I was stuck in the Philadelphia airport, years ago, and there was a guy outside a novelty shop who could make a card levitate. I watched him perform the trick over and over. It amazed me. As we were grounded for hours, I tried to figure it out. Finally, desperate to find out -- and hopeful that it might make me cooler at parties, I sprung for the $5.00 to buy the trick. It would be mine. Mine to impress, confound and amaze others. The salesman said that the instructions were in the package. When I arrived home, I opened the magic trick eager to learn it. It turned out that the “magic” arose from the introduction of a strand of thin, stretchy, nearly invisible, dark string – quite awkward to manipulate and - well - easily broken. The upshot -- I didn’t master the trick, but I learned a valuable lesson – 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

We do real magic here. I learned from Starhawk, that magic is what Dion Fortune defined as “The art of changing consciousness at will”. I mentioned Starhawk not too long ago and I got the sense that there were some people unfamiliar with her. She’s an activist, teacher, and author – whose thinking is intuitive, analytical, and who deeply influenced my own activism – particularly in my younger, guerilla days. Her books – particularly *Truth or Dare* and *The Fifth Sacred Thing* are sacred texts to me. I encourage you to check them out sometime. Starhawk wrote: “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.” I’m 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 soul without dogma but with ethics, without threat but in the face of the world as it is, without original sin but with lifelong promise. It’s magical because, for ages, Unitarianism and Universalism and now Unitarian Universalism - have stood for seeing the world more clearly – for seeing beyond dogma, fear, snake oil -- beyond the power of popes or kings, scriptural shenanigans, and, in these days, beyond the commercial, industrial complex.

I was reminded on Monday, at the annual Martin Luther King Assembly at the Missionary Baptist Church in downtown Chicago, about the importance of seeing clearly. One of the preachers, the Rev. Dr. Carmin Frederick-James, reminded us that having 20/20 vision – still isn’t perfect – but it’s close. It’s the vision that can allow you to see things as they are – but you need a deeper focus, she was saying, to see things as they really can be and not to be foiled by things as they are. Unitarian Universalists, what sharpens our vision to 2020 and beyond – is keeping our principles, values, our core values central when we are looking at the world.

One of my favorite examples, from mid century Unitarian history, is Ellery Schempp – a boy who was in high school at a time when there was compulsory Bible reading as 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, an active participant in the high
school youth program at his Unitarian congregation, was inspired to bring scripture to school, himself. But he chose the Holy Koran. He was sent to the principal’s office after doing that and so began a battle that ran all the way to the Supreme Court by the time he was in college. Along with the more famous Madeline Murray O’Hair, he changed history so that 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.

A little closer to home, is our own Joy Simon. Over nearly twelve years, I’ve watched her growth, but I know she started changing long before that - as a result of joining this faith and being an active part of this congregation. I know her as a Board member and as a Lay Minister, who brings strength and compassion to each person with whom she works. I watched her grow through the course of Beloved Conversations on Race – which she took as a participant and then co-lead, taking our whole board through challenging conversations. Joy moved from taking for granted what society had taught her to see – to being someone looks critically, who shows up, works hard, and testifies to the possibility of a more just and compassionate world. I’ve seen her mind and her heart open in so many ways. When I asked her if I could mention her a little during this service, she said, please say that I’m no standard bearer. But, she kind of, actually is - someone who, in her 70s, through the magic of this faith and of this congregation, changed radically. While we spoke, she lamented not having found Unitarian Universalism earlier in life, because, as she said “I could’ve been a force to be reckoned with.” But she is. She said, “this congregation used to just be one where people were talking, talking, talking. Now we’re doing what we’re talking about.” She is proof that, at all ages, this faith can work magic.

There’re many people here who’re examples of transformation and empowerment – people changed by their participation in this faith. So many. There’s a mother of two young boys, who served as the president of our Board – while a parenting those two boys and having a full-time job. I mention her, not because I think she wants her horn tooted – nor because I think that she is a rare example of the power and magic of our faith – but, because she perfectly exemplifies this magic. For many years, there was debate in this congregation about what to do with the house owned by this congregation. It’s been a rental property for many years – but we’re not, actually, called to be landlords. Still, the money, a pretty modest amount, kept us dependent on rental income. Christine Organ, a little over a year ago had this idea, that we could use some of the funds we raise for our outreach partners, to serve those partners by turning the house into a transitional home for people seeking citizenship. The idea excited a lot of folks. We began to research the possibilities and complications – inspired by the idea that we could live our principles instead of merely maintaining the status quo. The Board became involved and too many amazing people to name. Now, many months later, we’ve received a grant, and organizations and churches – both Unitarian Universalist and others – are coming to us with pledges and checks of both financial and volunteer support. The energy that’s going into working on this project, which has come to be called Chalice House, instead of draining people only seems to energize. For years we had to scrape to find people to help with the north property. Now, we’re inundated by eager souls and bodies. I don’t want Unitarian Universalism to take full credit for Christine’s inspirations. I can tell you, that, in her personal willingness to live her values, her family decided to house a refugee family themselves and she’s inspired and energized many people, and joyfully brought our principles to life. I could go on with names – it’s hard – looking around this sanctuary not too, I’ll just mention one more.
Last week, I had the pleasure of spending time with Kadyn Frawley. I knew Kadyn when she was in our high school program. She became actively involved not just here, but with the wider Unitarian Universalist youth movement. In high school, she was the first Youth member of our Board of Trustees – and served with keen intelligence and insight on the board. Now at college, she’s preparing to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. If we did as well with everyone who came through our religious education program – perhaps we wouldn’t be faced with those visuals of dwindling numbers that Dr. Mary showed us two weeks ago. The slides symbolized the numbers of our children and youth who don’t remain into adulthood. The vast majority. She called life-long UU’s mighty oaks. She reminded us that the failure to retain them is a key root of Unitarian Universalism’s failure to grow – even though we are – as she put it – so cool. We can and must be better – at nurturing our people at all ages and stages of life – because our people – you -- are amazing, world changing and beautiful.

Henry David Thoreau was a Unitarian, but, like many folks today, he saw no value in church attendance. I believe that we can 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 – not dogma, but a guide, not one chiseled idea, but 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 men 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 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. This, of course, is where another magic comes into play. Like Starhawk says on the cover if your order, “To work magic is to weave the unseen forces into form; to soar beyond sight; to explore the uncharted dream realm of hidden reality.” That’s what I’m talking about – to 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’ve been thinking about magic lately, partly because I, somehow, fell into watching a Netflix series called “Witcher”. Now I’m hooked, and I’ll have to read the books as well.

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 and 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. For those of you, feeling anxiety over this, I assure you -- it gets fixed. But that’s not the point. 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. For the Rev. Frederick – James, whom I mentioned earlier, the lens that focuses her vision is God. Some of us may use the word God and some may not – but what we each mean is that something holy living at the heart of being – something with inherent value -- life that must be cherished and honored -- 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.

I believe, on the island of Aretuza – the focus of the mages was not clear enough – the choice is not about lifting a rock or killing a flower. 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 mythologist, 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 channeling. You have to have not only the energy, but also the capacity of mind that gives the model of the channel—with that, life really flowers.”

So, I’m asking you to make more magic in the world - to use the energy of your money, just as Mark and I do, to empower the magic of this place. As cool and fine as we are – it takes ongoing commitments of time, talent, and treasure to keep the magic going. It takes even more to help the magic to grow in ways that will change the world around us. Each one of us has different financial resources – for sure. But we all have a storehouse of integrity that will help us to focus and, within those resources, decide how to generously work magic at CCUU.

I know you and I know the vision and creativity, the skill and magic of our staff. And I know that if we keep our vision at least at 2020, seeing clearly, we will not be fooled by sleight-of-hand – but will take our hands and our hearts – to do much more than lift a playing card – we can lift every life that comes into this place – and we can lift lives far beyond 2020 – we can
each give generously to pay the price to work a magic so desperately needed in our world today – and available to us here, right now, in our full hearts and our connected lives.

“Ged stood still, and his heart beat hard, for it seemed to him that he felt presences and powers at work unseen about him here, and he knew that this place was built not only of stone but of magic stronger than stone. He stood in the innermost room of the House of the Wise, and it was open to the sky.” (The Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula K. Le Guin)

And just like Ged, the young wizard in the reading we heard earlier, we will inhabit and strengthen and grow a place made of a magic stronger than stone. Let us make it so.