



The Healing Art of Tarot

by Toni Gilbert

Tears burst forth and flowed down her cheeks when she saw the image of the sorrowful man on the face of the Tarot card. “I have felt like that for so long”, she said. Jan had shuffled the deck of seventy-eight cards and the sorrowful image was the first of a four-card spread. She had come seeking answers beyond the realm of traditional medicine because it held no further treatment options for her condition. She had recently been diagnosed with an irreversible degenerative condition of the eye and felt her only hope was to arrest the progression and prevent blindness.

There I was, a health care professional, sitting barefoot on the floor! I had placed Tarot cards, gypsy style, between the client and myself. We sat on small pillows, with bright purple and yellow sarongs spread out beneath us. I know it sounds funny but somehow, it felt right and very feminine to be counseling in this way. It made me feel more like a barefoot healer getting down to the “real” part of the issues rather than a nurse quietly listening from a chair.

Not only was I acting outside my normal professional role, but I was also a first time participant at one of Breitenbush’s annual retreats. [Breitenbush](#) is an intentional community situated high in the Oregon mountains. It has a conference and retreat center that plays host to teachers like Ram Dass, Andrew Weil and Hank Wesselman. These events not only provide revenue to keep the community alive, but offer people simple hope in a complex world.

For me, this venture into alternative medicine was to be personally and professionally rewarding. I came to the healing solstice, to be with and observe alternative practitioners but, in particular, I wanted to explore the use of Tarot with physically ill clients who were in a spiritual or emotional crisis. At the time, Tarot was not a nursing modality, and I didn’t feel right about experimenting with paying clients.

I’d been exploring the use of Tarot with my family and friends for years. I knew the cards were catalytic, for time after time, I saw their faces light up in “ah ha” responses to the images on the cards. It definitely moved their thinking towards insights about the issue in question.

So far, the results of this very old counseling process seemed quite magical. I knew it was time to push the edge in my explorations and I needed a test group. In coming to Breitenbush I thought I would find a few willing participants who would allow me to explore the use of the cards as a therapeutic tool in wellness counseling. How could they best be used? I offered Tarot sessions free of charge, and in exchange I got to practice on clients who had come in search of alternative healing.

On my first day, the June sun was shining outside a building called the Vista House, where I was receiving clients. The resin on the surrounding trees gave off a wonderful therapeutic aroma as it warmed in the sun. I could literally feel what seemed like an all-encompassing angelic presence in the air and the environment caused me to instinctively breathe in deep to receive the higher energy of this peaceful place. I felt satisfied to the core just being there.

The Vista House is a small wooden cottage located to one side of the old lodge and close to the river, and I was seeing clients in the upper Sky Room. The only access was a weathered set of steps on the outside of the building. Inside, on one of the lavender painted walls, was a large gold and purple tapestry with row-upon-row of powerful elephants saluting each other. In the corner was a massage table, with two low dressers that held linens and other supplies.

Jan had signed up for a Tarot reading. She knew that I was certified in a guided imagery technique, and she was open to the use of the cards, but she also wanted to explore the possibilities of Interactive Guided Imagery (IGI) in regard to her eye condition.

Jan was clearly in an emotional crisis. She told me about her medical diagnosis of a degenerative condition of the eye. When the cards (Osho Zen Tarot deck) were laid out on the floor, she identified with the sorrowful man because it reflected her sadness and hopelessness about her condition. The next card portrayed a scenic painting of a pleasant looking woman walking in nature, holding a basket of flowers. The title of the card was "Ordinariness", which reminded her of her career, for she described herself as a rather bland art teacher. The third card contained a picture of someone in a narrow and dark confined space, all tied up in heavy ropes; a block of smoky clouds obscured the head. The descriptive title was "Suppression". This card, combined with the information of the second card, were strong images, prompting her to discuss how she, a longtime art teacher, did not feel connected with her high school students. She did an adequate job, but she felt deeply unfulfilled as an artist and teacher. The fourth and last card, which usually has to do with a client's hopes or fears, was titled "Beyond Illusion". This abstractly beautiful card showed a serene face in meditation imposed over a yellow butterfly on a background of deep blue sky. It also had a multitude of sparkling light images radiating from the butterfly. To her, the image seemed filled with positive energy. On the forehead of the face and between the wings of the butterfly there rested a feminine oval shape that gradually rippled down to a small, soft circle between the eyebrows. She saw this as an image of creativity being born from her mind much like a butterfly from a caterpillar. I pointed out that the area she identified was in the sixth chakra.

The chakra system is a traditional energy model that has been used throughout Asia for centuries. The sixth chakra is one of the seven core energy centers that form the coordinating network of our complicated mind-body system. All our actions and understandings are thought to arise from these multiple points of energy within ourselves. Full of information, they form connecting links between mind and body, spirit and matter, past and future.

The chakra system provides an excellent framework for assessing not only the mind and body but also the spiritual aspects of the client as well. Jan and I discussed the symbolic implications of the sixth chakra located between the brows, which is associated with intuition and the physiological functioning of the eyes.

As a holistic practitioner, I guide clients into the emotional and spiritual aspects of their illness using the Tarot to help open an intimate discussion. My dialogue with Jan sparked a profound emotional disclosure about her feelings. She not only talked about her medical condition, but her life's work as well. Her body, from her shoulders to her waist, rounded into a C-shape as she cried softly and told me of her despair over her doctor's prognosis. I stayed calm and talked to

her in a soothing and supportive way, holding a space for her to express intense feelings. We explored her emotions as we talked through the issues the Tarot reading brought up. The last card, with the butterfly image, and the resulting discussion about intuition, gave her hope. I sensed a certain peacefulness come over her.

After several minutes of careful listening, my observations and intuition told me she was once again in control. She was sitting straight and strong and I could tell by her calm expression and good eye contact that she was feeling emotional relief. Her solid ego strength was evident in her willingness and courage to explore other dimensions of herself in an attempt to find healing.

At the time, my experience with Interactive Guided Imagery or IGI spanned over a decade. As a therapeutic tool, it taps into the deeper layers of the psyche bringing forth unconscious information. It does this by directing the client through a progressive relaxation to a meditative place in which he or she can be receptive to deeper insights and images. In such a state, the counselor can ask appropriate questions to facilitate the client's imaginings. IGI can make use of all of the senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, touching, and intuition.

In my work, I was beginning to see similarities between the effects of IGI and the effects of Tarot. They both produced results by bridging unconscious information from the storehouse of the client's own experience to the conscious ego. I explained to Jan how IGI could inspire insights that could empower her and I assured her that she would be in complete control. If at any time she felt uncomfortable she needed only to open her eyes. Feeling assured, she lay out on the floor and closed her eyes.

I used a meditation technique to help her reach a relaxed state. I slowly led her to focus her attention upon her muscles, relaxing them one at a time, from the top of her head down to her feet. I could see her body go lax as she followed my suggestions. When she was ready, I told her to go to a special place in her imagination where she could dialogue with an inner healer. She found herself in a peaceful forest where she explored her surroundings and eventually found her inner healer.

Inner healers come in many forms. They can be people, places, animals or inanimate objects. As it turned out, Jan's inner healer was a pond of cool clear water. With her eyes still closed, she identified the pond as a symbolic representation of her emotions and of spiritual healing. I asked her to communicate with the pond. Since ponds don't talk, she communed telepathically. The pond told her to become more aware of her intuition, to live and feel her art instead of painting and drawing only from the intellect. Through this inner healer Jan gained both insight and a plan to help her become more intuitive, creative, and spontaneous with her students.

After the guided imagery session, we discussed her insights and mapped out a detailed plan. Instead of trying to tightly control her students' drawings, she decided to encourage them to play with symbols and abstract forms. She also explored ways to introduce more spontaneity in her own artwork. She felt a fondness for the pond, and she wanted to reproduce it by placing a bowl of water on her home altar. As a daily ritual, she planned to dab water from the bowl onto her eyes and the sixth chakra as a reminder of her desire to bring true artistic living into her life. For Jan, it was both a surprise and a great relief to come up with an easy plan of action.

After the imagery session, I talked to Jan about how the eye condition might be linked to her neglect of her intuitive nature. I felt that the life force of her sixth chakra may have slowed or become blocked contributing to weakened tissues and the resulting eye degeneration. She agreed and was intent on changing her ways of being in the world. The session ended and we stood up to say our good-byes in front of the saluting elephant tapestry, a last grateful embrace coming straight from our hearts.

The teaching worked both ways. She gained an awareness of her intuitive self and hope for healing and I took one more step towards the use of Tarot in wellness counseling.

As a certified holistic nurse with a master's degree in transpersonal studies, I approach wellness counseling using healing arts techniques to help clients gain insights about their physical ailments. As in the session described above, I bring Tarot in as a tool for my initial assessment. With the cards, I gather information from a client's reactions to the images, seeing them as a reflection of the client's mental and emotional states, including their hopes and fears. These may come true in the course of the client's life, but I see them as only possibilities at the time of the reading. Time and time again I've observed a mysterious synchronicity as the cards fall in place accurately depicting the client's issue as they question and search for an answer.

Although Tarot cannot be fully explained in a scientific and materialistic manner, I approach this time-honored system with deep respect and have learned to trust the mystery of the cards.

Toni Gilbert is a certified holistic nurse with an education in psychology and a master's degree in transpersonal studies. This article is the first chapter in her book *Messages from the Archetypes: Using Tarot, dreams and guided imagery to heal emotional and physical wounds*. Toni can be reached by e-mail at toni@tonigilbert.com.

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