

**INFINITY TAROT**  
**“Understanding the Tarot”**  
**by Keith McNider**

**The Wheeling Eye**

**1**

Hi!

Welcome to the world of Tarot.

May your presence in that world bring you many gifts of insight, inspiration, and delight!

The approach in these pages is informal in the belief that what emerges here for you has its own energy, and that its purpose will align with your purpose. It is also hoped that the benefits you derive from it reflect what is also happening for you in your own way and at your own pace.

You will need to have a deck of tarot cards or have access to some cards.

In these pages you will become comfortable working with and understanding the tarot.

You will find your intuition improve.

You will also find yourself on a journey through and into your own past. For, although the Tarot is usually consulted because we want to know about our future, working with it also shows us that in order to understand that future we have to look at what has us be the way we are *right now*.

It's a dialogue, if you like, between the past and the future.

So let's begin.

If you have your deck of cards there with you right now, greet them! Hold them, say a prayer over them, smile with them.

They'll reveal and reflect the changing tapestry of your life!

If they are new, make them your own.

What joy they can bring, and yes, you them as well. It is reciprocal, too.

All things, animate and inanimate, are forms of energy. Have your cards clear by looking after them, so they do their job without clutter.

It's good to smudge tarot cards as well, for it cleanses them and infuses them with goodwill.

Smudging also helps remind us, that though the Tarot might invite the playful within us, it is not a plaything, and should be respected accordingly.

Many people wrap their card decks in silk. Others do the same and keep the cards in boxes until required. The distinction between ordinary time and 'other' time is important. Protecting the cards with silk helps preserve their longevity. It also provides a psychic nurturing/blanket for the cards and their users.

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The origins of Tarot cards are shrouded in mystery.

Though they appear to have originated in Italy in the early Renaissance period where some very early decks of tarot cards have been located, there may well be an even earlier link with gypsies travelling to Europe from India.

There are also historical references to cards similar to Tarot in Germany, where several late medieval town councils prohibited their use.

Some suggest that the origins of tarot cards are much older, and to be found amongst the workings of the mystery schools in Egypt.

We don't really know where and when or even why Tarot cards originated.

Their closeness to ordinary playing cards is obvious: there are the court cards and the four suits. Playing cards also have a Joker. Yet the distinguishing feature of the Tarot is the presence of the Major Arcana cards.

The mystery is such an apt metaphor!

When we enter the world of Tarot, we enter a world different to our normal experiences.

How many of us encounter Kings and Queens in our daily lives, or Hermits and Magicians and Empresses?

With the Tarot, we meet the exotic, the historical, the fanciful and surreal; we can move within different terrain, different landscapes of time, different experiences of the imagination and the mind.

We can buy Tarot decks heavily imbued with the symbolic or those more starkly succinct.

We can buy the whimsical or those that are more obviously historical in theme.

We can go for ones that are essentially cultural and nationally based, the Mayan, for instance, or the Arthurian. Here we may don the robes of the Hermit and sit quietly amidst the seclusion of our grove. Or we may dance the dance of a past life, and move amidst the jungles and geomantic layers of the Mayan.

Listen to whatever calls you, for instance, when you visit a shop that sells many Tarot sets and where you can look through folders showing samples of each deck. Or go to great sites such <http://www.aeclectic.net/tarot/>. Get something of the flavour and colour and artwork of tarot card sets.

Let them speak to you. Check to which ones you are drawn, which ones you avoid and don't like, others which have little impact on you one way or other.

## EXERCISE 1

*Meditation:*

*Make sure you have some time and space for this exercise. For some of us, just doing that, creating the space and time, may be a breakthrough in how we organise and understand ourselves in our lives.*

*Choose a time and place which most works for you.*

*Ok.*

*Take a few deep breaths, steadying, calming yourself. Feel the ground beneath you, supporting you in a rich circle of comfort and calm. If you are not outside, imagine the earth beneath you, firm, supportive.*

*You feel at ease with yourself and your surroundings.*

*Feel/see/sense a shaft of light coming into you from above slightly slanted. This light is clear yet you notice it is also tinged with the colours of the rainbow at its edges.*

*Allow this light to fill your mind.*

*Allow it to fill your gaze, to be your gaze.*

*Follow the gaze of this light, a path of rainbow light.*

*It takes you to a land.*

*Here you find a forest and in that forest a path leading to a small clearing. Trees form a circle in this quiet space. Listen to what is around you, sense and smell the air, the aliveness. You may hear*

*birds, or you may feel the slight tremor of the breeze rusting the leaves in the trees.*

*Dwell awhile here.*

*Soon you notice another small path.*

*By the path, you see an object. It may be a stone, a leaf, or a coin. Or it may be something else, completely different. Whatever it is, pick it up and follow this small path.*

*As you step forward, light flowers up.*

*You find yourself at a hut. It may be of wood or stone or whatever else makes its appearance to you.*

*It is oddly familiar, yet somehow strange.*

*There is a strong light around the door.*

*You enter the hut.*

*Here, as you adjust your eyesight, you see an Old Man/Woman quietly sitting.<sup>1</sup>*

*The Old One beckons you to sit.*

*In one hand, the Old One holds a golden orb. Its light shines into you, and you feel at peace.*

*The orb glows gently around and inside you, filling you with wonder and goodwill.*

*Listen to what the Old One has to say to you. Feel the energy of light within.*

*When you awake from that, you find the Old One has gone, but that a gift has been left for you.*

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Old One' has been used here deliberately, and advisedly, not only to avoid sexist preconceptions.

*This gift is for you, for your study of the Tarot.*

*Take note of it, bring it back with you, or you may feel you can leave it. Do what feels right for you.*

*Be comfortable with yourself.*

*When you feel ready, move back out of the hut and along the path to the clearing. You will find things have changed. There are open spaces, open fields, golden in the sun.*

*Give thanks for the journeying, and bring yourself back to the here and now, the circle in which you sit.*

*Get a piece of paper and write down your experiences. Draw the symbol/gift you were given.*

*Give thanks for the day.*

Should you wish to follow up some of the imagery in this meditation, you might like to look at Pieter Middelkoop's, *The Wise Old Man: Healing through Inner Images* (Shambhala, 1989).

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The dialectic within the Tarot is the play between light and dark, seen and unseen, usual and unique. It is a play between all those paradoxes which spark the creative fire of life. And light.

In the past, people rubbed two sticks together to make a fire. Without friction, there was no fire, no light.

Often in working with the Tarot you will experience that clash between logic and intuition, between carefully constructed meaning and flash of insight.

Go through the cards you have, getting a feel of them, like the flashing lights of a stroboscope.

Be aware of colour, or words, your own feelings.

Some cards might inspire; others annoy you, even make you angry. Just be easy with yourself, just note.

Now go through the whole set again and separate the Major Arcana from the Minor Arcana.

The Major Arcana cards are usually numbered using Roman numerals. They are most often titled as the following:

The Fool

Magician  
High Priestess  
Empress  
Emperor  
High Priest/Hierophant/Pope,  
Lover(s)  
Chariot

Strength  
Hermit  
Wheel of Fortune  
Justice  
The Hanged Man  
Death  
Temperance

Devil  
Tower  
Star  
Moon  
Sun  
Judgement  
The World

Shuffle the major Arcana cards.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Not all decks have the sequence outlined above. RJ Stewart's *Merlin Tarot* is one that does not.

As you do so, ask that there will be one card in particular which will help you most on your journey through the world of Tarot.

When you feel ready, choose a card.

Remember that the cards must be face down so that you do not see which card you are picking!

Which card emerged for you?

Dwell awhile with this one.

Write down everything that comes to mind with this card. Just brainstorm. Don't judge what you get. Allow.

When you have finished, write and share what you have. If you like, send me a copy.<sup>3</sup>

## 1V

Working with the Tarot is very much about engagement. Challenge. Often there is self-doubt.

Start using a journal to jot down what you get from the cards, what insights come to you, where you feel blocked, where you feel most at ease.

Start noting the meanings of the cards listed in the books that come with the set.

Be prepared to have quite different views from whatever you read.

## V

Three very useful books:

Trish MacGregor et al, *Power Tarot* (Simon & Schuster), 1998. This book provides an excellent coverage.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.infinitytarot.com>

Barbara Sher, *I could do anything if only I knew what it was* (Dell), 1994. Sher's works are always encouraging and help shift some of those mental and emotional blocks to study and life in general!

Richard Prosapio, *Intuitive Tarot: Discovering the power of your Intuition* (US Games System Inc, 1996 Ed.). This book can be used for journal entries too should you wish.

In many ways, Tarot cards are like a family, a community. They provide us with a passing parade of characters, a theatre of roles, moments, events, experiences.

In the next part, we will be reviewing what type of community and theatre emerges.

## Two Structure

If we want to become skilled at reading tarot cards, we need to come to terms with its structure.

The analogy of the human body comes to mind here.

Without a skeletal structure, the body has no form, cannot stand up, cannot move about, and cannot be what it is meant to be.

Like the body, with its outer layers of skin, its obvious protuberances and features, the Tarot has its outer form – pictures, images, names, characters, and numbers.

But again, like the body with its unseen internal organs, mazes of arteries, veins, digestive tracts, that vast, busy mystery of life contained within fleshy form, so too the Tarot connects us with the unseen mysteries of ours and others' lives.

It does this in two major ways – through symbols, and, by its very nature, its structure.

Tarot decks consist of 78 cards (though recently there are decks that have more).

Of these, the first twenty-two, as we have already encountered, are known as the Major Arcana; the remaining fifty-eight, as the Minor Arcana.

The Minor Arcana consist of four different suits.

These are known variously as the wands (or batons, rods, staves and spears); the swords; the cups (or chalices, cauldron or grail); and finally, the pentacles (or coins; discs).<sup>4</sup>

The four suits in turn represent the four elements of fire, air, water and earth respectively.

Thus at its very basics, the Tarot is about the building blocks of life, those fundamentals which make us human – body, shape, form, emotion, mind, relationship, activity, work.

In that sense, the Minor Arcana tell us about the story – and structure - of our lives, how we go about things, how we move through our days and years.

Lots of cups in a spread will reveal emotional responses; those with many pentacles, money matters; with swords, conflict, ideas, tact, decision; and with wands, career and creativity.

## 11

Just as a preliminary exercise here, if you have your deck of cards handy, shuffle through the Minor Arcana.

Separate them into their respective suits.

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<sup>4</sup> Similar to the suits of clubs, spades, hearts and diamonds of ordinary playing cards.

Think of your star sign. Swords will relate to the air signs, cups to water signs, pentacles to earth signs, and rods or wands to fire signs.

Select the Ace of your suit of cards. Allow yourself some time to connect with the card; allow it to empower you with its sense of purpose and gift.

## 111

If the Minor Arcana tell us about the *base materia* of life, the Major Arcana describe to us the larger events and principles underlying who and what we are.

This larger structure is the larger 'canvass' upon which we see depicted a different set of characters, experiences and features.

The Hermit, the Magician, the Empress and Emperor are not everyday features of most people's lives, at least not formally.

These are highly evocative terms or titles, and they point to something *extraordinary* and yet, equally fundamental, to life.

The Major and Minor Arcana deal with energies of differing magnitude.

Wands represent the element fire, yet they do not have the same intensity – or exposure? - as the Sun card in the Major Arcana.<sup>5</sup>

Number ten cards in each of the four suits of swords, wands, pentacles and cups indicate something of fruition and completion. They often hint at the beginnings of the new in the events they are portraying. Yet they are not as vital, as transformative, or even as visually dramatic as the Death card.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Number nineteen in the major Arcana.

<sup>6</sup> Number thirteen, and with quite a contrasting set of images, with many current decks quite markedly different in their interpretation and portrayal compared to earlier decks.

When we see lots of Major Arcana in a spread, we know that larger forces are at play in a person's life, ones over which far less control can be exerted.

Something more profound is at work.

The structure of this larger 'canvass' often reveals material about the individual's journey through life.

Common themes here are those rites of passage through which each of us must pass – the trials and experiences of birth, death, renewal, of crisis and confrontation, of being and doing.

The Tarot constantly reminds us that nothing stays the same, that all life is motion, is in a state of becoming, transforming, is itself and yet (of) other at the same time.

## 1V

The other feature of the structure of the Tarot that is important in determining meaning is *placement*.

Where a card appears in a layout will alter its general meaning.

In one sense we are confronted in the Tarot with a shifting mosaic of meanings, just as the patterns of sand on the beach change with the tidal motions of the sea.

Generally speaking, different placements help us distinguish between (for instance) conscious and unconscious factors influencing people's behavior.<sup>7</sup>

We will look at devising different layouts as we go along.

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<sup>7</sup> For example: a person consciously decides to wear black because black is fashionable for evening attire in a particular social situation. Another person absent-mindedly puts on black because she/he is very unhappy with a situation. The meaning of the colour is different according to the context in which it is worn and chosen. So too with the tarot cards and their meanings.

## V

Two useful, succinct books which reveal more of the Tarot as a story are:

Elisabeth Haich, *The Wisdom of the Tarot*. This account looks only at the Major Arcana cards.

Micheline Stuart, *The Tarot Path to Self-Development*.

## V1

Earlier we talked of the Tarot and rites of passage.

In a way, every moment of our lives is a rite of passage in one sense or the other. But if we saw each moment as such we would most likely go mad.

We would not be seeing the wood for the trees but instead be overwhelmed.<sup>8</sup>

Contrasts bring light. And so it is the same with the Minor and Major Arcana.

The Minor Arcana reminds us of the daily tasks that still need doing, no matter. The Major Arcana remind us that are part of a larger pattern, a larger cosmos, and yet uniquely us too.

## V11

Exercise:

Select the first seven cards of the Major Arcana – the Magician, High Priestess, Empress, Emperor, High Priest (or Pope), the Chariot and the Strength card.

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<sup>8</sup> Or even, underwhelmed.

Use each card to write a paragraph about your life.

These do not have to form a sequence. For instance, you can simply pick the Emperor card, meditate with it for a bit, and ask how it might relate to a part of your life. Write down one paragraph about what you discover. Only one.

Then think of (for example) the High Priestess and write another paragraph. You then end up with seven paragraphs about your life.

When you have done that, close your eyes, shuffle the seven cards, and select one that will act as a summary of what you have written.

In other words, you are asking the cards via your Higher Self to select a card, which will provide unity to your understanding.

Write down what you get.

Again, be aware of what draws you most – is it colour, structure, sense of the scenes portrayed by the card?

Which card of the seven did you like least?

Remember to shuffle the cards again when you have finished, cover them with a cloth or put them back into their package, and put them away.

They need rest too.

## V111

We have spent some time with the first seven cards of the Major Arcana. Those cards provide the basis of any study into the Tarot.

They reflect very much the influences of the first stages of our lives, the movement towards our own individual consciousness and independence. We will see that more clearly as we proceed.

## Appendix: The Major Arcana

**The Fool:** New beginnings; creativity; folly; self-expression; courage; expansiveness.

**The Magician:** learning applied; communication; skill; matter; creativity; the male principle.

**The High Priestess:** fertility; intuition; polarity; entrance; choice; sacrifice.

**The Empress:** fertility; creativity; complacency; the Mother; harvest.

**The Emperor:** foundation; structure; organisation; authority; the Father.

**The High Priest/Pope:** institutions; authority; spiritual law; doctrine; teaching(s).

**The Lover(s):** - love; romance; relationship; responsibility; choice.

**The Chariot:** success; victory; fortitude; action; will; haste.

**Strength:** strength; courage; discipline; compassion; manner; control; service.

**The Hermit:** learning; solitude; seeking; inner guidance; understanding.

**Wheel of Fortune:** change; movement; cycles; seasons; travel; fate.

**Justice:** justice; integrity; balance; value; legal matters; viewpoint.

**The Hanged Man:** voluntary sacrifice; duty; obligation; boundary; re-evaluation.

**Death:** change; transformation; renewal; transition; endings & beginnings.

**Temperance:** patience; re-working; guidance; bearing; surrender.

**The Devil:** material form; bondage; habit; the shadow; breakthrough.

**The Tower:** transformation (often radical); crisis; opportunity; illumination; changes in lifestyle.

**The Star:** hope; time; inspiration; wish; vagueness.

**The Moon:** intuition; reflection; deception; illusion; artistic creativity.

**The Sun:** enthusiasm; the inner child; renewal; action; joy.

**Judgment:** renewal; reserve; judgment; understanding; form; tradition; family.

**The World:** change; travel; success; completion; wholeness; new cycle.

Reversed meanings generally mean precisely that. Thus the Sun, when reversed, can mean immaturity, escapism, the Peter Pan syndrome.

Check the meanings of the cards with those given in your card set/book. Then evaluate your own responses.

Be open to the process- and your own intuition.