

San Francisco Bay Area Tarot Symposium: An Intuitive Art Comes of Age

— Toni Gilbert

Bay Area Tarot Symposium (BATS) in San Francisco is celebrating its 21st year (www.daughtersofdivination.com). Each year, its enthusiastic team is headed by event producer Thalassa, a student, reader, and teacher of the Tarot for 45 years. She brings decades of experience in many other areas, such as theatrical production, stand-up comedy, and improvisational theatre. Her talents help set the stage for an extravaganza of workshops, presentations, panels, readings, plus a large display of vendors and book publishers. BATS is one of a number of similar conferences held around the world. In the U.S., there are scores of talented readers and counselors on the West coast as well as all across the country. Some use Tarot in a divinatory way, some see it as a self-discovery method, and others use it as a therapeutic tool.

Starting in 1991, Thalassa and other tarotists have seen the Tarot market expand from just a few Tarot card decks to more than 1,000 new ones, and new ones appear every year. Card themes range across a spectrum of the human imagination and its archetypes. Some decks are spiritual in orientation, some are ego-erotic, and still others are earthy. The styles vary

considerably, as there are a number of talented artists executing a multitude of colorful designs and images that delight and move us. There are authentically reproduced historic Tarot decks and highly creative contemporary versions available in every major bookstore. There are decks relating to Celtic Shamanism, Native American spirituality, Shakespeare, and abstract art. This creative tool that can be used in areas from relationship issues to psychological and physical health evaluation.

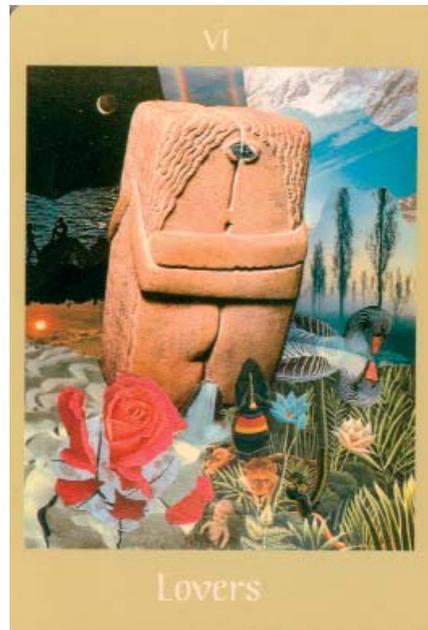
For centuries the symbolism on Tarot cards has intrigued occultists, artists, and art historians. The imagery has been preserved and reproduced on Tarot decks for more than 500 years, often with additional personal artistic touches based upon the important topics, fashions, and events of the time. Many of these decks are on display at leading museums and libraries throughout the world.

We can speculate that the system of Tarot may have been used as a philosophy for promoting insights and moral change much like murals were used in some cathedrals. In the Renaissance, it was customary for priests to tell illiterate peasants Biblical stories using the symbolic art on the mural as a visual reference for their interpretations. For the esoteric philosophers, it would make sense to keep their practices secret, since the Church viewed their

activities with suspicion.

Tarot historian and author Mary K. Greer states on her Tarot Blog that the philosophers of the day didn't keep their Kabbalistic, mystical-erotic, and alchemical activities that secret. Given everything

else they wrote about, it is strange that they universally failed to mention Tarot cards. She also notes that psychological counseling as we think of it didn't exist before the late 19th century.



Voyager Deck by James Wanless

Additionally, there is no evidence of Tarot being used for fortune-telling before the 18th century; according to historical documents, it was known almost exclusively as a game (Mary K. Greer, *Origins of Divination in Tarot*, marygreer.wordpress.com/2008/04/01/origins-of-divination-with-playing-cards/). Some cities outlawed the game, but it was extremely rare and then only briefly or with constraints—for example, some laws forbade the game on workdays; there were also restrictions on the amount of money that could be played with (Huck Meyer, *Laws on Tarot Gaming*, www.trionfi.com; Mary K. Greer, *History of Tarot*, marygreer.wordpress.com/2011/07/03/the-visconti-tarots/).

The tradition of Tarot deserves respect, for it is more than a deck of cards with symbolic images applied to the faces. Tarot, as we know it today, emerged from a collection of seventy-eight cards developed in the 15th century. The images on each card carry a rich symbolic tapestry of psychological energies, or archetypes, inherent in the human species. Many of the images in modern Tarot decks are derived from archetypal characters and symbols that may be found in the popular art of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Some contemporary decks contain symbols of the Hebrew alphabet, astrology, and numerology.

Like the Rorschach Inkblot Test, 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, according to Tarot scholar Stewart Kaplan, this

tool, like other tests, serves to elicit responses that can then be evaluated in standard diagnostic terms or by other criteria. Athur Rosengarten, a transpersonal psychologist, conducted a pilot study with recovering perpetrators and/or victims of spousal abuse and family violence. Rosengarten analyzed the respective position of each card and assumed that every card in a spread stood for something in the individual's psyche, although multiple levels of meaning could be found in each card.

In his book, *Tarot and Psychology*, Rosengarten concluded that the insights stimulated and clarified by Tarot are of primary value for the individual, not the method itself, and that Tarot must be considered an instrument of potential psychotherapeutic value in which the counselor seams together the nuances that gather meaningfully during a client's session.

There are many ways to use the cards, and because it is an intuitive art it is best to keep the rules simple about how to use it. However, there are bottom-line codes of ethics that tarotists follow such as the American Tarot Association Code of Ethics (www.ata-tarot.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=45&Itemid=29).

Tarot counselors rely upon the personal projections of the

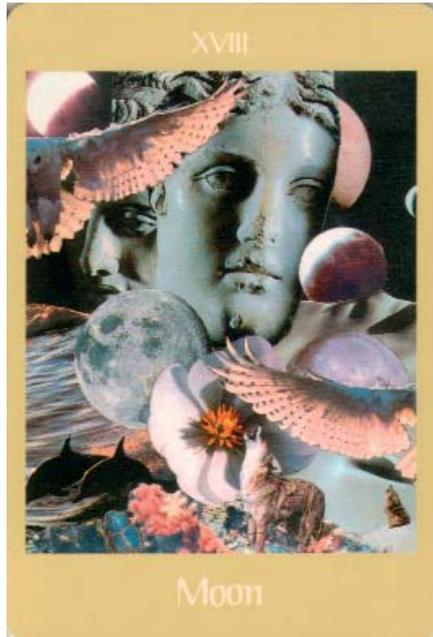
client, because as they discuss what they see in the imagery the counselor gets a glimpse of deeply personal information from which to begin forming assessments and to plan for future interventions and evolving potential outcomes. When the client is finished *free associating* or telling what they see

in the cards, if appropriate the counselor then can give his or her interpretation of the image all the while watching the client's responses closely and *intuitively tuning in* to subtle nuances such as facial expression, body language, and voice intonation. A

counselor can learn a great deal about a person in a single session.

Other tarotists are *readers* who primarily read the cards to the client. In other words, they tap into an intuitive sense and free associate about the images and grouping of the cards while telling the client their interpretation of how the cards relate to the client's presented question. Many experienced readers check with the client, and their perceptions, by frequently asking for feedback and watching for subtle body language.

Tarotists skilled in the art of Tarot counseling or reading may use the cards in self-development, client assessment, and as a complementary therapy with wellness clients. Likewise, it is utilized with some mental health clients as the licensed psychotherapist gain insights into



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his/her client and helps them to better understand their issues.

This article is a call for unconditional acceptance and caring for the whole multi-dimensional person. One way to do that is to examine the presenting disease or injury from many disciplines and perspectives. In that way, we *learn from it* rather than just asking for *the fix*. This perspective postulates that everyone needs to explore the complexities of life however painful. It is only by facing our shadows, or our darker side, that we begin to heal. Tarot in the hands of a competent counselor, reader, or therapist does just that.

The U.S. is in the process of creating a new vision of health care. However, in order to do so it is necessary to connect all parts of the health care system and to creatively integrate the similar and the dissimilar. There are benefits from traditional medical interventions. Nevertheless, there is a place in the whole for alternative and complementary therapies. In some areas of the country, empirically proven alternative modalities are being embraced in integrated clinics.

We still have a way to go.

In the next leg of our journey, the health industry needs to recognize and fully integrate the humanities' older healing arts such as astrology, dream work, and Tarot interpretation. The tarotists at this year's BATS conference are some of the creative pioneers bringing tools of change into a changing society. These talented and gifted individuals are rising to meet the needs of a country that is beginning to accept the concept that there is more to us than meets the eye.

BATS Presentations included:

PAMELA EAKINS, Ph.D., A Rite of Awakening: The Ten Powers of Evolution with the New Kabbalistic Tarot of the Spirit and the Lightning Papers www.tarotofthespirit.com

MARY K. GREER, MA, Tarot History for Tarot Readers www.marygreer.wordpress.com

TONI GILBERT, ASN, MA, ATC, The Archetypes and Developmental Psychology www.tonigilbert.com

CARRIE PARIS, MA, Seeing with Different Eyes: The Art of Cultivating Accurate Vision www.carrieparis.com

ELLEN LORENZI-PRINCE, creatrix of the Tarot of the Crone www.croneways.com

MAJOR TOM SCHICK, The Hanged Man, The Devil, and The Two of Coins as Depicted in Cards in the 18th and 19th Centuries www.majortom.biz

GINA THEIS, AA, Courtly Love: Partnership Choices and the Court Cards www.tarotadvisor.com

DIANE BRANDT WILKES, MA, Tarot Astrological Passages www.tarotpassages.com

JAMES WANLESS, Ph.D., The Sustainable Voyager www.voyagertarot.com

There are many innovative ways to approach Tarot. When used well, the system aids us in bringing greater understanding into our lives and is useful in our search for wholeness and healing. We are learning about our multidimensional selves and beginning to use the tools that help raise our consciousness so that we tap into a higher vision for ourselves and our world. The yearly gathering of the BATS presenters, counselors, and readers highlights how much we have learned and applied to the practice of Tarot and to our lives. It demonstrates that we are moving toward a more transpersonal vision in mental, physical, and spiritual health.

*TONI GILBERT, ASN, MA, ATC, is a transpersonal counselor with a background in holistic nursing. As a professional with a formal education in nursing, psychology, and transpersonal studies, she offers clients an array of healing arts techniques to enhance wellness and prevent illness. She is the author of **Messages from the Archetypes: Using Tarot for Healing and Spiritual Growth**, published by White Cloud Press, and **Gaining Archetypal Vision: A Guidebook for Using Archetypes in Personal Growth and Healing** by Schiffer Books. She has written for national and local publications. www.tonigilbert.com She is also the founding director of the progressive Oregon Holistic Nurses Association www.oregonholisticnurses.org serving California, Oregon, and Washington.*