

## **Sacred and Ceremonial Tarot:**

### **2008, the Year of Strength**

**Sandra A. Thomson, Ed D, CTGM**

#### Introduction

Carl Jung believed that the purpose of our lives was to shift the psychic center of gravity from the ego to the Self; that is, to move from the mundane into the sacred domain. Jung's colleague, Marie-Louise von Franz said that when we consult any so-called divination devices—coins, stones, bones, cards—we are, in fact, attempting to contact the Self, which Jungians variously consider as the soul or the god within. Von Franz further wrote that "the only worthwhile adventure for the people of today is the adventure within."<sup>1</sup> Tarot cards offer us one pathway to that adventure.

#### **The Promise and Challenge of the Year**

Tarotists who consider using Tarot cards as one technique for delineating such an adventure--as differentiated from considering them as a fortune telling device--look to the cards for information that may guide and inspire them in the next step(s) to consider in their process of personal development. They do this with readings, with special cards related to their birth dates, and with annual "year" cards.

Although Tarotists look at an individual card each year, we must not forget that we are considering only one aspect of The Fool's (Major Arcana 0), and our, continuing archetypal journey.

Last year, 2007 the year of The Chariot (Major Arcana 7), we were invited to attend to our advancement, to how we are going to leave home and make our life journey our own, paying attention to both the inner and outer journey.

In Tarot terms, 2008 is 08, the year of the Strength card, and attending to its invitation and influence becomes one of our major adventures for this year.

In many decks (Tarot of Marseilles, Thoth), Justice is Major Arcana 8 and Strength is Major Arcana 11. In order to match its astrological correspondences, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn moved Strength to the eighth position so that it astrologically fits the Leo card, and moved Justice to the eleventh Major Arcana position. Decks influenced by the Rider-Waite-Smith deck keep Strength as the eighth

Major Arcana and that's what I propose to do. So, without going into the many arguments and historical information regarding the Golden Dawn's switch of the Strength and Justice cards, let's look at how we can understand our tasks and the guiding principles and responsibilities that will be directed toward us this Strength year.

In *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*, Jungian analyst James Hollis reminds us that the engagement of the soul's agenda is the real meaning and task not only in any relationship with another but in the love of our own life and the love of our soul task.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed the Strength card is all about exploring and developing our soul's agenda.

### Strength

Although in at least one very early deck, where the scene in the Strength card is that of the Greek hero Hercules clubbing a lion to death (presumably relating it to one of his 12 labors), later decks typically depict a woman/maiden in some kind of relationship with a lion. Some say she opens the lion's mouth; others say she is closing it (symbolizing attending to and, possibly, curbing instinctual responses). In other decks, she simply resides beside the lion. Often the two figures are connected by a garland of flowers.

To consider what the Strength card tells us about the forces that shape and influence our lives, or that we need to embrace, this year, let's consider the question first from the point of view of the Rider-Waite-Smith (RWS) card.

In the RWS card, a maiden dressed in a long, white gown of purity (higher feminine aspect of the soul), is closing the mouth of a lion, which represents basic instincts. She is the maiden aspect of The Empress (mother-maiden-crone). The lemniscate (figure eight on its side) above her head connects her to The Magician (who displays a similar lemniscate), and indicates we are witnessing a transitional moment of mastery in the eternal now. She wears a crown of flowers; small bees (purposeful consciousness connected with the higher realm) dance above her head.

The maiden's connection to the Magician reminds us that Magician magic refers to drawing higher energies into our lives and actions. The Strength card tells us that the process of devouring energies can be transformed into our personal strength rather than overpowering us. The maiden represents the strength to take control of one's life. The strength depicted here is one of trust and love. In return, the maiden's instinctual self (the lion) opens up to her with a lick rather than an attack.

We are especially being called upon this year to work at getting in touch with our desires and unconscious needs (the lion) and create a harmonious union between them and our conscious, rational state (the maiden), as well as awakening to our inner strength, that of taking control of our lives, of power passing into action.

The Strength card invites us to consider the spiritual components of the adventures and situations to which we will be exposed in 2008. It assures us that problems can be solved if we change our frame of reference and see them in a new, more self-loving context, freed from the forces of repression.

The innovative Tarotist Mark McElroy says that if we look at the "story" of the card, it depicts an event or time when the main character uses his/her strength to resolve a situation.<sup>3</sup>

If the Strength card teaches us anything, it says that strength, power, and control are all intertwined. The Strength card suggests that spirituality must always be part of those situations. They cannot be properly utilized without it, and are more likely to be misused if it is missing. In her latest book, *Waking the Global Heart*, chakra expert Anodea Judith says we are a third chakra (love of power) nation and ponders what it is going to take to move into the fourth chakra state of being (power of love).<sup>4</sup> Not only is it a national question, it is also a personal one.

### Numerological Understanding

The number eight was considered a sacred number by the Pythagoreans because it can be successively divided evenly in halves, i.e., eight divided by two equals four; four divided by two equals two, and two divided by two equals one, the monad. Sometimes called the "little holy number," it is "a number that combines mystery with transformative power."<sup>5</sup> As we have already seen, eight when turned on its side forms a lemniscate, the sign of eternity.

Eight represents the ceaseless in and out breaths of the Cosmos, the "flame of divine breath," by which the soul achieves equilibrium. Lower ideals are withdrawn (exhalation) and higher ones introduced (inhalation).<sup>6</sup>

### Mythological Connection

In Egyptian mythology, the two aspects of the Strength card are represented by Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of war and destruction and at the same time the goddess of medicine and healing. Looking at this mythological connection, then, I believe that the Strength card is one of several cards in the Tarot deck that calls upon us to live more comfortably with paradox.

In identifying what he calls the "survivor personality," psychologist Al Siebert discovered that people who possess it are more comfortable than most in living in paradox and appreciating their own paradoxical nature.<sup>7</sup> Jungian analyst Robert Johnson says that the "capacity for paradox is the measure of spiritual strength and the surest sign of maturity."<sup>8</sup>

The Strength card might also be sub-titled Beauty and the Beast. It is the story of the awakening of the feminine hero, the heroine, of the empowerment that occurs when we freely and lovingly accept, rather than repress, our "inner beast." As the source of our energy, the guardian of our spirit, the lion urges us to find our own beliefs and truths and to live in spiritual integrity.

### Comparative Tarot

When we use the same card of other decks to enhance or expand our understanding of the meaning of a card, it is called Comparative Tarot.

In the beautiful Robin Wood Strength card, the lion totally dominates the illustration. Behind him sits the maiden with a lap full of flowers, symbolizing spiritual gifts she is willing to give to others. She wears a wreath of daisies (freshness of spirit and outlook), violets (sweetness), forget-me-nots (caring) and other spring flowers to show that she is "young in her outlook" in her hair. Robin says the woman is able to close the lion's mouth, not because she is stronger, but because she has "courage, understanding and confidence," and because the lion (representing our brute strength, pride, masculine qualities, and instincts) knows that she loves him.<sup>9</sup>

In Rachel Pollack's Shining Tribe card, there is only the lion, standing large before a tree of life, on a peak of a rounded hill. The roots in the hill emerge from the lion's paws. "Strength comes when we root ourselves in our Mother, the Earth,"<sup>10</sup> who my Andean teachers call Patchamama. The card also is meant to show us that strength can be fierce and gentle at the same time.

The World Spirit Strength woman nestles in the lap of a huge lion. She is described as a woman who is at ease with herself. With her left hand, she strokes the chin of the lion, while in the palm of her right hand, she holds a mouse encased in the luminous globe of spirit. Mice can symbolize introspection, while in some folklore traditions, the mouse has been thought of as the soul.<sup>11</sup>

In the background what is described as a lake with islands, but looking every bit like a pair of eyeglasses, forms the traditional lemniscate—only this time it "floats" over the *lion*. Also in the background a pink, spotted snake coils around a tree whose branches sprout 12 triple flames (signs of the zodiac and the three decanates of each?). These two symbols combined in one suggest this scene occurs in the mythical time of Eden, when all aspects of ourselves were undivided; hence, the luminous soul, the female psyche, and the instinctual lion, all residing so comfortably together.

My teacher Alberto speaks of the great Judeo-Christian story/myth wherein we were "kicked out of the garden." He thinks our work is to integrate ourselves until we realize that we have never been kicked out.

Because snakes shed their skin, they often represent rebirth, sometimes the unconscious, and sometimes kundalini energy (pink does suggest the renewal of feminine energy or the goddess Kundalini).

The eclipsed sun in the violet sky of truth and healing also speaks of the emergence of shadow material and the integration of solar (conscious) and lunar (unconscious) energy. Clearly this is one of the most sacred cards in The World Spirit Tarot.

In the brightly colorful Tarot of the Four Elements a water dragon supports a playful, nude female, colored blue (symbolizing the sky/expansion) and black (for night/mystery). The illustration calls to attention the "potential healing that may come to the individual who dares to play in the oceans of the unconscious."<sup>12</sup> The card invites us to rise above the "currents" of the past and discover the joys that are always within our reach.

The figure's outstretched fingers touch two clouds above her head, connected by a rainbow. We discover our strength when we summon all the aspects of the self to create a rainbow of our life experiences, say authors Isha Lerner and Amy Ericksen.

The related Osho Zen card is titled "Courage" and shows a small wildflower growing upward between rocks and stones to reach the blazing light of day. It is meant as a message to guide us out of darkness and into light. If the soul is to "flower," we must meet the challenges of life with courage.<sup>13</sup>

In whatever Strength card(s) we compare individually and collectively, they remind us of the polarity and challenge/need for integration of matter, spirit, and instinct. We become aware of our body wisdom—our unconscious needs, which are huge if we believe the size of the lions in the World Spirit and the Shining Tribe cards (in our depths, we are all four-footed?). We become aware that more than ever we are being called upon to live what my friend and Canadian tarotist James Wells called, a soulcentric life.

### Summary

So, in 2008, the Strength card reminds us to:

- consider what we need to do to feel more at home in our world, our bodies and our four-footed psyches.
- identify and to give our body, mind and spirit what they need to know that they are loved.
- identify the fears that oppress us and those that set us free.

- practice entertaining paradoxical/contradictory ideas and concepts and ascertaining how we feel when doing so.
- identify our inner values and move toward living them more clearly rather than running away from them toward more superficial "successes."
- explore our own myth(s)/stories regarding power and control; what they mean in our lives; how they have influenced (limited?) or enlivened us.

## References

---

- von Franz, Marie-Louise. *Alchemy. An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology*. Toronto, Canada: Inner City Books, 1980, p. 66.
- Hollis, James. *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*. New York: Gotham Books, 2005.
- McElroy, Mark. *Absolute Beginner's Guide to Tarot*. Indianapolis, Indiana, Que Publishing, 2006, p. 123.
- Judith, Anodea. *Waking the Global Heart: Humanity's Rite of Passage from the Love of Power to the Power of Love*. Santa Rosa, Calif.: Elite Books, 2006.
- Lerner, Isha and Amy Ericksen. *Tarot of the Four Elements. Tribal Folklore, Earth Mythology and Human Magic*. Rochester, Vermont: Bear and Co., 2004, p. 40.
- Curtiss, Harriette A. and F. Homer Curtiss. *The Key of Destiny*. 4th ed. North Hollywood, Calif: Newcastle Publishing Co., 1983, p. 287, p. 294.
- Siebert, Al. *The Survivor Personality*. New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1996.
- Johnson, Robert. *Owning Your Own Shadow*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, p. 78.
- Wood, Robin. *Robin Wood Tarot: The Book*. Dearborn, MI: A Livingtree Book, 1998, pp. 54-55.
- Pollack, Rachel. *The Shining Tribe Tarot: Awakening the Universal Spirit*. St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 2001, p. 43.
- Thomson, Sandra A. *Pictures from the Heart. A Tarot Dictionary*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003, p. 241.
- Lerner and Ericksen. *Tarot of the Four Elements*, p. 105.
- Osho International Foundation. *Osho Zen Tarot*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, pp 18-19.

Sandra A. Thomson is the co-author of three Tarot books **The Lovers' Tarot**, **Spiritual Tarot**, **The Heart of the Tarot** and the single author of a Tarot dictionary **Pictures from the Heart** and a dream dictionary **Cloud Nine**. A former psychologist and researcher, she also has ghostwritten five books in the medical field. She is a former president of the American Tarot Association and has worked with Tarot cards for almost 30 years, writing and teaching, with ongoing classes in Los Angeles, where she lives. She is an annual presenter at the Los Angeles Tarot Symposium (LATS), as well as teaching the beginner's course for LATS. An avid gardener, she considers her work with Tarot and with her students as gardening of the soul. You may reach Sandra via e-mail at [Sthomson1@sbcglobal.net](mailto:Sthomson1@sbcglobal.net)