



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Of Magic Doors

Todd Nelson, Guest Speaker
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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@uuneighborhood.org

“Of Magic Doors there is this: you do not see them
even as you are walking through.”

I’ve been a seeker of Magic all my life. The fairy tales and legends of childhood were never just fables to me but markers . . . clues to a magic just under the surface – an undercurrent of magic that is always there but hidden in plain sight for those who seek it.

I’m not talking about the magic of David Copperfield or Houdini, although I explored that too. My cousin and I were The Magiceers – teenage prestidigitators who produced doves out of thin air and sawed our sisters in half eight times a week, twice on Saturdays.

I found our old top hat in the attic and thought I’d dust it off and see what’s inside . . .

(A magic wand . . . all these silks – glad the magic hasn’t died. The last time I performed this trick was in 1980. Anyone remember 1980? That was the year that Ronald Reagan made Jimmy Carter disappear. Aha . . . I wondered where that rabbit’s been for the last 34 years!)

Who doesn’t love the magician pulling rabbits from his magic hat, or the shaman telling stories with shadows around the communal campfire, or our current cinematic equivalent?

Moving to Hollywood brought me to a career path of another type of magic, filmmaking, creating illusions from flickering light on a screen. I’ve learned a lot about how people love the idea of being awestruck. It’s like we humans are programmed to crave this “other” dimension, beyond ourselves, out of our control and deeper than the laws of science and mind.

When’s the last time you experienced magic of your own? Capital “M” Magic . . . magic that is beyond comprehension and yet utterly human. Feeling your arm hairs standing on end at an indescribable beauty; seeing a particular glow around someone or something; getting a nagging pull toward something that changed your life; losing track of time and space? You have these moments? You want more of them?

I’ve experienced real Magic much less often than the slight-of-hand variety, but it has happened enough for me to realize it isn’t by chance and it doesn’t have to be rare.

At church, every church, even UU, there is an attempt at ritual and majesty that has its roots in inspirational magic. But I’ve never heard anyone really speak of magic in the pulpit – of creating it, allowing it in your own life. Do we want to pretend this can’t be shared, or even taught? Our kids are right now in the middle of a Harry Potter program at YRE – a mini-Hogwarts right here at Neighborhood. Is Magic really only for the Sunday School classes or bedtime stories of our youth? What about Magic for grown-ups?

Scientific discovery is happening at an accelerating rate, but hasn't explained everything just yet. Each big discovery – out in the cosmos or in our tiniest spinning atoms – only creates more mysteries. And maybe . . . room for Magic?

Einstein called his own work “indistinguishable from magic.” He said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand at rapt awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.”

It's those moments of rapt awe that we crave, those moments that take us right out of ourselves and into another dimension. We are always looking for Magic Doors.

Have you ever been present at the birth of a child? Magical, isn't it? My wife and I'd been through the classes and seen the ultrasounds, heard the heartbeat, and knew all the science behind childbirth, but nothing really prepares you for that incredibly beautiful, terrifying moment when the magic door of your wife's womb opens up and you reach out and stare into your newborn son's face. Being there as another human being comes into being . . . that's a Magic Door.

And, of course, there is real magic in that mystical moment some nine months earlier, the moment of procreation. We are hard-wired to experience the uniting of bodies, the merging of two souls in an ecstatic blissful moment – another Magic Doorway. Is there any power on earth more mysterious than the one that conceived each of us?

There are 7 or so billion of us who inhabit the planet right now and about 108 billion who ever have. Every one of us came into magical being from one singular ecstatic union between two people. Now today we have all kinds of ways to create a family, but to make babies it all goes back to the birds and the bees, each sperm and egg uniting and dividing and growing into a human body. But where does that little spark of spirit come from?

Peggy Payne writes about the holiness of ecstatic moments in sexuality, and how akin they are to moments of spirituality, offering moments of expansion beyond the ordinary self. She says, “Through sex, we join with another being, gaining awareness of the other as well as acute sensitivity through the vulnerability the experience brings. Connected and receptive, we open into a space far larger than ourselves, even if only for seconds. What we feel physically at such times is explosive, a near-obliteration of the self into an entity unimaginably large.”

And of course, sometimes, as it did with your parents nine months before you were born, and their parents, and theirs and theirs, this magical moment creates a life. Nobody gets into a human body here without being intertwined with a moment of ecstasy. A pretty nice set up, yeah?

Lately, I've been exploring my family tree. My grandparents and greats I knew, (I even knew my Great-Great Grandmother!). But I've been discovering the great-great-great-greats who are

no more than entries in some dusty old bible, and I've gotten back on some strands to ancestors who were alive in the 400s A.D. When you get back into your 50th great-grandparents, you realize that you were related to a huge number of people back then, thousands really. And each of these names on the branches of my tree were flesh and blood people who way back then found their way to each other and at least once, had an orgasm together. (My feminist wife here will insert, at least ONE of them had an orgasm).

Now UUs are known for our OWL program – teaching healthy sexuality to our kids. We're not usually squeamish about talking about sex, so bear with me for one more moment. Whatever else happened in my ancestors' relationships or their personal stories was more complex and unknowable, but the point is that I am the magical legacy of hundreds of thousands of acts of bliss. We all are. I like to picture it . . . all the branches of my whole family tree, right at the moment of explosive creation – all those ecstatic moments leading in a long orgasmic magic chain to me, and through me, since I'm a dad myself.

At the other end of life, there's another Magic Door awaiting us all. Death is completely mysterious, a door marked EXIT ONLY . . . leading OUT of this life for sure and into . . . what? Well, the answer to that is part of what's kept religions humming for thousands of years. But being present as someone transitions out of this reality of life is certainly powerful. You feel it quite tangibly, even if you can't understand it. They are with us, and then they are not. Another Magic Doorway.

So we each pass through one portal at birth and will go through another as we take our last breath. What of the magic in between? Goosebumps. Tickle at the back of your neck. Gut-busting laughs. Stomach flips. Heart-bursting, mind-blowing, toe-curling JOY. Who doesn't want more of that in our daily lives?

Magic is often by nature spontaneous, but that doesn't mean we can't help create it. INVITE Magic into your life. CALL for it. Are you creating *space* for magic? Visualize it, nurture it, tend to your Magic like a secret garden and watch it grow before your very eyes.

One key to having more Magic is receptivity. Being present in the moment. Be in the NOW, as Thoreau and Blavatsky and Eckhart Tolle would all tell us. Use all your senses. See, feel, taste, EXPERIENCE each moment fully. Tune in to turn on. Says my fellow Nebraskan, Willa Cather, "Miracles rest on our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always." Magic is seeing when others don't.

One way to be more present is to get out of your habits. Try something new, be open to something different. (Like rearranging our sanctuary, for example? Guess what? *This* is the way the architect designed the space to be used back when this building was built. The drawing of it is out in the narthex. I proposed this arrangement to Jim before I even knew that. Magical?)

Comfort zones don't inspire us to see the magic. So allow yourself to stray outside your comfort zone sometimes, at least a little. Just a slight tweak to your lifestyle will allow you to notice more clearly, to pay attention to the magic around you.

Nature is full of magic. Nature is Magic, really now, isn't it? The molecules that are all interacting to create our bodies in moving, breathing form; the gorgeous trees and lush green grass outside right now; the beams of star shine streaming from a giant ball of burning gas out through space down onto the mountains encircling us, shining through the colored glass of this room and onto the little specks of dust floating in the very air we are breathing.

Grok the miracle that is you, sitting right now on a spinning planet that holds you safely on its surface, a paradise made miraculously perfect for your every comfort, surrounded by other beings who love you. Feel the magic of that?

Tantrikas say you can't learn the utmost secrets of the universe until you take off your head. Your analyzer won't get you into nirvana. You won't think your way to Magic. Get out of your own way. Like the creatures at the bottom of the river, do you dare to let go?

And I would add another key, one that comes from all spiritual paths: be in gratitude. If you are full to the brim, complete, not greedy or needy, then you're more likely to be present and receptive and open to the Magic. Thankfulness attracts Magic like a magnet. Thank You really is the most powerful magic phrase. Sprinkle a few more Thank Yous into your day and watch how you are rewarded with more Magic.

I met my wife ten years ago in Berkeley. It really was love at first sight. Now I had been calling out for her for a while, so I was ready, and in gratitude. I pushed myself out of my comfort zone to go talk with her, and over the next days and weeks I let go into the bliss of getting to know her and being open to her knowing me. When we first melted into an hour-long hug, the redwood trees around us started dancing, the stars shown in daytime – I kid you not – and we were swept up in a magical adventure that has continued through the birth of our son and the creating of many magical moments together.

We married on 11/11, almost nine years ago. And ever since, whenever we notice a clock reading 11:11, we kiss. Or text an XX, if we are apart. Now this is a simple little ritual, but I can tell you, it keeps the love alive for us. It puts us in a connected space and helps us keep our eyes open for more magic.

Do you make wishes? Do you call for magic? Are you curious enough to try?

In college, I once had a dream that I was going to work with Bea Arthur and Rue McClanahan from the Maude TV show, but it was strange because there was also Betty White from the Mary Tyler Moore Show. Well, when I got to Hollywood some years later and heard they were making a show with these three ladies called The Golden Girls, I knew I was going to get a job on that show. I got the job. (Easiest job interview ever).

Listen to your dreams. They will show you the way, if you pay attention.

Two summers ago we had a glorious family time camping up in the redwoods above Santa Cruz. Headed home along the 5, we pulled into a gas station about dusk in the middle of nowhere. I tried to stop at the first pump, but there was a little black furry puddle laying right in the driveway. Was that an animal? Alive? Yep, it's breathing. I pulled around to the next island and took Jack in the station for an ice cream. Marion said she was going to see what the fur ball was. I told her not to get too close, in case it was hurt, but I knew there's no stopping her from trying to help an animal in peril.

Hold me back now, she said, cause I'm about to rescue it. Really? A strange dirty dog with who knows what wrong with it? Let me remind you we are in the middle of escrow on a new home. Our son starts kindergarten next week. We have no time or energy for a puppy right now, and we always said Jack would have to be older to help care for a dog. "You're right," she says. "Dad, where's my ice cream?" says Jack. "Don't do it," says I. Post ice cream, Jack and I came back to the car to see Marion with a black shivering rat dog on her lap. She'd been inside the station and the girl behind the counter told her the pup had been in that exact spot all day, since they opened at 7 a.m. Customers had tried to coax it away with a hot dog or drink of water, but it would not budge from that spot in front of pump #1. People dump pets here off I-5 all the time, she said, sometimes 4 or 5 a week.

It was trembling, but not hurt, and had come right to Marion when she approached, licked her hand when she knelt down. We don't have to keep it, she said, but there was no way we're leaving this dog here. Matted down with mud, the fur around those big brown eyes looked up at me pleadingly from Marion's lap. And on her lap that mutt stayed for four long hours back to Pasadena. By the time we got home to bathe him and pull out all the cockleburs, he was named Cruz, in memory of our vacation. Cruzar in Spanish means crossing paths unexpectedly. (Marion had suggested Arco, after the gas station, but I couldn't imagine advertising for big oil every time I called him). Cruz it was. And he was housebroken, fully grown and in perfect health said the vet. He even walked well on a leash, as I soon found when we moved into our new house with a big fenced yard in a perfect neighborhood for walking dogs and meeting our new neighbors. This little creature totally changed our lives for the better.

In short, Cruz opened a Magic Door for us. And we for him.

One of those neighbors I met on those walks was the Senior Minister of this church. Jim walks his own dog on my street, and it was during one of those meetings that he pitched me the idea of joining the Preacher in You class. We all wouldn't be here, doing this today, if it wasn't for that little fur ball at pump #1!

I've had Magic Doors open all through my life: career shifts certainly, meeting my best friends, finding our new home. And sometimes, like with Cruz, I almost went right by them. Some

doors opened at the craziest times, and I wasn't always ready to go through them. Sometimes it doesn't feel like magic in the moment but only on reflection. I'm certain that I've missed more doors than I saw.

Like Lucy in the Narnia forest, sometimes you call for the Magic and it doesn't come. What then? Do you stop trying? The nature of Magic is that it just might surprise you when you least expect it. Magic Doors open like an energetic gateway opened just for you. Opportunity is at your doorstep, and at these moments your thoughts can manifest into form at lightning speed . . . if you are ready.

Invite it. Be present. Hold the Space for it and surrender into the Flow. Dare to Let Go. And most important, be in Gratitude. Good tools for Magic, but also for Life. And that's what almost every one of the world's spiritual paths have been telling us. Magic is Life. Life is Magic. And it is yours, and you are it, now and now and now and now . . .

Abracadabra – you're all now Magicians!

Go on...go make some Magic today...BE the Magic.

Thank you.

BENEDICTION:

While your hands are joined with your neighbors . . . feel our circle, our Neighborhood tribe, all interconnected.

Great Spirit of Life, Everything That Is, Goddess/God, Supreme Magician – thank you, thank you, thank you. We so appreciate this circle of friends and this time to come together and explore the magic that is here for us always. All-Ways.

We remember that you created us as a part of your creation; as magical beings who can create magic for ourselves and all the interconnected others in our universe.

The magic is everywhere, help us open to experience it, inspire us to create it and share it, and to feel it within us – every day, in every way, now and forever and Once Upon a Time . . .
Amen, Awomen, Sat Nam, Ho!

Please Go in Peace...and Magic.

It will come as no news flash to many of us here that Neighborhood Church is now in search for a senior minister to fill the slot of Jim Nelson, our retiring senior minister. In the next few months our hard at work search committee will bring us the name of a candidate that they have picked to be our new minister and then they'll want *US* to decide if that is the right person for our church. It's an exciting time for some of us and also a time of anxiety. Change brings about those two emotions. I've heard and watched several ministers here in the last 45 years I've been a member. One of them, as the introduction said, I was married to. Brandy was a parish minister for over 40 years, 24 of them here at Neighborhood. I saw first-hand what a complicated sometimes frustrating and often rewarding job it is ministering to a bright, opinionated and involved church community.

Now we've had an opportunity to reflect on just what kind of minister we want next through surveys and group discussions and private conversations among members. I've done all of this and yet I'm still not sure what I want and expect from my new minister. But I have been looking at those challenges and at the attributes and skills which a minister brings to the position. Then I took a leap prompted by the hype and speculation now surrounding who might run for president of our country in a little over two years. Right now I'm a bit surer that we will get the right minister here than that we will be getting the right president in two years. But it has been helpful for me to look at how these two roles – minister and president – intersect. While they are, of course, different in many substantial ways; one is elected the, other is, we say, called. One is visible and influential on a global level the other on, at most, a community wide level. The president, unlike a minister, can make and enforce laws. But the similarities stand out as clearly as the differences of these two public people. Each must exercise the tricky balance of power, along with always staying in touch with their congregants/constituents. And each has checks and balance on that power.

That word 'power' is loaded with a variety of connotations depending on how and by whom it is used. In a book Brandy wrote over 25 years ago called *A Machiavellian View of the Ministry*, he addresses the power word. It was written as a guide to new ministers many of whom begin their careers loaded with institutional innocence. The book is designed to help them manage their positions in churches with a more realistic perspective. As I read this opening paragraph of his book where he talks about power think how much applies to both presidents and ministers. It reads:

As much as most people, and almost every minister new to her or his profession does not want to hear or believe it, the best way to understand what is happening is to look at how power is distributed and is being used. This is true in relationships between couples, within families, within a nation, internationally and in the church. Within the congregation between members and the minister there is the continuous use of influence, authority, alliances, coalitions, and decision making; in a phrase, there is the exercise of power in its various guises. Power, personal or group, scares many people. But power is best understood as simply the necessary element required to make and effectuate individual or group decisions. Power is too often thought of as

power over others, when in a church the best use of power is when it is used with others to achieve mutually desired goals.

I think our church would score pretty high on achieving mutually desired goals in cooperation with the three branches of our governance – minister, board and congregation. Maybe we should be giving our national government some lessons on that effective use of power.

I want my president and my minister to know how to be a positive role model *and* realize the heavy responsibility this carries. In my lifetime a very public figure, President Franklin Roosevelt, made a choice about what to reveal or obscure. As a young man he was felled by polio and was wheelchair bound. When he ran for Governor of New York and four times as president the public was never shown a picture of him in a wheelchair. Apparently it was felt that if we knew the degree to which he was afflicted he would appear weak and unable to govern as effectively. But what if we had known? What if we had been able to observe this remarkable man function fully politically and personally without perceived weakness? Was this a missed opportunity to be a role model or was it his perfect right to choose what we knew?

Like most children, I searched for models – people and mostly adults who could show me ways of being human and grown up. We need models first for our cognitive development and later for our moral development. But do our childhood models stand up to time? Think about those models you had as children. Do they still work for you? I remember my grandmother, a deeply religious, loving woman . . . very grandmotherly. I spent a good deal of time with her and loved the attention she gave me with her story telling. She would sit me on her lap and tell me stories with a moral.

I especially remember the one about the squirrel and the chipmunk. The squirrel would spend the summer storing up nuts and seeds for the winter and the chipmunk would frolic and play all summer and then have to beg food from the squirrel the next winter. I suppose I absorbed her point but mostly I liked the attention. And then there was this: When I asked her, as a seven year old, to write in my autograph book this is what she wrote, “You asked me to write in your book. I sincerely don’t know where to begin because there’s nothing original about me but original sin.” I was seven and thought then that it beautiful. It rhymed and she knew it by heart. Now I’m appalled that this bright and talented woman really believed this. I still loved her but I sure needed a new model.

And then when I was older I began spending a great deal of time with our new next door neighbors, the Barkers. They had three children who seemed to be encouraged to be chipmunks a nice balance to my squirrelly household message. Then one day my mother said to me, “I’m glad that you enjoy the Barkers. They are a nice family but you need to know that they are Unitarians.” Of course, I had no idea what that was, nor I suspect did my mother. And it didn’t sound good. But that model took, and later as a freshman in college I joined a small campus Unitarian fellowship. And here I am many years later still following that model.

If my president and my minister are to be good role models it is important – *necessary* – that they have a strong inner commitment to the task they are asked to fulfill. We say that our clergy are “called” to serve not hired or elected. It’s a strange term which has its antecedents in Christianity and means the clergy are called first to serve God through their commitment to their congregations. I interpret this to mean that the people who choose to enter the ministry have a strong moral compass to guide them in their tasks. I can’t imagine how either presidents or clergy can survive without that guiding compass.

All public figures wrestle with the ‘publicness’ of their roles. In many cases they have no control over when and by whom information is revealed. There was a recent article in the New York Times by Frank Bruni, written after a tell-all book called *The Hillary Papers* came out. The information in the book was supplied by her best friend to whom she had apparently confided. Bruni indicates up front that he’s not a great Hillary fan but nevertheless he writes:

What I have been feeling for and about Hillary Clinton over the last week is sadness. Does she have even a smidgen of privacy left? Can she utter a syllable or think a thought with any assurance that it won’t be exposed analyzed and ridiculed. Frenzied media feed on this, to a degree that arguably goes beyond our obligation to keep politicians honest and it’s troubling in two regards. How many gifted people who contemplate public office look at what someone like Hillary endures and step away?

And how do we, the public, judge the worth or truth of that information. Who draws the line about what is told and what is withheld? Sometimes taking control of when and by whom personal information is given is the best approach.

A personal example: 35 years ago one of our daughters, not yet 20 and unmarried, came home and told us that she was pregnant. As we absorbed and dealt with this information deeply concerned for and with her, we moved to be supportive of her as she explored the different options available to her. And then, when she chose to continue with the pregnancy, my husband, then the minister here at this church, said, “The church must know about this development in our lives.” I was stunned. “This is a private family matter.” I said. To which he replied, “I am a public person in this church community and there will be those who will be curious to see how I handle this. We are going to be first time grandparents. This will be public.” And handle it we did with the kind support of this community. It was a professional judgment call on Brandy’s part and though I was initially against such an approach, in this case I soon saw it as wise. We assumed control of how and when this family development became public. A perk for me was to experience how this community quietly supported us through a tricky time in our lives. Another perk was our first grandchild . . . our wonderful Sarah whom some of you may have heard speak at Grandpa Brandy’s memorial service four years ago.

Being married to a public person has made me curious about and aware of how other much more public people handle their . . . publicness. We mostly had a choice about how, when and how much over the years we revealed of our lives and our family. We also were part of a basically supportive and caring community. Most public figures do not have that choice or in

some cases a similarly inclined public. Most accept the risk as part of their public position and role. How many gifted people who contemplate public office or even the ministry look at what these roles require and step away? Our president and our minister must have strong egos to withstand and not fold under the inevitable challenges which will come their way.

But that ego needs to be sprinkled with a dose of humility. There's a story UU ministers like to tell about a colleague, the well-known minister of a big church who was known to be a bit full of himself. Seems he had just preached and on his way home as he continued to hold forth he said to his wife, "Do you know how few really good ministers there are in our association?" to which she apparently replied, "One less than you think dear."

Doses of humility sometimes come from unexpected sources.

We usually know what particular strengths presidents come into the office with. Some are strong on international relations, some on domestic matters. Some have had wartime experience. Ministers also have specialized strengths, sermon styles or persuasions. Experienced ministers know their own styles. There are four style categories.

There is the PROPHETIC. In our tradition this entails a call for social action. Then there is a PASTORAL ministry – Nurturing, counseling, giving examples of those who have prevailed over hardship perhaps with personal examples. PRIESTLY deals with spiritual practice, meditation or prayer. And lastly the INTELLECTUAL – Theological, concerned with ideas rather than the consequence of ideas. Me, I'd like to have them all in my minister which is probably unreasonable. Skilled ministers will have some of all but will be stronger in one of those categories.

When it comes time to decide if we want to call the minister whom the search committee has brought to us we will have a week to listen and observe. During that week our candidate will most likely be accompanied by a spouse if he/she has one. Our candidate will preach two consecutive Sundays, meet with committees, the staff, the board and so on. We will have an opportunity to ask the candidate questions. We will be listening and observing. We humans are observers. Studies show that we pick up almost as much from observing body language, smile, posture as we do from words. When our new minister arrives we will do more than listen to him or her. We will watch to see how our candidate interacts with his/her family, with us and at meetings.

I remember many years ago when Brandy and I were here and he was candidating to fill this pulpit. We were at a luncheon in the meeting room of the old church – a large gathering of women of the church called the Women's Guild. The room had a stage above the main floor and Brandy and I were instructed to sit on the stage, not all alone but almost. I asked *why* we were put there and the response was, "They'll want to look at you." I was amused and amazed. But she was right. We're going to be looking.

I am part of the “old guard” of this church . . . I see a few others sitting out there who have been around even longer than my 45 years. I’ve also voted for presidents of our country for almost 60 years. Even though we as a church and we as citizens of this country may have different hopes and dreams for our church and our country we all unite in wanting to carry on the proud traditions of both. So when it comes time to call a minister and elect a president let’s hope (or pray if you wish) that we get two people who exhibit, courage, intellect and wisdom to guide us into the next phase for our church and for our country. And I don’t think that’s too much to ask.