

## STACY'S PROMISE



It's half past two on a rainy afternoon in August and I find myself staring into the fridge. It's an all too familiar situation. But this time it's different. This time, I have Stacy Makishi deep in my ear, urging me to turn my life around. I'm used to inner voices but mine are usually filled with regret, self-criticism and dismay. Makishi's is more forthright and pragmatic. Through my phone's tiny speaker, she's trying to turn my fridge into a portal: a door into some kind of kingdom of redemption.

*I wanna take you home...but to do that...I'm gonna have to ask your heart a very hard question: What is the feeling you're unwilling to feel? Because there's no way home ... but through.*

*Are you willing?*

*Let's go to your fridge.*

*Place your hand on the door.*

*Say, I am willing to open up and go through.*

1. *Open the fridge door.*
2. *See the light go on and feel its coolness*

3. Say: *I am willing to open up and go through.*
4. Say: *I am willing to wait. I am willing to return. I am willing to fill the place in my heart.*
5. *Shut the door.*

At this stage, part of me is on the brink of a reawakening but part of me is questioning the whole direction of modern academic life. Moments later, I'm in the loo upstairs. Again, Makishi's small electronic voice is offering up my household appliances as sources of potential salvation. She talks me through David Kessler's theories of grief, urges me to blow my nose and flush away the snotty remains of my old life. The domestic pilgrimage ends back in my bedroom, where Tracy Chapman's 'The Promise' is playing. Stacy's and Tracy's promises are now running over one another: a promise that I can return home if only I can remember how to feel.

Promises are curious things. They don't simply describe the world: they change it. In making a promise we conjure up a set of ties and obligations. In the 1950s, the Oxford philosopher, J. L. Austin, became interested in these kinds of words. He termed them 'performatives'. Phrases such as 'I promise', 'You're guilty' or 'We're married' are meaningful, even though they don't actually point to anything out there in the world. They are not anchored in some inner state, neural circuit or special quality but they shape our social lives and sense of self. They do not reference anything but they leave their traces everywhere. They are powerful, Austin thought, because they are sustained by a broader context. You can't just announce 'I marry you' in a seminar or a departmental meeting. And you can't christen someone's baby while standing behind them in a café queue. It is only in certain contexts that the performative earns its meaning. Without these contexts, as Austin noted "utterance is then, we may say, not indeed false but in general unhappy." As someone who works on the history of emotions, I am curious about what makes words happy.

In the 1970s and 1980s, anthropologists became interested in performatives as a way of making sense of magic. According to Malcom Crick, Stanley Tambiah and Tanya Luhmann, magical spells and invocations can be seen as examples of Austin's performatives. They are phrases that create new objects in the world and in ourselves. For Luhmann, studying Wiccan groups in 1980s London, magical spells are transformative because they allow us to bring the happy context into ourselves. The sheer circus of witchcraft - the cloaks and wands and incense etc. - creates a lasting image allowing us to recall or recreate the context at will inside of ourselves. It is that lasting image, that recalled context of magical ritual, that keeps the performative happy inside of us.

I've become interested in magic and rituals through my work on the history of tidying up. As part of that work I've been looking at the archaeologist and philosopher, R. G. Collingwood who from 1936 until his early death in 1941 was Waynflete Professor of Metaphysics at Oxford. Collingwood is now remembered mainly for his idiosyncratic philosophy of history in which he argued that historical thinking only succeeds when we re-enact the thoughts and arguments of our subjects in our own minds. Makishi's use of the iPhone loudspeaker makes this internalisation of another voice much easier. But Collingwood was also interested in magic, emotions and children's play and he thought these things were connected. In his *Principles of Art*, published in 1938, he argues that art and play are important processes for making sense of the mess of our inner lives. They are processes which allow us - recalling Makishi's words - to 'feel what we are unwilling to feel'. As Collingwood noted, "until that work [of art of play] is

complete one does not know what emotions one feels"(*Principles*, p. 115). A few years later, in his final work, *The New Leviathan* (1941) he offered a model of emotion which in many ways anticipates Austin's ideas of the performative as well as contemporary ideas of affect: "To name the feeling awakens his consciousness of the feeling . There is a tendency to put the cart before the horse and fancy that consciousness of the feeling comes first and finding a name for it afterwards ; but that is a mistake due to false analogy" (6.26). But if it's simply art and language which hold our inner lives together, that leaves the problem of what holds the meaning in place: the problem, as Austin noted, of keeping the performative felicitous or happy.

Writing in the 1930s, Collingwood thought that magic had evolved as a set of practices for evoking, directing and canalising particular emotions in productive directions. And he thought that those magical practices persisted in charismatic political speech and the uplifting incantations of popular psychology. However he did not offer any detailed analysis of how such magical practices might work. Luhrmann, as we have seen, offers a solution to this problem. For her it is the remembered glamour of the magic ritual which creates a context inside us that can keep emotion in place. However I think Stacy's *Promise* might provide us with a potentially more elegant solution. She recruits our everyday household items, fridge, bed, and lavatory, to make sure that our performatives endure. The context that holds our performatives in place is not the remembered ritual but the place itself, however ordinary it might be. Makishi reminds me, a little, of Mickey Mouse in his role as Sorcerer's Apprentice. In 1937, when Mickey's career was on the skids and Collingwood was writing his *Principles of Art*, Walt Disney gambled his company's fortune making *Fantasia*: a feature length cartoon in which the mouse steals his master's magic and uses it to enlist the kitchen's brooms, pots, pans and buckets to assist him in his servile work. Of course, it does not end well. Disney offers us a kind of nightmare version of the Lakeland catalogue in which the brooms have a mind of their own. Stacy's *Promise* is more successful than Mickey's Faustian bargain. But through my work with her, I have a clearer sense that the stability of my inner life is closely bound up with the built-in obsolescence of my kitchen's white goods and my indoor plumbing.

## **Bibliography**

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