Communities Are Magic Spells, and Spells Can Be Broken

By Austen Tucker · 2026

I've received no official response from the convention about my recommendations. Here's my response to that:

Read the original letter: Leave the Door Open

An Elegy for a Fandom That Left Me Outside

Communities are magic spells.

Buildings, bylaws, and registration badges give us places to gather. The spell happens when people begin to believe, sometimes without ever saying so, that they belong to one another.

A convention is an especially powerful spell. For a few days every year, thousands of people travel across the country to inhabit a world that exists because they believe in it. They put on costumes. They embrace people they haven't seen in months. They make art and music and terrible jokes. They turn a hotel into a home.

Then, on Monday morning, the spell dissolves, and everyone goes home carrying a little of that magic until next year.

I've spent most of my adult life believing in it. Building it, too: I was the media liaison for the first IndyFurCon and spent six years staffing Midwest FurFest (MFF).

I've stood in weddings at furry conventions for people who met through this shared interest. My oldest friends are people I met on writing lists in the aughts. My first publication credits came from ANTHRO, where I worked as a columnist and short story contributor. My neighbors were once internet weirdos I met at fursuit bowling events I found through ancient mailing lists.

People who were once usernames on a screen became people I can walk down the street to see. They built marriages, households, and lives together. We built a community for one another.

And this community held me through transition.

When I was figuring out who I was in 2008, I had people around me who knew me, loved me, and stayed.

I didn't have to build an entirely new life from scratch. The people I'd found through this ridiculous shared fascination with cartoon animals were already part of the life I was becoming.

Many of us made a family. That won't change.

The magic worked. I have the people in my life to prove it.

What I've lost is my confidence that the kindness I found here was something I could trust the larger community to extend beyond its familiar circles.

Rooms Inside Rooms

Communities are held together by friendship, romance, flirtation, marriage, sex, and the networks of affection that grow between people over decades. Furry is a vivid example. People find love here. They find families. They find places to express desires they spent years hiding.

But intimacy creates its own geography.

There are rooms inside rooms, circles inside circles, invitations that travel along lines of attraction and affection. A convention welcomes thousands through its doors, but much of its social life happens behind other doors. Those rooms are legitimate. Nobody owes everyone an invitation.

Still, I noticed where I was standing.

At our last few conventions, my wife and I kept finding ourselves at loose ends. Friends were busy with parties and gatherings built around circles we weren't part of, many of them centered on gay male intimacy. That's a real and important part of this culture. It just wasn't ours.

We could still attend. We could recognize people, walk the floor, admire the art, sit in panels. By any formal measure, we were included. But the social world that gave the weekend its meaning was happening somewhere we weren't.

There's a peculiar loneliness in being surrounded by thousands of people who share your interests and feeling that the real party is down the hall. A community can hold you through the largest change of your life and, later, become a place where you can't find the door to its center.

We didn't talk about it much. There was always another event, another reason to believe the feeling would pass.

The Disenchantment

At MFF 2024, my wife and I were chatting with two people from a big publisher in the community, one I already had a business relationship with. They wanted to know when I was going to write another book.

I got excited.

I could imagine restarting my writing career. Finding a new audience. Being a writer again—a real one, with a bibliography and books from a publisher and everything.

I'd already been that writer. I had the publication credits. But there's something powerful about someone asking when you're going to make another thing. It gives the future a shape. Someone remembers your work. Someone wants more.

So I wrote a book.

I used AI in the planning and revision of that work. I was experimenting with tools I was learning, in a community where experimentation had been part of what drew me in.

By MFF 2025, I had a finished draft, ready to submit. Then the convention announced its rules for 2026, and the work I'd imagined bringing back to this community was no longer welcome under them.

The publisher had encouraged me to write. The convention's decision was a separate one. But I had begun the book imagining those things belonged to the same future: the publisher, the readers, the conventions where we found one another.

The rug came out from under me.

I had spent a year working toward a future I could picture. Now I had the book, and I couldn't count on the place I'd imagined bringing it.

Midwest FurFest adopted restrictions on generative AI in artwork and merchandise for its 2026 convention. I objected. I resigned from convention staff in September and published an open letter, "Leave the Door Open," arguing against the policy and proposing alternatives. I won't relitigate it here. I've said what I have to say.

The policy was the wound that made me realize I was already bleeding.

My wife and I had begun to feel peripheral long before. The policy made us say it out loud. Whether my creative work belonged had stopped being a matter of taste and become institutional policy, and I couldn't put off the question anymore.

Did I still belong here?

How does a community that helped me become myself stop feeling like home?

My wife and I talked it through after our poor experience at MFF 2025. We talked about the times we'd wandered looking for something to do. The parties we weren't part of. The way our attendance had become more about going to an event than living in a community. The strange feeling of being familiar and peripheral at once.

Neither of us felt we truly belonged anymore.

That was the disenchantment. Not the policy, and not the arguments. It was learning that the belonging I'd been protecting had already begun to disappear.

The controversy didn't break the spell. It showed me the spell was broken.

The Fine Print

There's something devastating about discovering that a welcome you thought was unconditional had terms and conditions.

Communities have boundaries. They should. But knowing boundaries exist is different from finding yourself on the far side of one. Once that happens, you see the machinery: the rules, the committees, the people who decide what belongs. Things that felt organic start to feel conditional. You reconsider old memories. Was I welcome because of who I was, or because I hadn't yet done anything that tested it?

That isn't a fair question. People can love you and disagree with you. But disenchantment isn't a courtroom. It doesn't need proof beyond a reasonable doubt. It's a change in what you believe.

And once you've read the fine print, you can't unread it.

The Future I Won't Build

I've lost something that never quite existed.

I wanted to build a little business there. Nothing enormous. A small creative enterprise making strange, wonderful things for people who share my interests. Something experimental that might pay for itself and let me give back to the culture that gave me so much. I had ideas. I had tools. I had the skills to make them real. For a while, I could picture it.

I don't want to build it there anymore. Not because nobody there wants what I make. I have many fans. But I no longer have confidence that the institutions controlling the main avenues of participation will

keep accepting how I work. That's a personal decision about risk. I'm not claiming the whole market is hostile. I can't build a plan on the hope that the people holding the gates will someday approve my tools.

And I don't want to spend my creative life asking permission.

So I'll build elsewhere, for a broader audience, where the future of that work is less dependent on institutions whose judgment I no longer trust. The book is already part of that. The Two-Flat Cats comes out in March, under my own imprint, and I won't market it to the furry community.

It's strange to grieve a future that never happened. But I had imagined making something there.

Now I won't.

The Magic We Keep

There's something peculiar about spending decades in a fandom. You learn the secret handshake. Not a literal one. A way of recognizing one another, a shared language, an understanding that the person across from you has also spent an unreasonable portion of their life imagining being a cartoon animal.

I can still walk into a room of furry people and find common ground almost immediately. I still know how to cast the spell: how to gather people around a strange idea and turn enthusiasm into friendship. I know because I've done it, and because so many people did it for me.

What drew me here wasn't only that the fandom was welcoming. It was experimental. We experimented with identity, gender, sexuality, relationships, art, technology, and the idea of what a community could be. We made ourselves into cartoon animals and found that a fictional face sometimes gave us permission to be honest. Nobody waited for approval to invent a way of living.

But experimentation and inclusion aren't the same thing. The freedom that let people build extraordinary networks of intimacy also left others outside them, and I was one of the others. An institution can protect some experiments and restrict others. The fandom I loved was never perfectly inclusive. I loved it anyway, imperfections included.

So I don't think the old fandom was a lie, and I don't think it was a utopia. It was a place where possibilities felt open. I'm grieving the sense that its institutions no longer protect that.

Perhaps they've changed. Perhaps I have. Probably both.

But I don't need their permission to keep doing what brought me here.

A Visitor

I don't want my disappointment with an institution to erase what people have built around it. I don't begrudge anyone their joy at Midwest FurFest. I hope my friends have a wonderful convention. I hope somebody meets the person they'll marry. I hope somebody finds the family they didn't know they needed.

I hope the spell works for them. Over 23 years of attendance, I've helped cast it for others through book signings, readings, and conversations. Some of those people picked up a pen and began writing their own stories. I'm proud of that.

But I can't make myself believe in it the way I once did. A policy can change. Someone can apologize or extend an invitation. You can't necessarily restore the trust that made the invitation meaningful.

For a long time, I helped hold this community up. I wrote things, made things, organized things, and became a small part of its infrastructure. A pillar in a structure I believed in.

I don't want that responsibility anymore.

That isn't hostility. I'm not asking anyone to leave with me, and I'm not asking anyone to defend going. I won't be at Midwest FurFest this year, and I'm not interested in another argument about generative AI. This reaches into something older and harder to repair: what I believed about the place and the people in it.

I don't know whether I'll go back. Maybe someday I'll walk through those doors, see old friends, admire the costumes, laugh at the same terrible jokes, and remember why I loved this strange little world.

But if I do, I'll be visiting.

I won't be helping hold up the roof.

It takes no villain to break a spell. It takes a few people deciding, quietly, that they no longer feel at home.

The building is still standing. The music is still playing. The people I love are still there, and the family we made doesn't dissolve when an institution stops feeling like home.

I'll keep making things. I'll keep finding my people. I'll keep casting the spell wherever I can.

I just won't mistake the institution for the magic again.