

October 9, 2022
"Magic In Our Midst"
By Rev. Ron Phares

I don't know if you all can feel it - because this season of our congregational life has been pretty stressful for everyone - but there is magic in our midst. It is an ember. I've seen it blossom to flame. And return to ember. Perhaps it just needs fuel. Perhaps, as reminded by this Thanksgiving weekend, our gratitude will spark it. For it is here, even now, shaping us without our knowing.

I have seen such magic before. It happens when we really see each other's hearts. Not when I see yours. Not when you see someone else's. When people see each other's hearts, mutually. When that connection sparks, magic emerges.

It is by no means a stranger to this place. But I do think it is time we give it our utmost attention, cultivate it intentionally and, thereby uncover our essential purpose with our hearts more open, held, and healed.

It sounds nice. I think it sounds nice. But what, really, am I talking about after all? What is magic anyway? Well, the magic I'm talking about is not so much about seances and more about meaning and connection. To my way of thinking, magic is a generated field of meaning that connects you and guides you such that it feels like serendipity. Magic is feeling consciously and reciprocally welcomed by the world. And it can be conjured - by methods, practices, and techniques.

Have you ever been to an escape room? Do you know what one is? I've seen one where the walls, ceiling, and floor are totally covered in dots of various sizes and colors. It's very disorienting.

You have to solve a series of riddles until finally you get your hands on a pair of glasses with... I don't know...say, *green* tinted lenses. When you put them on, a message suddenly emerges from the crazy colored dots on the walls that directs you on where to go and what to do. "Good job," it says.

"This way!" Of course the message was there all along. You just needed the right lens.

That's kind of like what I mean by magic. Our world is a crazy dot world until we view it through the right lens. Then all the meaning that was always there emerges to guide us. But in the case of the world, it's not a single message of escape. It is a jazz ensemble of messages from a living cosmos playing separate parts together, responsive to each other, which means responsive to you. Magic is entering into dialogue with the world, jamming with creation.

How do we do this?

Well, if you don't mind, I'd like to refer to two tributaries I've mentioned to you in the past. The first highlights our principle of a responsible search for truth and meaning and our source of earth centered traditions. Last year we reflected on Oral Knowledge Systems, where we learned that when you invest meaning into matter - in many cases in the form of story - that meaning becomes a medium for matter to communicate with you.

If that's too woo woo for you, then you can think of it as the observation that meaning exists where you invest it and, because everything is always changing, that meaning is dynamic. It's a two way street. Meaning is a medium of exchange. And that is magical.

The second thing I want to refer you to with regard to how we make magic is a personal experience, which is another one of our sources and highlights the same principle. Last spring I was invited to Amsterdam along with other religious professionals curious about the role of the psychedelic renaissance in our traditions. While the explicit topic was compelling enough, my greatest takeaway concerned the power of intention held in community.

As you may recall, we were asked to set an intention for the week. My intention took the form of a question: how to be home in a transitory culture? Throughout the course of the week we took part in several group experiences, practices,

and integration sessions - breathwork, osho meditation, blindfolded dancing, communion, singing, rituals, walks in the woods, ceremony, story telling, poem reading, and open hearted sharing. Each of these was explicitly and constantly framed by our intention.

Importantly, our individual intentions were known and supported by the group. In fact, they soon began to interweave with one another. Our individual intentions formed a whole cloth. It was a powerful experience.

Our intentions became a lens through which all our experiences passed. The lens of our intention was like putting on those glasses in the escape room. Information transmitted in a poem, or prayer, or ritual, or walk in the woods went from being interesting and beautiful to being highly significant, deeply personal, and instructive.

Suddenly I was moving in a world that seemed to be communicating with me. And this is before and entirely besides any direct mycelial chemistry. This was just earnest, open hearted people, supporting each other's intention such that the intention became an investment of meaning into the world. And the world has something to say, friends.

But until we provide it a medium, an intention, a lens, it's just a bunch of random molecules. Give it a lens, and you'll find it says, "Good job. This way!" You start jamming with the ontological jazz band. Holding that intention in community, holding by honoring the intention of others, that also opens our hearts to other people in a new and really good way that is also absolutely magical. It's awesome.

Magic has technique. It has method and practice. And that... that is what this place can do. That is what you can do here. That is what here can do to you. And... it is important - crucially important to note - though the intention comes from you, the meaning it makes is not only you.

It is a relationship. It will call you beyond what you are. If you come at it with a heart hardened by suspicion, it will not work. But if you come at it

with some vulnerability and imagination, you will find a new, profound friendship awaits.

This is my experience. And my offer. I mean, I'm sort of assuming that sounds good to you. It sounds good to me. It sounds like why I'm here and I guess I've assumed it's why you're here too, in this community, a church. Or maybe, if not all of you then some of you. Or maybe I'm a freak. I don't know!

But if that is of interest to you then there are two ways in which we may focus on cultivating magic here. And yes, this reflection, in a sense, has been a big ol' commercial for them.

The first is a small group ministry experiment I'd like to invite you to. We're calling it Firetenders. As in tending the chalice fire. The fire of commitment. The warmth of community. Tending the magic ember.

We will gather in groups of 10 or less on the regular and engage in some ritual, some practices, some sharing, all of which will be grounded in a personal intention held in community care. And we will see... it's an experiment... so with some vulnerability and imagination... we'll see if the world starts talking back.

Sign up in coffee and an info SZ where we'll also talk about soul matters and circle suppers.

The second way we can cultivate magic at NSUC is by centering our covenant. There is a puzzle here though. We do not have an active covenant. And more than that, I am not sure that we have a proper understanding of covenant as a whole congregation. Soon, we will begin exploring both what covenant is and how to craft one suitable to our church community.

As a primer, I would say 3 things. First, we are, at our essence, a covenantal tradition. Our 8 principles are, in fact, a covenant between congregations. We are covenantal as opposed to credal. A covenant is simply a set of promises we make to one another about our orientation in the world and amongst each other. While it, like our

tradition, germinated in the soil of the Abrahamic traditions, it, like our tradition, has evolved immeasurably.

A covenant is not a list of prohibitions or a tool for authoritarian control. You can think of it rather, and fittingly for our topic today, as a set of intentions adopted, held, and practiced by our community as a whole and those individuals who comprise it.

Covenant is another instance of intention held in community. It is a lens through which our depth, meaning, and purpose will reveal themselves and begin working on us. It is the investment of meaning into place and body and system and is capable of a similar kind of magic.

And what is this magic? Well, it will manifest in many ways. But in short and ultimately, it is the manifestation of the beloved community. The beloved community is... well... it's another sermon. So I owe you one.

Until then, we will work with what we have. And what we have, actually, is magic... still. An ember of magic, working on us even now, asking us for attention, for sustenance, for gratitude, for fuel.

Let us feed that spark with our intention until it becomes a campfire around which we all may gather and be warmed. For as we tend the flame, we tend one another. As we nurture the magic, we nurture each other. And as we craft lenses of its light, whole worlds of meaning burst through being. And that is something to be deeply grateful for, a harvest of the spirit, and a blessing to tender hearts.