



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## Stewardship is more about magic than money

Clay Nelson © 22 May 2022

I was never a big fan of magicians because I don't enjoy feeling conned or suspending my disbelief. Then I encountered Penn and Teller. Who couldn't love magicians with a TV show called *Bullshit?* They are scientific sceptics and atheists who love making mince out of sacred cows. I particularly enjoyed their trick of making an American flag seem to disappear by wrapping it in a copy of the United States Bill of Rights, and apparently setting the flag on fire, so that the flag is gone but the Bill of Rights remains. I saw the trick first on *West Wing*. If their unique routine weren't enough they have written numerous books. I am most drawn to two of their titles: *God, No!: Signs You May Already Be an Atheist and Other Magical Tales* and *Every Day is an Atheist Holiday!: More Magical Tales from the Author of God, No!*

What Penn and Teller taught me in their magic is: don't mistake sleight-of-hand for real magic. And don't let tricks of the eye fool you into thinking that you're seeing clearly. Real magic reveals truth.

Here at Auckland Unitarians, we do real magic.

Starhawk, born Miriam Simos, a neopagan and ecofeminist who gave birth to the goddess movement, tells us magic is, "[t]he art of changing consciousness at will." She writes: "when hard logic fails us, we might gain more clarity by looking at the situation through the lens of magic .... Magic ... in this sense is not waving wands or pulling rabbits out of hats. It's the heritage of ancient psychologies ... understandings of the world as infused with life, consciousness, presence, and underlying patterns." She is not suggesting abandoning logic — but joining it with insight and heart to get a wiser picture of the world.

That's precisely the magic that we do here.

We work to liberate and empower minds and spirits — as well as to provide space for each person, at any age, to explore the transformation of their

spiritual essence, without dogma but with ethics. It's magical because we don't need dogma, fear, and snake oil to see the world more clearly.

We don't claim 20/20 vision — but it's close. Our vision allows us to see things as they are — but with a deeper focus. We seek to see things as they really can be and not to be foiled by things as they are. Our vision is sharpened by keeping our principles, values, our core values central when we are looking at the world.

One of my favourite examples is Ellery Schempp, who was in high school when compulsory Bible reading was a part of every day in public school. He got in trouble for not wanting to read the Bible and was told that he had to read scripture in order to be in class. Schempp complied. A member of a Unitarian youth group, he brought the Qu'ran. After being sent to the principal's office he took the school to the Supreme Court. He changed history — prayer and Bible reading were no longer required in public school. Magic starts with changing one's own consciousness then provides the magic to change consciousness and even law in the world.

Henry David Thoreau saw no value in church attendance. I seek to change that — I mean, it's too late for Thoreau but I believe that we can equip this congregation to more fully serve our principles and values so that we are easily seen and known as the cool faith tradition that we are. I believe that we can equip this congregation to have the integrity that comes from being firmly grounded in and acting from those core principles. We are cool, but we're not a club of cool people. We are a religious community — bound together by our affirmation of and our aspirations to the core ideas of our faith — a constellation of principles ever evolving — founded in love and reason and grounded in recognition of the inherent worth of every person and of the interdependent web of all existence in which we live and move and have our being — a web throughout which our choices and actions are felt. These are the heart and soul of our magic. Thoreau wrote, "The mass of [people] lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is ... desperation. An unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of [hu]mankind."

The Magic of Unitarian Universalism is its core purpose to liberate us from resignation to what is set before us or desperation at what is around us and to sustain us in our liberation.

Starhawk says, “To work magic is to weave the unseen forces into form; to soar beyond sight; to explore the uncharted dream realm of hidden reality.” Take the power of love and the reality of human worth and weave them together into a place and a force that makes a difference in the world.

I don’t know if you have seen the Netflix series *Witcher*, but I am entranced, enchanted, and enthralled by this alternative universe full of dangerous creatures popping out of nowhere, heroes and heroines that combat them, and magic ... lots and lots of magic.

In the second episode, a main character, a young woman named Yennifer, is sent to the isle of Aretuza to be trained in the art of magic. It’s a harsh training, but then the world she lives in (that we live in) is harsh. Her teacher, Tissaia, says to her, during a lesson, “Chaos is the most dangerous thing in our world. It is all around us, all the time, volatile and powerful. Listen closely, your survival depends on it. Magic is organizing chaos while oceans of mystery remain. We have deduced that this requires two things: balance and control.”

Yennifer is in a class of young women training to be mages. They stand in a circle with a table in front of each one of them. On each table is a rock and a flower. Tissaia tells them to lift the rock without touching it, just using the power of their minds. She says, “Magic is organizing chaos ... this requires two things: balance and control. Between your flower and your stone lies the balance.” The women begin to apply their attention and focus to lifting the stones with their minds. One of them does, right away. She looks excitedly at the stone floating in the air but, immediately, her left hand begins to shrivel, painfully, crunching up, and withering. The young woman looks painfully up at the teacher who says, “This is the balance... demonstrated beautifully. There is no conjuring something from nothing. There is a give and a take.”

I’ve heard that before — the idea that magic exacts a price. But, then, everything does. The way to create order out of the chaos is to focus and make conscious choices about the price. On Aretuza, the mages learn to lift their stones by allowing the flower that is also on the table before them, to die. That’s a narrow focus -- between two objects on a table.

When we each make choices about how to pledge or, in fact, how to spend any money, we have to think about the impact of our choices — in the context of an interdependent world. We have to focus on something holy living at the heart of being — something with inherent value, life that must be cherished

and honoured — if we are to live with integrity. When we lose focus on that, we lose integrity. We start to see the world in distracted, unbalanced, broken ways, making choices that are not in line with what we hope for the flourishing of the world in the present and the future. When we lose focus, we forget who we are at our core — that we are a faith movement, with a purpose in the world, a purpose that is life-affirming and world changing, that lifts up the human spirit and all of life, that values justice and compassion, and reason and love, that invests in the making of a thriving and healthy community here, for the shaping of the beloved community in the world.

It concerns the balance of the web of life and the liberation of the spirits of all. And, lofty as that sounds, it takes money.

Joseph Campbell, the visionary student of myth and legend, wrote, “In the living of a life today, money is a facilitating energy source. With money in the tank like gasoline, you can get places you otherwise couldn’t go ... When you put ... money in the wrong place . it can be devastating. Where is the money going and where is it coming from in the economy of a nation ... of a city? That’s one of the big problems. You can turn a flowering culture into a desiccating culture just by wrong channelling. You have to have not only the energy, but also the capacity of mind that [helps] life flower.”

Pledging isn’t about pulling a rabbit out of your hat. It is real magic that empowers the magic of this place.

\*Inspired by Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia’s sermon on January 26, 2020

### **Meditation / Conversation Starter:**

What do you experience as magical at Auckland Unitarians?