

## Tarot Counseling

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*The author, a certified holistic nurse and wellness counselor, sees clients in crisis due to illness, injury or difficult life situations. She has found the ancient system of Tarot cards to be a useful adjunctive tool. Upon viewing the artwork on the faces of the cards, clients begin to tap into an innate intuition that helps them raise their consciousness and achieve insights. The archetypal imagery of the cards serves as catalysts helping people express their deepest hopes and fears. In combination with a transpersonal counseling process, the cards have become one of the author's most important and efficient tools.*

As a registered nurse with a master's degree in transpersonal studies, I pioneer in different directions of study rather than within the tried and true wisdom found in the traditional school of nursing. In part, this kind of diversity in education ensures a healthy growth of an ever-expanding nursing profession. Nurses like me, explore esoteric therapeutic modalities and then introduce them to nursing in language that can be understood. These modalities then become integrated with traditional ones to become a part of the new holistic paradigm of complementary and alternative care.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce Tarot cards, a transpersonal modality that can be used to complement traditional counseling. The term transpersonal is derived from Latin and means beyond the self or beyond the ego. The transpersonal experience is one that transcends or goes beyond personal ego (towards inner consciousness) and individual identity (outward to the community or cosmos). The transpersonal experience unifies personal purpose, meaning, and values with universal or spiritual principles (Dossey et al, 2000).

As a trained transpersonal counselor, I see clients in crisis due to illness, injury or difficult life issues. I understand how to explore deeper levels of consciousness in the mind and the spirit, which, as we know, affects the health of the body. This knowledge helps me guide my clients toward their higher psychological and spiritual potential, helping them to access their inner wisdom in the healing of emotional and spiritual wounds. Towards this end, I rely upon archetypal imagery to give me information.

Carl Jung, a transpersonal psychiatrist, postulated that the archetype is a system of energetic personal and universal psychic patterns that cause us to respond, in predictable ways, to events in the environment (Kaplan, 2000). Archetypal imagery can be found in myths, legends, fables, art, and in our imagination in the form of fantasies and dreams.

Tarot is a tool with archetypal imagery that I use to help the client access the inner or transpersonal levels of consciousness. It is a system of artistically decorated cards that have been used for centuries as a form of divination and as a method for raising consciousness and achieving insights. In combination with the counseling process, the imagery of Tarot cards can accurately uncover clients' underlying concerns.

Tarot cards can be used like the Rorschach Projective technique, in which inkblots are used to stimulate the creative imagination to make associations. This psychological test elicits and scores

responses in terms of formal qualities to reveal important personality features (Kaplan, 2000). In the same fashion, relating to the archetypal images on the cards brings forth seeds of information buried in the unconscious mind. I teach clients to understand the symbology of the card and relate it to their feelings and to their life situation. Only when this unconscious symbolic material becomes conscious can they take the appropriate action, which also may be mirrored in the cards (Gilbert, 2003).

Like the Rorschach, Tarot does not easily lend itself to research purposes. Both modalities lack the psychometric qualities that could be used to measure psychological variables such as intelligence, aptitude, behavior and emotional reaction. However, it is worth noting that both tools, like other tests, merely serve to elicit responses that can then be evaluated in standard diagnostic terms or other criteria. The clients associational patterns of thought are brought into focus largely because the ambiguity of the imagery of both tools provide few cues as to what may be standard responses (Gilbert, 2003), (Kaplan, 2000).

Tarot is more an art than a science. Nevertheless, taroists have conducted research studies for years. Arthur Rosengarten, a transpersonal psychologist, conducted one such study. His pilot study, which is discussed in his book Tarot and Psychology, used recovering perpetrators and or victims of spousal abuse and family violence. He tried to provide a sound philosophical and empirical basis by establishing a rational application for an irrational method. He primarily used an analytic method based on analyses and correspondences of each card in its respective position. His study assumed that every card in a spread stood for something in the individual psyche, and that multiple levels of meaning could be found in each card. His hypothesis: "That as an acausal, synchronistic reflector of human experience, the Tarot method will reveal certain meaningful underlying group trends that are consistent in the personalities of perpetrator and victim (Rosengarten, 2000)."

In conclusion, Dr. Rosengarten (2000) stated that the Tarot method itself is of secondary importance, while the insights it stimulated and clarified are the primary value. It is the counselor who seams together the nuances that gather meaningfully during the session. Tarot's primary value is in meanings for the individual, and for that it must be considered as an instrument of potential psychotherapeutic value.

Tarot, as we know it today, emerged from a collection of seventy-eight cards developed in the 15th century. The first twenty-two pictorial cards are called the Major Arcana and are numbered from one through twenty-one, with a beginning card that is either unnumbered or labeled zero. The images on each card carry a rich symbolic tapestry of human experience.

The next sixteen court cards are called the Minor Arcana and resemble the jack, queen and king in a standard playing deck. In a modern deck the four suits are labeled clubs, hearts, spades and diamonds. In Tarot, the archetypal kings, queens, knights and pages are also depicted in four suits but here they are called wands, cups, swords and pentacles. In some decks the names of the suits are different. For example, wands may be called rods, cups can become water, swords are renamed air, and pentacles may be changed to earth or coins. Whatever the name, the basic archetypal energy of the suit remains the same and is reflected in the image of each card. Generally speaking, cups represent our emotional state, wands symbolize energy and creativity,

swords refer to our thoughts and plans, and pentacles stand for the way we manifest ourselves in the physical world.

The remaining forty Minor Arcana cards, in the suits of wands, cups, swords and pentacles are numbered ace through ten and symbolize archetypal situations in which we find ourselves. They are basic scenarios we play out as we go about our daily lives. For example, the Ace of Cups may symbolize the purest aspect of emotional energy and the moving power behind the spiritual. The Five of Wands can represent obstacles that occur in the course of creative work. The Nine of Coins can be indicative of internal and external benefit and gain. The Ten of Swords often indicates a decision to end something.

There are numerous books, written from a psychological perspective, offering interpretations of these ancient symbols and forms.

The images of Tarot represent archetypal principles that are collectively experienced regardless of cultural conditioning or family imprinting. Each of us is a unique combination of these archetypal principles. Our roles and the clothes we wear reflect and affect the archetypal energy at work in us. For instance, the uniform of a policeman contributes to his archetypal feelings and behavior. (He wouldn't feel like a policeman in shorts and sandals.) In Tarot, the King of Swords represents someone who likes his world in order and could, therefore, symbolize the officer's personality traits. When the officer goes home and puts on relaxed clothing his feelings and behaviors change. Taking on the role of good parent he extends love to his children and allows them to love him in return. In this instance, he expresses yet another archetypal principle, represented by the King of Cups (Gilbert, 2003).

### **The Case of Ryan**

Tarot Counseling is an ancient art, yet it is a new tool to the health care profession. I bring Tarot in as a tool for my initial assessment. With the cards, I gather information from a client's reactions to the images, seeing them as a reflection of the client's mental and emotional states, including their hopes and fears.

Ryan a thirty-five-year-old man had come seeking reassurances. He had not been successful in achieving sobriety on his own and had recently entered a treatment program. He was under a physician's care for depression and possible withdrawal symptoms and he was seeing me for psychological and spiritual counseling.

In the first session, I began building rapport. My nursing diagnosis reflected that he was suffering from mild anxiety related to a disruption of normal routines and an unpredictable treatment outcome. The objective was to use Ryan's reaction to the Tarot cards' imagery to gather personal information and to provide emotional support.

"Will my treatment, for alcoholism be successful?" Ryan asked as he shuffled the New Palladini deck of Tarot cards. The first card of the four card spread was entitled "Strength." The symbolic image on the card is of a woman with a serene countenance, her arms around the jaws of a tamed lion. Sometimes known as the beauty and the beast, this image reflects the archetypal principle of quelling the beasts or demons in our own nature (Arrien, 1988).

Tarot counselor and holistic nurse, Christine Jette (2001) states that drawing the Strength card is indicative of a need to “correct unhealthful dietary and lifestyle habits...” and make the animal nature a peaceful companion.

I asked Ryan what he saw in the picture on the Tarot card. In seconds, he had intellectually made associations and intuited the felt meaning. He replied, “This is the strength I need to gain sobriety. The lion represents my cravings to drink.”

The intuitively felt energetic meaning behind a symbolic image is known as archetypal energy. As in the above Tarot card example, an image that has the same felt meaning in all cultures and across time and is known as an archetypal symbol (Gilbert, 2003).

“This card represents the foremost archetypal energy operating in you in this situation.” I told Ryan, “It indicates that you are feeling strong and determined.”

He furrowed his brow, thought for a moment and then replied, “Yes, I feel very determined.”

Tarot is a system that has archetypal symbols, which everyone can resonate with. We resonate with them because they contain essential elements of our being---our hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses of our bodies, minds, and spirit. There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations (Kaplan, 2000). These same archetypal themes can come to us through dream interpretation and when we use guided imagery to gain insights. All three modalities draw upon the archetypal energies that are hidden within deeper levels of our consciousness (Gilbert, 2003).

The second card was entitled “Three of Swords.” The image on the card was of a red heart with three swords piercing it. In the background there are large raindrops falling from clouds in a dark sky. This card represents the archetypal principle of the deep sorrow and grief caused by negative states of mind. Ryan looked at the image for a moment and said, “This card depicts all the pain caused by my drinking behaviors.” I heard a man accepting responsibility for his actions, a sure sign that he was headed towards healing.

According to Christine Jette, the Three of Swords carries the promise of psychological growth if problems are faced directly. In my estimation, Ryan was already facing his problem behaviors.

The third card was entitled “Death.” The image on the card is of a cloaked skeleton riding a white horse. There are snakes crawling out from beneath the skeleton’s cloak. This card symbolizes transformation and change. Ryan looked at the card intensely but said nothing.

I asked, “What do you see in this card?” Ryan shook his head in consternation. I then offered an interpretation; “ This card rarely means actual physical death but is telling us to let go of old patterns of behavior and to express ourselves in a different way. The snake sheds its skin thus reminding us that in order to change and grow we must let go of old ways” (Gilbert, 2003).

Ryan sat up straight and said, “That makes sense, that is what I want for myself.” With this statement, I knew Ryan was getting in touch with his higher truths. The card and my interpretation were merely providing a contemplative point of focus.

The last card was entitled "Four of Rods." This card represents the archetypal principle of having completed something (Gilbert, 2003). The image on the card is of four upright poles, a golden road runs between the poles up a hill to a golden castle. Ryan immediately said, "This is the road to success and the castle is my goal to achieve sobriety." This card indicates that the questioner has laid a foundation of stability and healing through choices made and actions taken (Jette, 2001).

I told Ryan, " This is the outcome card. It indicates that you are moving in a new and strong direction."

Ryan leaned back in his chair, sighed deeply and smiled. I knew he had received the validation that he needed. My intuition told me he was indeed headed towards sobriety and healing.

For almost a decade, I have explored how to use Tarot as a therapeutic tool and I find it can be used to facilitate a profound transformative process, one that unfolds for both practitioner and client. In the beginning, friends allowed me to observe their minds while using the cards in a creative process and I was graced with mentors who knew more than I and were willing to pass on their knowledge.

As I experimented with the cards, the scientific part of me searched for more. I've received gems of information from remarkable teachers and authors. My intuition and intellect work together, as I continue to study and collect data from my observations and experiences.

In my experience of Tarot, and hundreds of readings, something happens beyond our everyday awareness to affect the performance of the cards. In theory, as in the example of Ryan, the archetypal energy of the thinking and feeling states of the client synchronistically affect the order of the cards as they are shuffled and placed into a predetermined formation. Time and time again I have observed a mysterious synchronicity as the cards fall in place accurately depicting the client's issue as they question and search for an answer.

A Jungian theoretical concept of synchronicity is seen as the meaningful coincidence of two events. Dr. Jung felt that synchronous events occur when archetypal activity is aroused (Kaplan, 2000).

Synchronicity, which can be viewed as part of our conscious energy structure, manifests itself in the form of seemingly coincidental occurrences, which symbolically connect our psyches to the events that are happening in the world. Because this does not make logical sense, synchronicity is often experienced as a miracle, serendipity or pure chance. Synchronistic events disrupt our everyday notions of reality, thus giving us a larger sense of the world in which we live. Indeed, such experiences---which the mystics write about---suggest that there is a direct interaction between the material world and our feelings, behaviors and thoughts. Working with Tarot, dreams and guided imagery often brings us closer to this mystical realm of experience, one that always enriches the healing potential within (Gilbert, 2003).

## **A Brief History of Tarot**

Some researchers speculate that Tarot was first used as a philosophy for promoting conscious psychological change. But in the 15th and 16th centuries, Tarot was primarily recorded as a fortune telling device. Since the game was also associated with gambling it was outlawed in many cities. For the esoteric philosophers it would make sense to keep their practices secret, since the Church viewed such activities with suspicion.

During the 13th century, the Church had successfully established a dogmatic theology, and argument from philosophers or anyone else who dared to reject its doctrine would be met with imprisonment, exile or death. In this way the early Church rooted out heresies against their religion. Under the Church's influence hundreds of philosophers, mystics and healers were persecuted and the church's authority became more rigidly established, mainstream philosophies gradually moved underground and the scope of higher reasoning became narrower.

In order to communicate their esoteric ideas, some of these "heretics" modified the Tarot imagery to include their philosophical ideas and beliefs, thus creating a pictorial language rich in archetypal symbolism that could be secretly and safely be revealed to others who understood the symbolic language of the soul, or as psychologists would say, the unconscious mind. A system of evocative emblems evolved gradually becoming more complex over the next few centuries.

The narrow medieval mind-set began to decline during the 14th century. The weakening of the Church continued and by the 16th and 17th centuries esoteric groups began to spread throughout Europe, Britain and eventually America. Certain French esoteric lodges, (connected with the Masonic orders) considered Tarot a serious and worthy study. They wrote volumes and kept this mystical paradigm alive. As a result of this inheritance, many people are now discovering how to use Tarot as a tool for self-development and healing (Russell, 1959, Kaplan, 1978).

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**Note: Authors Gilbert and Jette are holistic nurses.**

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