

Interview: Toni Gilbert

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*Complementary Modality Interview
with Toni Gilbert, RN, MA, HN-BC*

Therapeutic Tarot Counseling

Tell what transformational modalities you work with that Imagery augments and vice versa—something that you work with that augments your work with Imagery?

Tarot cards are my most efficient and powerful tool. Meditation upon the Imagery in the 78 cards is a quick way to elicit insights. In my experience, thinking and feeling states of the questioner (and possibly practitioner) seem to synchronistically influence the order of the cards as they are shuffled and placed in a formation. In the resulting layout, Tarot's Images reflect the shuffler's psychological profile at the moment they shuffle the cards.

I find that my thinking, feeling, planning and intention may affect the cards in ways I don't understand. I am careful to be clear upon all these levels so that I remove as much of my ego as possible. Essentially, you have a layout with a number of Images that represent who the client is at the moment. For me, it is as if they have just laid out a dream for me to interpret. Dream interpretation is an early talent and set of techniques that came to me in adolescence. Consequently, I have been involved with dream work for about 40 years.

The questioner's reactions to the Tarot Imagery may prompt me to use Imagery to deepen the experience and to elicit responses from other dimensions of the mind. I sometimes involve



energy work with the scenario being played out as well. I stay open to whatever needs to happen and then just allow the process to proceed, acting spontaneously in the Now. Not only is this fun, it stimulates the archetypes and creates a synergistic grace in the moment.

Do you consider the modality you use to be primarily Imagery or one that uses Imagery

as an adjunct?

That is hard to answer because there are a lot of forces at work. Artistically drawn archetypal Images are printed on the faces of the Tarot cards. Carl Jung recognized these Images as "symbols of transformation." These symbolic Images are the foundation of the therapeutic Tarot counseling ses-

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sion. Each Image stimulates the questioner to reflect upon the multiple dimensions of the psyche: personal history, visions, hopes and fears. The dimension accessed is dependent upon the needs and the developmental level of the questioner. Everyone will resonate with the Images at some level. The depth and breadth of the questioner is examined and the Imagery is a catalyst for all that occurs during a session.

Did you create this modality or parts of this modality? What did you add to this modality after learning the basis?

I didn't begin using Tarot cards until I was 50 years old. By that time, I had a transpersonal education and multiple transpersonal mentors. I worked with Tarot cards on my own for two years and used who I was and my mid-life emotional issues to work with the cards. Since I have always been fascinated with the Images of our nighttime dreaming, I immediately saw that something was happening that involved the unconscious mind and synchronicity. I looked for other practitioners' experiences with the cards. I describe my explorational process and my resultant understanding in my book, *Messages from the Archetypes*.

Because I was already trained in several counseling techniques, I took an unusual approach for, Tarot "readers." I elicited responses from the client first, rather than read the cards to the

client. I call this technique interactive Tarot counseling. I have also organized and developed a year-long training in Archetypal Tarot Counseling™ for the health professional.

Where did you learn this modality? What was involved in the training?



After exploring the cards for two years on my own, I sought out a master tarotist. The first person I approached was not a good fit for my professional values and we weren't an intellectual match. I found my Tarot mentor, Christine Payne Towler, at a Whole Life Expo. We had an immediate intellectual rapport and I worked with her

over the next 3 years. She was self-taught and knew as much about psychology as I did. As it turned out, both of her parents were traditional psychotherapists.

What in the approach is particularly useful or might not be found elsewhere?

I use an interactive approach that I learned from my certification in Interactive Imagery, my years of dream work and traditional training in counseling. Most Tarot readers use what I call a divinatory approach whereby they read an interpretation of the cards all the while checking in with the client to see if their interpretation is accurate. Both ways work.

Can you tell a story about how this has worked with a client? What did you actually do and the result?

Bessie, a retired lawyer, volunteered to teach English as a second language at a school. She requested a session because she was having trouble dealing with the director, who was also a fellow volunteer. She described the man as

spoiled as a result of being born to a wealthy family and never having to work. He put up an impressive front in the school, told lies and behaved in a passive/ aggressive way. Bessie felt there was nothing that she could do but quit. She liked her work and

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wanted to continue but she was having trouble controlling her emotions. She wondered what a session would tell her about the issue. Bessie chose the Voyager deck.

The first card, of a 4 card spread, was the High Priestess the androgynous archetype that represents the universal principle of inner resourcefulness and inherent wisdom. Of the collage of Images on the card was a calm lake with a sail boat, an ancient temple ruins with a beautifully serene statue's face in the middle. After some discussion about the attributes of the High Priestess, and because she was instantly struck by the serene Images on the card, I had her close her eyes for a guided meditation. Using the techniques of guided Imagery, I had her draw upon her own inner Priestess.

In Bessie's Imagery, the High Priestess was a small golden statue that spoke to Bessie in her native French tongue. The Priestess told her to "be in the center and stay calm and just let the events around her happen." She also instructed her to remain detached. The Priestess said that she would be with Bessie at all times and that she could call upon her when needed. She also requested that Bessie pay attention to her dreams wherein she would give her more insights.

The remaining 3 cards reinforced the messages of the High Priestess in that she was to watch her negative thinking and consult the inner Priestess at will.

Are there any circumstances or populations you feel are not appropriate to use this modality for?

As with most Imagery, this tool should not be used with delusional or psychotic clients, those with fragile egos or clients who may have negative thoughts about Tarot cards.

What was it about this modality that spoke to you?

The synchronicity of the shuffle was immediately apparent and showed my issues in the Imagery of the cards as they were laid out. It was hard to believe at first. It took about two years for me to get around the scientific part of my mind and just trust the process.

What was your original training and /or use of Imagery in your practice?

I have training and experience in dream interpretation, Interactive Guided Imagery, Interactive Imagery, Jungian psychology, the Use of Imagery in Medicine, art therapy, Wellness Counseling and Mind-body Consciousness. All of these before I took a look at Tarot cards. Currently, I am an apprentice astrologer. I use my skills as a holistic nurse and transpersonal counselor in an alternative nursing practice.

How do you use this modality for personal enrichment?

I simply shuffle the cards with my issue in mind and I receive a layout that contains answers and insights that I need to know at the time. I find it better to have a session from someone else because the cards seem like mirrors that reflect what I already know. The other practitioner gives me a different perspective. I also have a computer program called Tarot Magic that

I use. Sometimes, I simply draw a card to meditate upon for the day.

How do you structure your sessions i.e., how many sessions are appropriate for each client; do you use this as a one-shot deal or as a continual growth experience for the client?

It is the same as any healing art. The sessions are structured according to what is needed by the client. Many clients buy their own cards because as they receive counseling from me, they also learn how to interpret the cards.

How do you present your modality to those folks who are accustomed to using more traditional allopathic methods of treatment?

Usually, clients know the tools I use before they come and their interest is piqued.

What negative responses, if any, have you had from clients?

I worked in psychiatry for 13 years. I make good mental health assessments and am careful who I see in sessions and with whom I use the cards. There have been no negative responses from clients.

Did you feel there was any validity to this criticism?

N/A

How is this modality promoted by professionals, i.e., is there a professional organization

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related to this modality?

I am among several tarotists who are also PhDs, authors and mainstream counselors who belong to the American Tarot Association. The organization teaches Tarot through an excellent newsletter and promotes the ethical use of Tarot.

Is there a body of research related to this modality?

Yes, you will find references to Tarot research in any college that teaches transpersonal psychology.

What is the research? How can it be accessed?

Research can be found at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in the doctoral dissertations. Art Rosen-garten, PhD a clinical psychologist wrote about his Tarot research in his book, *Tarot and Psychology: Spectrums of Possibility*. There an article entitled *Tarot and Emotions Research Project* by tarotist and author, Mary K. Greer in the archives of the *Alternative Journal of Nursing* at www.altjn.com <http://www.altjn.com/archives/issue4.asp>. Beyond that, I suggest you search the Internet where you will find an enormous amount of information about Tarot cards.

What have you seen in the growth in use of this modality?

Europe and Canada embrace Tarot in psychotherapy more than the US. However, there are many good intellectual books on the subject and I have seen movement towards acceptance in the 15 years of my study of this symbolic and archetypal system of cards.

Where would you like to see additional growth and use for this modality?

I see clients with concerns about their physical health and difficult life situations. It is my intention, through my writing, to further manifest the use of the cards in wellness counseling and transpersonal counseling specifically in holistic nursing. Other health professionals will get something from my writing as well.

What is the value of your modality from a medical or psychological perspective?

For those who endeavor to search out answers to their health concerns through a symbolic modality, the Images on Tarot cards pay big dividends.

How do you respond to others who view your modality as too alternative?

I don't think about it beyond the awareness that the mind-set is occurring. And I don't judge it beyond a quick safety assessment of my environment. I simply go my own way, which is pretty middle of the road. I have a more liberal mind-set and am an educated person with a wealth of experiences and stories to tell. On top of that, I have a 40 year marriage (try that sometime) and am a grandmother and recently, a great-grandmother. I feel like I have made my bones and if it works for me, then others have a responsibility to listen to what I say and read what I write. If people want to close the door to what I have to impart, it is their loss.

How do you think that your modality complements the medical and psychological approaches?

Archetypal energies are a part of who we are and because of that we cannot leave them out when we begin the process of psychologically and spiritually developing ourselves toward our potential. The end result of development is called by many names: enlightenment, self-actualization, individuation and possibly, born again experiences. I believe that we must begin to use our physical and psychological symptoms as opportunities to challenge us to work towards that end. In other words, the symptom, injury, difficult life issue becomes a challenge to work through so that your ego relaxes a bit and a more accepting part of yourself shines through. After many years of work, you become an authentic person in the world. Simply stated, as we uncover our potential selves, we heal. This makes it all the more important that each of us should clearly understand that our biology is our psychology and vice versa.

What do you think is needed for the mainstream professional community to come to an appreciation of this?

Once a person has educated themselves in the use of symbolic thought in a professional setting the conclusions are easy and the uses apparent. All one has to do is read the literature produced by a vast array of highly talented intellectuals; some educated in mainstream colleges and some not.

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How do you overcome the challenges of working with a modality that is usually not understood or is dismissed out of hand?

I feel blessed that my path through life is unusual as are my talents. I understand that most people cannot see the way that I do. I find it is because they have not been taught a symbolic mind-set. Think about it. Where in mainstream thought does it reside? If people are receptive and have the courage and the interest to begin the journey, I teach them my ways. I find

that intelligent people can easily think symbolically and that we are all naturally intuitive. It becomes simply a matter of showing them how to use the images on the cards to raise their consciousness to a higher realm of Imagination and educate them to the possibilities of using such a tool. In the process, I promise clients and students, you will find your unique path and uncover your hidden talents.

Toni Gilbert, RN, MA, HN-BC is a certified holistic nurse who holds a M.A. in Transpersonal Studies from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. Toni is one of thousands of health professionals who act as a bridge between mainstream medicine and alternative and complementary therapies. Her on-line journal, the *Alternative Journal of Nursing*, gives these pioneers a forum to discuss their esoteric discoveries. She has also released her first book, *Messages from the Archetypes: Using Tarot for Healing and Spiritual Growth*. Contact: www.tonigilbert.com

