

Archetypal Symbols as Therapeutic Tools

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Tarot is a system of archetypal symbols that contain essential elements of our being – our hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses of our bodies, minds, and spirits. According to Kaplan (1978), there are as many archetypes as there are typical situations. These archetypal themes can come to us through dream interpretation or guided imagery and draw upon the archetypal energies hidden within our deeper levels of consciousness (Gilbert, 2004; Kaplan).

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, it is worth noting that both tools, like other tests, serve to elicit responses that can then be evaluated in standard diagnostic terms or other criteria.

As one example, Arthur 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. Rosengarten (2000) 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 as an instrument of potential psychotherapeutic value in which the counselor seams together the nuances that gather meaningfully during a client's session.

I have explored Tarot as a therapeutic tool for over a decade, and I find it can be used to facilitate a profound transformative process that unfolds for both practitioner and client. In theory, 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 formation. Time and time again, I have observed a mysterious harmony as the cards fall in place and accurately depict the client's issue as he or she questions and searches for answers, as in the case of Ryan (see below).

RYAN

Ryan was seeking reassurances and had come to me for psychological and spiritual counseling. He had recently entered a treatment program and was under a physician's care for possible withdrawal symptoms. 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 information and provide emotional support.

"Will my treatment for alcoholism be successful?" Ryan asked as he shuffled the deck of Tarot cards.

Strength

The first card of the four-card spread was entitled *Strength* and had a symbolic image 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). Holistic nurse and tarotist Christine Jette (2001) has written that when one draws the *Strength* card, it is indicative of a need to "correct unhealthful dietary and lifestyle habits" (p. 134) and make the animal nature a peaceful companion.

I asked Ryan what he saw in the picture on the card. After seconds, he intellectually made associations, intuited the meaning, and then replied, "This is the strength I need to gain sobriety. The lion represents my cravings to drink."

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I responded, “This card represents the foremost archetypal energy operating in you in this situation. 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.”

Three of Swords

The second card, *Three of Swords*, contained the image of a red heart with three swords piercing it. In the background were large raindrops falling from dark clouds. 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 Jette (2001), the *Three of Swords* carries the promise of psychological growth if problems are faced.

Death

The third card was entitled *Death*. The image was of a cloaked skeleton, with snakes crawling out from beneath its cloak, riding a white horse. Ryan looked at the card intensely but said nothing. So I asked, “What do you see in this card?” When Ryan shook his head in consternation, I 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 we must let go of old ways in order to change and grow (Gilbert, 2004).

Ryan straightened his back and said, “That makes sense because that is what I want.” With this statement, I knew Ryan was getting in touch with his truth. The card and my interpretation were merely providing a contemplative point of focus.

Four of Wands

The last card, entitled *Four of Wands*, represents the archetypal principle of having completed something (Gilbert, 2004). The image on the card is of four upright poles, with a golden road running 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 also told me he was indeed headed towards sobriety and healing.

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