I've ever seen, my first class watching him. I learned so much about how to carry myself as a performer by watching him and other professors try to communicate something they cared about to a group of students who, honestly, probably didn't care about it very much. Some of the professors were very good at doing that, some of them were very bad at doing that.

But, a magician's in a similar place, because the audience doesn't care at all about magic tricks. They're there to have a good time. It's up to the performer to find a way to build a bridge between this thing that matters more than anything to me and the audience who doesn't care about it at all.

Speaker 1: You know, and in your book, you repeat that theme, that what's really important about magic is the impact that it has on the audience. That for you, it's all about their experience.

Nate Staniforth: Yeah, magic is interesting. If you're a musician, you can create music on your own. You know, you get out your guitar and play in your bedroom. If you're a writer, you can write a masterpiece and no one will ever read it, and that's fine.

You've still written a masterpiece, but magic only ever exists in the mind of the audience. I can't create magic. There's no such thing.

Here's what it's like, I was once ... I was in Paris, and I was watching this painter paint sort of a scene of a candle, right? He was painting a candle that was burning on a table in a dark room. But the fascinating thing about how he approached this is he didn't actually paint the candle flame. He painted everything around it. He painted the illumination on the wall, on the wood, and the tabletop, but that bright, hot, white centre was just blank. That was just canvas. But when you looked at it, that's all you saw, right? Your eyes just were sucked straight to the centre and you saw this painting of a candle flame, even though he had never actually painted the flame. That's what a magician's doing, right? I can't show you real magic. I can't do that. That's not how it works, but I can set things up to help you see it even if I'm not the one that's creating. Does that make sense?

Speaker 1: Sure. You know, what fascinates me ... I mean, it's one thing to say a magician sort of sees a trick, or as a kid you read about something, and then [inaudible 00:11:24], "I'm going to get really good at it." But, what I'm wondering is how do you come up with your own illusions that are just to you? What triggers in you to say, "I think I'm going to make this my next illusion"?

Nate Staniforth: Sure. I have a notebook of impossible ideas that I want to perform for people at some point. It goes back to age 11. It's the same notebook, and I still am adding things to it. Some of the pieces that are in that notebook are in the show now. Some of them are sort of halfway through research and development. Some of them, I have no idea how I'm going to accomplish, but I still think about them all the time.

The first step is to imagine that you're sitting in the audience and just ask yourself the question, "What would take my breath away? What would make me believe in magic?" Then, it just becomes a lateral thinking problem. How can I throw all of my intelligence, and all of my problem-solving ability, and all of my time against this thing that seems impossible until you find a way to make it work? I wish there was an inspiring way to talk about it. It's just a lot of bang your head against the wall until you find something that works.

Speaker 1: I know you travel a lot, so what does it take to really get a good illusion perfected so that you're satisfied with it? I mean, you've heard of the 10,000 hours and so forth.

Nate Staniforth: Yeah. I hit Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours the summer I turned 22. He's right. I mean, there's no shortcut. The thing that I love about the world of magicians is it's you can't fake it. You can't buy your way in. There's no shortcut. The hard way is actually the easy way. You just have to do it, and you have to practise. It's very easy to see in the world of magicians who has put in the work and who hasn't, and I like being one of the guys who has.

Speaker 1: You know, I would think being in front of hundreds of people and about to do some magic, some place in your head it must be, "Don't mess up. Make this one work." I'm sure in addition to your many successes, you probably had performances where, even if they didn't realise it, you feel like it was kind of a flub.

Nate Staniforth: Yeah, sometimes they realise it, too. When I was 17, I did a show for my high school. I had been dreaming of this, essentially since I started as a magician. I wanted to do one big show to impress everyone in the school. You know, put yourself in the position of 17-year-old, you're sort of out to prove yourself to the world. So, 600 people filled, we sold it out, the Ames High auditorium. The first hour of the show just went spectacularly well. But, then I introduced the famous illusion created by Blackstone, he was a rival of Houdini. He invented this illusion called the floating light bulb. In his day, it was a miracle. You have this light bulb illuminate on its own, not connected to anything, and then float all around the theatre.

I didn't know how Blackstone did it, so I invented my own method, which was idiotic. It was this absurdly dysfunctional ... And I can tell you this, because it's a terrible method and no magician would ever use this. It was this absurdly complicated network of invisible threads that were connected by pulleys to this marionette stick that my friend had in the winds. I would dance around on stage and sort of take credit for everything, but my friend John was the one who was sort of working the sticks to make it happen. My only job was to secretly, as I was sort of dancing around on stage, attach the self-lighting light bulb to the secret thread. Then, my job was done. I'd just sort of move around and John would make it float.

The curtain opens, and the stage is bathed in blue light, and fog from the fog machine is rolling. Brian Adams, Everything I Do, I Do it For You, is just throbbing from the speakers, right? I sort of do my 17-year-old dance move over to the centre. I go up to attach the light bulb to the thread. Because I'm nervous, and because there are 600 people there, and I just ... I hadn't practised this enough. Instead of doing that successfully, I broke the thread. I could feel the tension in the line. You know, the thread was pulled up into the rafters immediately. I knew in one just searing moment of clarity that I had just announced that I was going to do the floating light bulb illusion. Everyone in the audience is looking at their programmes, and yup, up next, here's the floating light bulb. John and I both know that there's no way this light bulb is going to float. It's not going to happen.

In my sort of idiot 17-year-old brain, the only solution I can think of to get myself out of this uncomfortable predicament is to invent an interpretive dance with me and the light bulb as dance partners. I started. The music's still going. I'm in my tuxedo swirling around the stage frantically trying to remember every bit of choreography from every David Copperfield special I've ever seen. It was worse than you think it is. That's for bringing it up. I appreciate that.

Speaker 1: Yeah, yeah. Okay, okay. Quite a story. I know that you went to India in the-

Nate Staniforth: Sorry.

Speaker 4: Is this a part of the trick?

Speaker 5: Yeah.

Speaker 1: This is part of it.

Nate Staniforth: That was my alarm to remember to come to this, which is funny for a couple reasons, but I apologise for it.

Speaker 1: I'm just so glad it wasn't me. Nate, you also went on an odyssey. You were doing quite a bit of magic. I think passion, commitment has always been strong with you, but you hit a spell where I think you felt like you needed to kind of find yourself again, find some kind of an anchor, and you went to India. Can you share a bit about why India and what you learned by the time you came back?

Nate Staniforth: Yeah. I mean, I started touring while I was a student here at the university. I would skip classes, do away on weekends to do shows on other campuses. When I finished school, I did that for five years doing 100 shows a year. I was just gone all the time. I just was sort burnt out and disillusioned with the whole process of being a professional magician because it was mostly just ... It was like living like a UPS package sort of bouncing around the country all the time.

Yeah, after one particularly bad show, I thought, "Okay, I'm either going to quit or I'm going to find a way to reinvent this and sort of dream it all up again." I just happened to be reading a book about traditional Indian street magic. More than anything, I just wanted to go on an adventure. You know, I wasn't looking for new magic tricks. I was looking for the experience of magic. I wanted to be amazed by something. Because as a magician, you get in love with magic because you love that experience of wonder and astonishment, but sometimes it feels like the better you get at giving that to other people, the harder it is to feel for yourself. For someone who spend his entire life dedicated to magic, it had been a while since I felt like I had actually experienced it for my own.

So, yeah, I came up with this idea that I was going to go sort of on this quest to the other side of the world to just find amazing things and remember how that felt. I bought a backpack and I just travelled by train across India looking for street performers, snake charmers, mystics, [inaudible 00:19:51]. You know, anyone who can show me something amazing. That trip fundamentally changed the way I saw the role of a magician and how a magician should relate to the audience. That might be a longer conversation for another time, but I did discover this idea that it's very easy, I think in any profession, but especially in mine, to sort of fall into a routine and to sort of live in the story that you tell yourself about the world rather than the world itself.

You know, after you've toured for four years, you can get through a tour without ever really having to pay attention. The traveling's on autopilot. The show's on autopilot. I just sort of was coasting. The thing that travelling does is it shocks you out of that complacency because all of the shortcuts and assumptions that you usually make in day-to-day life are no longer there. You have to pay attention all the time. The result is that it feels like magic. The connection I made is that a good piece of magic does that, too, right? Whether you're on the other side of the world travelling in Rishikesh in the north part of India, or you're in a theatre and you see an elephant disappear on stage, for a second, you're forced to live in the present moment and everything else falls away. I love that feeling.

Speaker 1: I like what you said about being shocked back into a whole reality and the whole idea that we get complacent. You know, we begin to go on autopilot. You talk a lot about wonder and awe. That seems to be what really drives your magic. Can you just share a bit? What does it mean to you when you think about wonder and awe? What is that?

Nate Staniforth: Let me say it like this, I actually don't like show business. If I could find another way to do this without being a performer, I would do that, but I love the experience of magic more than anything. When I was young, my parents took me out to see a meteor shower. We drove out in the country. It was the first time I had ever seen the Milky Way. That just floored me. Then, when I started doing magic for people. I recognised that one of the best ways to experience wonder for yourself is to give it away or to share it, you know? I think parents, when they are pretending to be the tooth fairy, you're not doing that to deceive your child. You're doing that to give them the experience of magic. What you discover is that that's as amazing for you to give someone that experience as it is for the child to receive it, right? That's what a magician's doing.

I remember a couple years ago, my cousin was at my place for Thanksgiving. He was two, I think. I realised he had probably never had ice-cream before. His parents were just kind of like that. I decided it was my job to introduce this young boy to ice-cream. I took a spoonful and put it in his mouth. You could you see the cold disoriented him, but then he tasted it. He looked up at me, and it was like he was saying, "Your world has this? This is a miracle." That struck me with such force because I was having ice-cream the same time and it hadn't ... We were having the same dish of ice-cream, but I'd gotten used to it.

It's like, for me, magic is the experience of sort of waking up and seeing things the way you saw them before they became ordinary, and I love that more than anything. You can find that. You can find that anywhere. You can find it in music, or movies, or poetry, or basketball, or conversations, or mountain tops, or sunrises, or sunsets, right? It's more about how you look than where you look. I think it's probably different for everybody, but for me, there's something in the act of finding a way to share that with people that helps me for myself.

Speaker 1: Right, right.

Nate Staniforth: Does that make sense?

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(singing)

... does, and you know, you're clear that being a magician is kind of your route to that.

Nate Staniforth: Right.

Speaker 1: That there are many other things from [inaudible 00:25:14]. Now, your mom was an educator all of her life, so I know you have an affinity for the magic that's possible in education. Can you talk a bit about what you see as a possible magic in the classroom? A number of people here who are going to be teachers.

Nate Staniforth: Yeah. I mean, I think curiosity is sort of the oxygen of wonder, right? If you're curious about the world, it's impossible to not see it as this sort of sparkling and fascinating place that is infinitely complex and will continue to open itself to you as you learn more and more about it. I love this thought that wonder ... I want to get this right. Wonder is a product not of ignorance, but of knowledge, right? The magician operates from the fundamental conviction that the more you learn about anything, the more amazing that thing becomes. It's the absolute renunciation of the thought that familiarity breeds content, because a good illusion, the hallmark of a good illusion, is that it becomes more amazing in your memory as you think about it. It doesn't break apart under scrutiny, it becomes better, and better, and better the more you think about it.

I think that's true of everything, right? When you learn about the world around you, I think the honest response to that isn't cynicism and disappointment, but it's astonishment, you know? My wife and I were on our honeymoon. We're trapped in a tent in a lightning storm. Lightening was slamming all around us. It was terrifying, but it was also one of the most amazing experiences of my life, and it was not diminished in the least by my knowledge that this lightening was just the discharge of static electricity from the clouds being released to the ground. My understanding to the situation did nothing to diminish the raw, visceral power of experiencing firsthand. I think that can play itself out in any number ways in any number of disciplines, but ...

Speaker 1: Nate, what do you think parents can do to keep that sense of wonder in their kids?

Nate Staniforth: Yeah, to keep it alive in themselves, right? I think the more awake and alive you are to the world around you, the easier it is for you to share that with the people that you love. That's easier to say than it is to do, but I think it's worth saying anyway.

Speaker 1: Yeah, yeah. It's a great message to young people to adults, you know? I think one of the things that happens is we probably start off with a sense of wonder as little kids, and then we kind of outgrow it. How do we get that back as adults?

Nate Staniforth: Here's my theory on that. I think, just if we're speaking perfectly frankly, life in the world is very hard. When you're young, you're insulated from that a little bit. I think growing up is less a function of age as it is a function of that moment when the weight of the world sort of overpowers the wonder of the world in your attention, right? Doesn't mean that the good stuff goes away, but it just gets obscured by all of the responsibilities of being an adult, right? Because the world is hard and be we're in the world, the temptation is always to sort of insulate yourself from that hardness with ... Well, with what? With cynicism, or nihilism, or escapism, or ... You know, sort of to remove yourself from it a little bit so it doesn't hurt you so badly.

But, I think, one of the things I started thinking about in India is this idea of growing up twice, right? The first time happens to you. You don't get to choose when it happens. The first time you grow up marks that victory of weight of the world over the wonder of the world. The second time is up to you, and you get to choose when that happens. It's when you go back and you find all the good stuff that you stopped looking at as a result of all of the struggles that come with [inaudible 00:29:31]. Look, that's different for everybody. Again, it's easier to say than to do, but that's where I'm at right now.

Speaker 1: You have two young kids. I think they're still preschool, okay? Probably in about 15 years, they're going to hear this podcast with Dad on there. What would you like to have them get as a message from their dad 15 years from now? They'll still be teenagers.

Nate Staniforth: I would say go far, but come home often.

Speaker 1: I like that. Okay. We'll try to go far and then come home, too, and welcome home. Nate's willing to take a few questions from the audience. Does anybody have any questions or comments for Nate?

Speaker 6: Why don't you just kind of raise your hand. Make sure the mic's with you so we're able to pick you up.

Speaker 1: While they're thinking about a question, Nate, I want to go back to something that you had in your book, really got my attention. You said that magic is not cool because cool is exclusive. Cool does not sit next to the new kid in school

sitting alone at the lunch table. Magic sits with that kid. Can you expand on that?

Nate Staniforth: Yeah.

Speaker 1: That captured for me so much about who you are.

Nate Staniforth: I think magic is sort of at a perverse place in our society, because if you ... Like the sort of, excuse me, stereotypical image of a magician is this guy who's trying really hard to be cool, right? I think if there is such thing as real magic, surely it's us creating it for one another and sharing it with each other. You know, you can do that with a magic trick. You can do that with a song. You can also just do that with a moment of kindness and being a decent, decent person, you know? Because we're also helping each other along.

Speaker 1: That is magical.

Nate Staniforth: Just to clarify, that's how magic should feel, right? If you go to a magic show and the magician has made you feel foolish or not smart enough, like if you feel like a magician has deceived you, they're not doing their job right. It should feel like something they're giving you, not something they're hitting you over the head with.

Speaker 1: Question?

Speaker 7: Could you tell us an example of magic that you saw in your K-12 education growing up?

Nate Staniforth: Yeah. When I was in eighth grade, I had an English teacher who was the toughest guy in school. He was the wrestling coach, and that mattered so much for me, and I think some of the other kids in my class, because that's an age where it's really uncool to like reading, and it's uncool to like poetry, right? And here was the toughest guy in the school. He'd go lift weights after school with the football team just to show everybody that he was tougher than they were, but he loved literature. He loved books. It was the first time I'd ever heard The Raven by Edgar Allan Poe. It was the first time I'd ever discover Catcher in the Rye. This man was a vessel for some really great work that I never would have found if it wasn't for him occupying the same two roles, being sort of this tough jock athletic figure and also someone who loved literature very much. That, just it introduced me to this world that is still very important to me, but I wouldn't have found till much later otherwise. Does that answer your question?

Speaker 7: Yeah.

Nate Staniforth: I guess books is the short, like that's the one-word question, or one-word answer.

Speaker 1: Just to let our audience know, before we started this podcast, Nate did some magic with the live audience here. In no time, he reduced the average down to about eight years old, because he just had people smiling, you know, that feeling of wonder, that feeling like not only how did he do that, but it just felt so good to have something out of the ordinary happen.

Nate Staniforth: I levitated and made someone disappear, right? That's what happened. Will go with that.

Speaker 1: Nate, we have another question.

Nate Staniforth: Okay.

Speaker 8: Nate, kind of dovetailing on the first question, can you, in addition to reading, because I'm sure some maybe future teachers are listening to this, or seeing this, and going, "Wow, I would love to be able to replicate that, but I'll never be able to invest the thousands of hours that Nate has," what might be some other ways teachers can instill that sense of magic into the classroom?

Nate Staniforth: Yeah. I think the sight of watching someone who really loves what their teaching is almost impossible to beat, right? If you're in a classroom as a student and you see that your teacher really cares about whatever they're teaching, it almost doesn't matter what they're teaching. I was not a very good math student, but I had a teacher in high school who just loved ... She just loved it. That, more than any interest in math on my own, really carried the day for me, because I knew I must be missing something because she so clearly ... She was just passionate about trigonometry. I still don't understand how anyone can be passionate about trigonometry, but for her ... I mean, it was incredible. I don't know how old she was, but she transformed from this, what, 70-year-old woman? Into just this ball of fury when it came to sharing with us why we should care about all this stuff. That really captivate me. I think caring genuinely about the subject. I guess that's my short answer.

Speaker 9: [inaudible 00:36:07].

Nate Staniforth: Yeah.

Speaker 1: Well, Nate, you're making a clear message that you don't have to have sleight of hand to really work magic. You know, that a commitment, whether it's geometry, whether it's literature, and I think that's the important message that I get from you in everything that I've ever heard you speak about.

Nate Staniforth: Right, because I think anything can be amazing. It's just a matter of finding a way to see that and then share that with other people.

Speaker 1: Great. Nate, I hope you will continue to work your magic and to give all of us that sense of wonder and awe.

Nate Staniforth: [inaudible 00:36:48].

Speaker 1: I thank you for much for being on Window today.

Nate Staniforth: Thanks for having me on.

Speaker 1: Nate Staniforth.

Nate Staniforth: Thank you.

Speaker 1: The Window is presented by the Connie Belin and Jacqueline N. Blank International Centre for Gifted Education and Talent Development, part of the College of Education at the University of Iowa. The Belin-Blank Centre is directed by Dr. Susan Assouline. The Window is produced by David Gould and Joshua Jacobs. Music for The Window was composed and performed by Daniel Gaglione and John Rapson. Opinions expressed by guests on The Window are their own and not necessarily those of the Belin-Blank Centre, College of Education, or the University of Iowa.