

[Excerpts from] An introduction to

## The Symbols and Magick of Tarot

What is the Tarot? We see decks of these colorful cards in many places in today's society. They turn up as props in movie and television productions. Their images are sometimes found in the video images created for contemporary music. The Tarot is clearly part of our society yet it is not well understood. There are popular myths and numerous misconceptions. Some believe it can guide your future - yet I've never heard of anyone winning a lottery or an election due to a Tarot reader's advice. There are those who believe the Tarot is clearly the work of the devil - of the Christian's Satan which was, perhaps, part of the symbolism of the card by that name.

Is the Tarot divination? In the sense that the symbols and archetypes allow one's internal divinity to emerge through the cards the answer is 'yes.' Does the Tarot represent 'fortune telling?' There's a vague negative connotation around that phrase. 'Fortune telling' is often used in a demeaning way to diminish the value of the Tarot. Because my own tendency would be to avoid that phrase when thinking of the Tarot, I looked it up in the dictionary at my desk. And so, what is fortune telling? It is using the Tarot in a precognitive manner: to indicate the likelihood of specific events to happen. In that sense the Tarot may well be used for the telling of one's fortune.

The faces of cards have long fascinated me. I grew up playing cards. Card games (canasta, pinochle, cribbage, even poker) were part of my family experience and were warm memories. In college I played many hours of solitaire and even learned to use it as a subtle type of divination. If I won the majority of several hands of solitaire before an event I would anticipate the outcome to be positive. I knew of the Tarot for many years, but it was always one of those odd things. I would see a deck now and then but it was far too foreign to me and I gave it little thought. The Tarot was something I would see now and then in a movie, relegated to the realm of 'fortunetelling.' Although I was a water dowser for many years as a youth, that was familiar territory and it took me many years to realize that I had embarked upon a spiritual journey and that the Tarot was one of the many valuable tools which would become part of my life.

Upon learning that I teach the Tarot, people often volunteer comments about their own experiences and feelings regarding the Tarot and I have encountered many misconceptions about the Tarot. There are those who have tried it once and panicked. There are those who purchase a pretty deck but are unable to make it 'work.' What is the Tarot? There are so many answers found in so many books yet each of us must answer that question personally. When I first encountered the Tarot in the mid-1970s my understanding of it was very different than it is today.

My own spiritual journey took a major step in life when, in the early 1970s and without knowing the Tarot, I stepped off the precipice of my secure life and, like the Fool, plunged myself into an abyss. For the first time in my life I was now in unfamiliar territory. As a child I learned to dowsing water and as a teen I yearned for knowledge of the occult. I attempted on my own to experience trance-like states and, as the years passed, learned to understand the precognitive nature of my dreams. My path was circuitous, from the parapsychology interests of the 1960s to the influence of the popular stars of my youth who encouraged us to explore Buddhism, to learn how to transcend life's woes. All of this brought me to my teacher, Judy Durum, a lovely and delightful woman living in suburban St. Paul, Minnesota. My first study of the Tarot was from her for, at the time, I was learning all that I could of herbal medicine as well as the human pursuit for spiritual wisdom. There was so much to learn that I felt like a fledgling, not knowing how to spread my wings as I plummeted off the edge. But, as the Major Arcana shows us, we simply take the journey and today, thirty years later at the age of fifty-nine I have, for some years, enjoyed the fruits of The World card.

Back in those student days of mine, I began taking Mrs. Durum's course in the Tarot which would last several months. I was completely green, knowing almost nothing about these cards. It was a good course and I repeated it two additional times until I had thorough notes. Judy's course had a strong Kabbalistic orientation to which I did not relate well. In the subsequent thirty years I have read much material regarding the Kabbalah (by all of its spellings) and I still choose to not integrate

it into the Tarot. Although today I have a strong affinity for the basic paradigm of Kabbalah, I find that, for nearly all students and for every client for whom I have interpreted the cards, the Kabbalah only makes the cards less accessible.

Even today I do not feel that relationship indicated by the correspondences of the Major Arcana to the sephiroth and the paths connecting these archetypes of energy. Yet the underlying structure of the Tree of Life does speak to me and I perceive much of the Tarot embodying the central pillar in that tree which represents a conduit of energy moving simultaneously from the pure divine to the manifest mundane in both directions, balanced on either side by the polarities. For me this is a living mystery I see in the Major cards such as the High Priestess, The Hierophant and Justice and also in a different manner in such Minor cards as the Four of Swords or the Ace of Cups.

My professional work and exploration led me also to astrology. I have taught astrology since the late 1970s, even longer than the Tarot. I find that the correspondences between the Major Arcana with astrology work quite well. Both systems are quite comfortable sharing space in my head.

Over the past eleven years I have been patiently working on a series of columns for a monthly journal, *The Hermit's Lantern*, published for our students and the extended family of our readers. Over the previous decades I had created my own text book of notes from which I had been teaching, often adding phrases during one of my twelve-week courses when the students inspired me and I saw a new mystery shown in the basic symbols of the Waite-Smith tarot (known to most as the Rider-Waite).

My goal as a teacher was not dissimilar to that of my work with astrology: to work to make the subject matter far more accessible. No matter how deep into esoteric lore and trivia the occultist wishes to delve, the students and clients whom I meet as a professional are consistent in their desire. What they want is interpretive material which is uncluttered with the intellectual jargon of an adept. They seek information which is directly relevant to their lives and easy to comprehend. Their lives are already more complex than can always be managed, and the reason they seek information from a professional astrologer or through the Tarot is so that answers and understanding may be given to them in depth and in detail but in terminology relevant to their lives and easily understood. It was through experience that I learned to allow the cards to 'speak' to me through the symbols shown on their faces.

My very first deck was the Egyptian Gypsies deck. I knew nothing of the cards but I had seen Tarot decks in the hands of my metaphysical teachers and I felt that my studies would expand to include the Tarot - and they did! I still recall the newsstand on Hennepin Avenue in downtown Minneapolis where I purchased my first deck. They had a small section of occult books and just a few Tarot decks. Back in those 'olden' days such items were not easy to find. In addition to the scarcity of a store which carried such as a Tarot deck there were internal taboos against delving into anything considered connected with the 'occult.'

Why did I choose that deck? I liked its name: *Grand Etteilla: Egyptian Gypsies Tarot*. When I was a child there were gypsies who made the rounds of the local farms each summer. We were, as children, warned to stay out of the way, to avoid being 'stolen.' I knew little of Gypsies other than a few stereotypes. This was, after all, the very early 1950s in rural Wisconsin. I felt some attraction and remember that I was always disappointed. Traveling with Gypsies - an exotic image in my mind - would have included crystal balls, lively music and ... fortune telling!

There was also an attraction to the use of French, a language I had studied in secondary school and in college. It was the language of many of my ancestors. But the deck proved far too cumbersome. The four suits offered no pictures and the images of the Major Arcana were not easy to interpret. My Tarot lay quiet and it was not until I was in my first course which was taught with the Rider-Waite that I began looking for a deck which would be more user-friendly for my own path.

### **The Waite-Smith (a.k.a the Rider-Waite) Deck**

When my teacher taught Tarot she used the Rider-Waite deck. By 1980 I was also now teaching the Tarot and, as a tool for teaching, there seemed no deck appropriate other than that which we then knew as the "Rider-Waite." I have taught my full course in the Tarot many times and each time, as I refer to the Waite-Smith deck my appreciation for it grows.

How did this deck come into being, and why is the Rider-Waite deck known by some as the

Waite-Smith deck? An artist known as Pamela Colman Smith painted the images under the direction of A. E. Waite. Rider was the publisher and, in those days, it was a man's world.

Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942) wrote his first book on the occult, an anthology of works by Eliphas Lévi, at the age of 29. Waite joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1891, was an exceptional student and attained one of the highest levels of work - but left in two years. The Golden Dawn was, at that time, undergoing considerable internal political struggle and Waite was part of a group which later established a separate Golden Dawn branch although that fared no better and, in 1914, Waite became one of the founders of the Fellowship of the Rose Cross. John Greer, in *The New Encyclopedia of the Occult*, considers Waite's most notable contribution to be the tarot deck. Influenced by a Sola-Busca deck, one which dated to the fifteenth-century, Waite described the images for Smith.

Pamela Colman Smith's life (1878-1951) leads to an unhappy biography. American by birth, she returned to England where she had spent much time when young. An illustrator of books and theatre posters she came to know the Irish poet William Butler Yeats and, through him, became involved in the Golden Dawn.

The combination of Colman's style (she was well-known for her symbolist style) and Waite's extensive knowledge of the magickal and occult aspects which could be integrated into the Tarot led to their collaborated deck which was published by Rider in 1910. This deck changed the Tarot and the majority of decks in print today are based upon that singular deck.

Colman was paid little and her name alone survived with the deck but, until recent years, the deck continued to be known as the 'Rider-Waite.' Today some of us work to give her belated yet much-deserved recognition. Millions of people globally have literally touched the reproductions of her art as they handle the deck which I like to think of as the 'Waite-Smith' deck as a way of acknowledging the artist.

Every time I teach my basic Tarot course and go through each of the seventy eight cards one by one my admiration for this deck grows.

### **A Brief History of the Tarot**

It is fascinating to hear the many theories regarding the origin of the Tarot. One popular belief is that the Tarot originated in Egypt prior to it being conquered by Alexander the Great. I don't recall ever reading a particular dynasty or time frame, only a vague reference to Egypt. Somehow the thought of someone attempting to shuffle seventy eight pieces of papyrus tickles my fancy; but there is no historical evidence for this theory. In the latter part of the 20th century theories about the 'lost city' of Atlantis were very popular and a number of authors maintained that the Tarot came to us from Atlantis. It would seem that those ancient, mythical people were capable of creating waterproof cards!

I have also read that the Tarot came to us directly from European Gypsies but I had the opportunity to meet a woman who was, by birth, a Hungarian Gypsy when I lived and taught in Minneapolis. The woman was not even yet in her teens when smuggled out of Europe to flee to the United States as World War II was erupting in Europe. The Gypsy peoples were being subjected to extermination just as were the Jews and homosexuals. She told me that her aunt gave her a deck of cards - regular playing cards - and told her that she could always support herself by using them.

When I think of using cards for divination I think often of this woman and how accurate she could be using a regular 52 deck of playing cards. There is not a symbol to be found other than the numbers and the four suits! I learned that, despite the Hollywood view, true Gypsies read fortunes with regular playing cards. Although some of them may enjoy the modern Tarot, it did not emerge from their culture. Where did it come from?

The oldest Tarot cards were created for the Visconti family in Milan, Italy. At that time the deck contained only what we now call the Major Arcana. Reproductions of this deck may still be obtained, both new and used. The archetypes for these cards were derived from life. Reflecting the literature of the time as well, we find figures based upon real life, cards which represent allegories and morals and the like. Rosemary Ellen Guiley, in *Harper's Encyclopedia of Mystical & Paranormal Experience* indicates that an even earlier prototype may have been created by the French painter, Jacquemin Gringonneur in 1392 for King Charles VI.

Despite various theories, we cannot do more than guess what the purpose of these early cards served. Whether they were used to discern the patterns of life through divination or whether there was a card game we do not know but at some point these cards were joined by the four suits of a regular playing deck. By the mid-eighteenth century a deck of cards had emerged as the standard for the modern Tarot.

What about those stories of the Tarot coming to us from Egypt? According to Guiley, we may thank Antoine Court de Gebelin. Born in 1725 (he lived to be only 59 years old), he posited the idea that the cards were derived from the *Book of Thoth*, a mythical, mystical book which supposedly contained the greatest magickal wisdom of Ancient Egypt. The Egyptian theory was furthered by a popular tarot reader known as Etteilla (a name you will find associated with some decks even today). Etteilla published a deck in 1789, called *The Book of Thoth*. This deck is still published today and is often known as the Egyptian Gypsies Tarot. Yes, it is that same deck I stumbled upon when I began my own Tarot studies. We do know that the symbolism of Egypt was very fascinating to the occultists of Europe, although an interest in things Egyptian is found even among the ancient civilizations of Greece and Italy.

The Rosetta Stone was discovered in 1799 and, although it took some time to be deciphered, it contributed to the desire of people to believe that Egypt was a great source of Magick. It had obvious remnants of great magick found in the pyramids but, unlike the great stone henges of more northern climates, ancient Egypt left behind a rich tapestry of symbols and hieroglyphics. What a wealth of occult trivia this was for a species which has such a desire to validate itself through claiming ancient lineage. Businesses boast about their years of service. Magickal orders and religions take comfort and affirm their validity through claims of direct lineage from ancient peoples. The symbols of Egypt were soon connected with the Tarot.

We have the British to thank for a nineteenth century renaissance of interest in things mystical. Not only were scholars studying what they had learned from the Rosetta Stone but other texts were being brought to European consciousness as well. The impact *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* had upon the late 19th century occult renaissance in England cannot be adequately understood. Dr. E. Wallis Budge of the British Museum acquired a magnificent roll of papyrus from an 18th Dynasty tomb near Luxor. It dated to 1500 B.C. and was a copy of what we know as *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. The Egyptian influence, combined with the human desire to claim that all new occult material and mystical practices are, in fact, offered intact and handed down from the ancients (all of whom were apparently fluent in the contemporary languages such as 20th century English) is more likely the source for this theory.

Throughout the 20th century into the 21st there is still a fascination with things Egyptian. Whether due to the pyramids or the mysteries found within them, Egypt remains a place of interest but it is not, alas, the source of the modern Tarot.

During the nineteenth century (as well as centuries earlier) various symbols and deities were brought into the rituals of the Freemasons and later into the Golden Dawn as well as other magickal movements. The Tarot was a source of fascination to those who studied the symbols and languages of occult disciplines. One whose place in magickal history remains secure is the man known as Eliphas Lévi (which was his magickal name). It is generally believed that he was the first who gave the Tarot the correspondences with the Kabbalah and Hebrew alphabet. And this was the state of the Tarot when A. E. Waite, using the paintings by Pamela Colman Smith, published his book on the Tarot in 1910.

I have not seen any of Pamela Colman Smith's other work. Her illustrations for Waite's designs are, at times brilliant. They capture the perfect balance which exemplifies an artistic skill which does not sacrifice the importance of the symbolic imagery. If she could but appreciate today how many hundreds of thousands of people, if not millions, have been touched by her art.

### The Magickal Tarot

The last third of the 20th century brought us a quiet revolution in how we, as individuals, manage our spirituality and religion. Today there are many books which guide the reader into working a ritual written by the author or in creating a ritual for one's own use.

Ritual is an intentional process through which one creates a space within which one may draw upon symbols and meaningful items in order to empower the images being held with one's mind.

Over the past decades I have encountered magickal correspondences with the Tarot. My professional work, in addition to Tarot, includes botanical medicine and herbal lore as well as the magickal history of gems and minerals. As I encountered occasional correspondences with the Tarot they quickly stimulated my interest. While much of what I found seemed less relevant, often without any historical perspective, the reality of our modern Tarot being so recent leaves us without a long history of correspondences. As an astrologer I feel strongly about the relevance and value of the standard astrological correspondences and as a Wiccan known for my understanding and creation of ritual forms I can only view the Tarot as a wealth of potential.

Drawing upon the magick, or symbolism, of the Tarot in order to promote change in one's life can be as simple as creating a small altar in one's home. Adding a candle (or several candles), one's favorite herbal oils or perfumes or incense, collecting stones, personal jewelry or photos can all add a sense of personal power to this setting.

Magickal information seems generally focused upon the Major Arcana. Why would this be? Perhaps it is the numerical similarity. There are twenty two Major Arcana cards. When teaching I often refer to the Major Arcana as the 'billboards' in life, appearing when the Universe wants to gain our attention to let us know of something more important and significant than our usual lives. There are ten 'planets' (astrologers use that noun incorrectly, including one star - the Sun - and one satellite - the Earth's Moon) and there are twelve signs of the zodiac giving us another collection of twenty two archetypes.

Those who explore a number of fields quickly discover that the esoteric approach to herbal magick, to the gem and mineral lore and other aspects of folk magick have 'correspondences' which is a way of describing some amount of similarity in energy which allows us to draw upon an expanded point of reference.

If, for example, I wish to bring the quality of the Sun Card into my life to strengthen positive aspects of my personality, to remove some of the shadows of insecurity; if I want my life to move in a direction so that my accomplishment would result in the image of the Sun Card, perhaps adding to my working some of the aspects of the Sun (in astrology), herbs associated with the Sun such as bay or a sunflower, and using a peridot or ruby to bring in aspects of gem lore might all further my progress.

Most who work with ritual find that being able to assemble a collection of items centered around a common image is not unlike some of the best play times we had as children. I so enjoyed foraging in the woods behind our farm, bringing home feathers, being fascinated with the trilliums, finding special stones or an abandoned birds' nest. I've never lost this enjoyment of discovering all manner of wonderful things in the world around me.

When I write of the magickal energy of a card I am writing of qualities which we might find were that card to manifest in ritual. The ritual traditions of most cultures embrace the concept of the polarities of female and male as that which leads to creativity, whether an internal union and balance, or one found with another. The magickal energy also describes the underlying personality and vitality of the card. Living in a world which is perceived by our senses (meaning: sensual), one in which creation manifests through sexual action, the Tarot exemplifies for us how we might exist in that reality. As tantra describes the energy (and sexual energy) of one's spiritual self in a physical body, I will often refer to the sexual energy of a card as one might work with the creative polarities within the context of ritual.

Should you wish to change the course of your life's events by using ritual to invoke or manifest the Wheel of Fortune, you might wish to use some of the herbs which are suggested in the text for that card. If you wish to increase your Strength of character, angelica or sunflower might be plants for your gardens, herbs for bathing or even the foundation for an incense. And how might you create ritual? There are many guidelines and there are no rules. There are countless books, some of which I might think of little value but which you might deem exceptional. Your ritual might be as simple and beautiful as a combination of a candle, a few images and time spent in meditation and visualization. On the other hand it could be as complex as ritual theatre complete with ritual script and costume and mask as one enacts a life-changing scenario at a profound level.

To suggest how you might engage in ritual is far too complex for this book. My goal is to help you better understand the Magick of the Waite-Smith and of the modern Tarot.

Onward

Reviewing more than a decade of columns has been a wonderful adventure. As the first months of this year slip past I have spent many hours wearing my editor's hat, reviewing eleven years' work as an author on the Tarot and preparing it for this book.

I am offering you nearly thirty years' experience. You may read the book as a whole or you may use it for reference for individual cards. If you still consider yourself a student, I encourage you to obtain a copy Waite-Smith deck (the Rider-Waite). If you are an educator, U.S. Games publishes a large format deck in which it is far easier to see the symbols. I can think of no deck better for learning, no matter which deck you might prefer when you shuffle the cards and lay them out.

Allow the Tarot to change your life. It has for so many.

Paul Beyerl

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