

The Lifetime Spread
A Tarot Reading for UUCS
By
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I want to begin by showing you an image. This is a scene from the very latest *Action Comics* issue (#987), released just four days ago, showing Superman defending a group of immigrants from a racist gunman who blames them because he lost his job. “They stole from me!” he exclaims, “Ruined me!” After Superman disarms the man he tells him, “The only person responsible for the blackness smothering your soul—is you.” He then instructs the arresting officers to “make sure these people are safe and cared for.”



Take a moment, if you will, to feel how this image impacts you emotionally. Don't bother to think much about it, just feel it, feel its impact... This simple drawing stirs something within us, not because of its intrinsic qualities, but because of all the meaning we project into it, because of all that is happening in our lives and our world outside the image.

After the horrific school shooting in our own community on Thursday, only a day before this not so comical comic book was released, the image of a powerful hero swooping in to protect innocent people from violence and madness is particularly moving. It's more obvious meaning, of course, has to do with the real-world situation in our country, in which racism and white supremacy has emerged from the shadows, spewing hate against nonwhites, especially black and brown nonwhites. In this issue's storyline, in fact, the villain is some unexplained force that's causing ordinary people to do terrible things—corporations firing lifelong employees to save a buck, rebel guerrillas attacking an orphanage and kidnapping its children, poachers killing rhinos for their horns, ship captains drinking on duty, prison riots, workplace shootings, war, racial disputes, terrorist attacks—“widespread violence everywhere,” the comic book says, “...more than anyone can handle! Even... Superman!”

I'm not a comic book collector, but I was compelled to buy a copy of this historic issue after learning of the controversy it's provoked. A Fox News columnist has called it a, “propaganda tool for the defending of illegal aliens,”¹ Its author, Todd Starnes, goes on to say, “Remember

¹ <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/9/15/16307794/superman-undocumented-workers-white-supremacist-action-comics>

when Superman stood for truth, justice and the American way? Then again, Clark Kent is technically an illegal alien—a native of Krypton.”

I bring this up today, only to show the power of imagery to move us, provoke us, and cause us to assign subjective meaning to what, objectively, are little more than ink blots. This is the basis upon which I have long used imagery to help contemplate the circumstances of my own life, to resolve inner conflicts, and to determine what direction I should take. For there is something about contemplating an image that can lead us to insights we might otherwise miss. Whether pondering the meaning of our own dreams, or drawing upon images from ancient oracles, like runestones, constellations, the I Ching, or Tarot cards, most of us seem to have the uncanny ability to discover in them just what we need at the time.

This habit of finding meaning in almost everything and anything, the Virgin Mary in the clouds, Jesus in a slice of toast, is why Harvard psychologist, Robert Kegan defines humans as “meaning makers,” explaining that, “what a human organism organizes is meaning.” It also seems to have something to do with our mental wellness. We must all cope with suffering, uncertainty, and evil in the world, and we often do so by projecting order in such chaos, that is, by finding meaning in the random ink-blotches of life. Doing so was the entire point of Nazi death camp survivor, Victor Frankl’s logotherapy, as outlined in his classic book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, in which he argues we can survive anything if we can find meaning in it. As sociologist Peter Berger says, we all have an “innate need for meaning,”² and that we, “cannot accept meaninglessness.”³

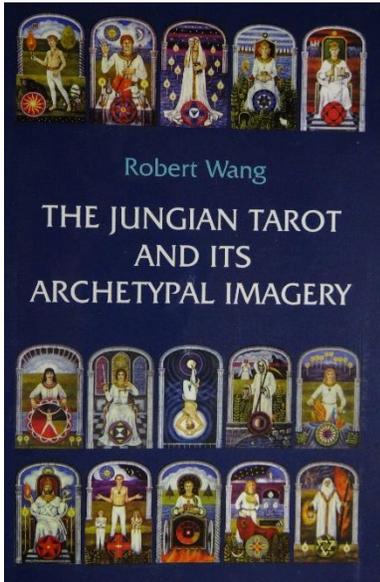
This is why psychologist Carl Jung didn’t view ancient oracles like the I Ching, Zodiac, Runes, or Tarot in a magical way, as fortunetelling devices, but as archetypal imagery that, when reflected upon, can help us unlock inherited wisdom buried within our own unconscious minds. This is how I too have come to understand and use them since I began studying Jungian psychology more than a quarter century ago. So, today, rather than talking about how contemplating images can open us to the centuries old wisdom of humanity’s Collective Unconscious, I’ve drawn a series of Tarot cards with our church in mind. The particular placement of the seven cards I drew is called a “lifetime spread,” with each card’s location signifying something different about we’re we’ve been, where we are, and where we need to go from here.

I’ll say more about that, but, quickly, for those who might not be unfamiliar with Tarot cards, it is believed they were first used in Europe during the 15th century, for playing card games. With Kings, Queens, Princes, and Princesses, along with four suits, discs, swords, cups, and wands, they are the ancestors of today’s standard playing cards. People began using them for divination in the 18th century. When that happened, the deck went from 56 suited cards, to 78 cards, 22 of which are major arcana. The major arcana are independent images, like *The Fool*, *The World*, *The Devil*, *The Tower*, *The Wheel of Fortune*, and so on. Today there are numerous kinds of decks, the most popular of which are the Ryder Waite deck and Aleister

² Scott, Mark S. M., *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil*, American Academy of Religion (AAR) and Oxford University Press, Inc., New York, NY, 2012, (Kindle Version), loc. 392.

³ *Ibid.*, loc. 411.

Crowley's Thoth deck, but I've seen some pretty obscure decks out there too, like the Mermaid deck, the Celtic Fairies Deck, and the Wizard of Oz deck. I even own a deck I found on clearance for a couple of bucks many years ago, depicting Aliens and UFOs called, "Contact Cards." Given my power to make meaning, I've enjoyed contemplating them on occasion, though the deck I've used most often over the years is called, what else, the Jungian Tarot, created by Art Historian and Medievalist, Robert Wang in 1988.



The Jungian Tarot is the one I'm using today and the particular card layout I've chosen, is, again, called a "lifetime spread," which holds places representing the past, present, future, a current life lesson, a most recently completed life lesson, what works, and what works against us. I'll now present my interpretation of the cards I randomly drew last evening with the life of our church in mind. But again, this is only my interpretation, reflecting the meaning I make out of these images. Others might interpret them differently, but, I think you'll agree, the seven cards I took from the top after shuffling and cutting the deck several times, seem almost too perfect to be random selections.

The first card in the spread, representing the recent past, the *Five of Cups*, symbolizes, "Troubles." According to Robert Wang, it represents, "some of the most difficult and painful of human experiences."⁴ I must admit, given what I know about the difficulties this church had a few years ago, including the resignation of your previous settled minister, financial stresses that followed, conflicts among members, uncertainty about the church's future or even if it had a future, and an extended period of time without a settled minister, it didn't take much for me to subscribe meaning to this card. The suit of Cups—cups being containers that are shared and passed around—symbolizes relationships, and community. The water they rest upon represents emotional and unconscious currents, all the stuff dwelling beneath the surface. The flames beneath the cups in this card suggest that in the recent past our church community was in some hot water, that it had reached a boiling point, and all kinds of stuff was bubbling up. There is a positive aspect of the card, however, that troubled waters can lead to resilience and self-determination, which, I would say, is precisely what happened here. Several members stepped up to help fill the administrative gap, and stepped into leadership roles at a difficult time to lead. You cut expenses to compensate for financial shortfalls and to prepare for the future, fully committed to this church having a future and remaining a progressive leader in the Spokane region. You



⁴ Wang, Robert, *Tarot Psychology*, U.S. Games Systems, Inc., Stamford, CT, 1988, 1992, p. 85.

did it, and you're still here, and so is our church, which has remained a vital force in our community's arc toward justice for the past 130 years. Thank you!



The next card, representing the present, the Six of Pentacles, symbolizes, "Gain of Wealth and Power Through Hard Work." Wang says it, "stands for unswerving self-discipline, for long and hard work which yields impressive results, often against very substantial odds or in opposition to many who say that something cannot be done."⁵ Again, this card seems so spot on, it's not difficult to ascribe meaning to it. Firstly, it's a great card to have follow the previous card symbolizing a troubled past, especially one fraught with financial and institutional uncertainty. Those who were around then did, indeed, work hard, with unswerving discipline, in preparation for a new minister and better times, and, since I've been here, we've continued to work diligently together to get our house in order by scrutinizing our mission statement, our bylaws, our administrative policies, and strategically planning to fulfill our mission of sustaining an enriching and supportive liberal community for ourselves, and creating a more just world for

everyone. The Pentacles are coins that symbolize financial and other worldly matters, which is why they hover against a backdrop of earth. That there are six evenly distributed coins suggests stability and balance in our financial affairs and earthly endeavors. As Wang puts it, the Six of Pentacles reflects persons, driven toward one ambitious goal, and [have] the strength of character never to be moved from the course toward that goal."⁶ Getting our house in order, by paying great attention to our unglamorous finances, policies, and strategic plans, is not the kind of "spiritually" minded matters most like to think about when it comes to church life, but the Pentacles remind us we must pay attention to earthly matters if we are going to make a real and substantial difference in our world, and this is something I'm proud to say we are doing an outstanding job of these days.

The next card in our spread, representing our future, is the Six of Swords, symbolizing, you're not going to believe this, "Justice." Isn't this the perfect image for the future we seek, as expressed in our mission to create community, find meaning, and work for justice? Because there are six swords, it is also a card depicting balance. Only, instead of relating to finances and policies, swords represent ideas and sound judgement, which is why their backdrop is a cloudy sky, the realm above, of dreams and thoughts. So, this, too, is a near perfect card to follow the previous one, because it helps to balance our



⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

⁶ Ibid.

important, though unexciting attention to our business matters, with our bigger purpose, with our ideals and values, and our dreams about making the world a better and more just place for everyone. It's about being clearheaded, thoughtful, and decisive about the direction we're heading together. It's a card suggesting our past journey across the troubled waters, and all we're doing now to keep our house in order, will be worth it because, not magically, but through such resilience and effort, we shall succeed in our work for justice, which, after all, is the point of all we do. If the Six of Pentacles represents the trees, our need to pay attention to the tedious details, the Six of Swords represents the forest, our need to remember why we're here and what we're all about.



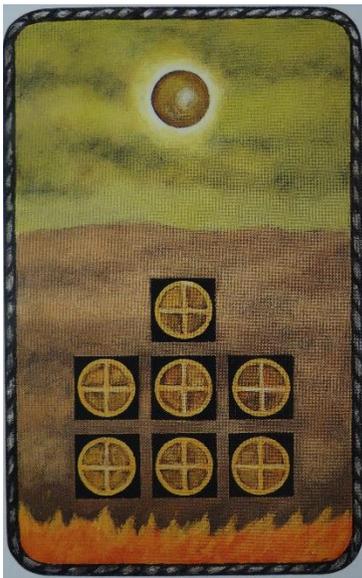
The fourth card, representing our current lesson in the life of our church, is the Two of Wands, symbolizing, "Invention." This image, I must admit, has taken me a little more effort ascribing specific meaning to, not because it's a stretch, but because it seems to represent so much going on in our church right now. The suit of Wands is associated with insight, imagination, creativity, and spirituality, and herein rests upon a bed of fire illuminating a dark sky. In this case, as inventors, there is a sense of being isolated and alone in our endeavors, in our hopes of achieving things that seem inconceivable to others, changes, given the current climate, that may even seem impossible to us. Is it too late to stop global warming? After 500 years, are we ever going to end racism and bring down systems of white supremacy in our nation? Can we create economies that work for the welfare of everyone, not just a handful of the filthy rich? Now, especially after the unimaginable and ill-gotten election of Donald Trump, it's difficult for us not to feel

utterly defeated. Yet this is the current lesson we are in, finding a way to move positively and productively forward, even against difficult odds, when so many are tempted to give up hope. Just as Thomas Edison is said to have tried thousands of filaments before he found one that worked, he didn't let his failures stop him from continuing, even when everyone else thought he'd undertaken a fool's errand. Like Edison, the card of Invention reminds us to keep going, to keep believing in ourselves, to keep pursuing what might seem unimaginable to everyone else. That's our current life lesson, keeping hope and continuing, illuminating these dark times with the light of our ingenuity and inventiveness.

Our next card, the Strength card, the only from the Major Arcana in our spread, symbolizes "The Daughter as Collector of Experience," and is in the place representing our most recently completed life lesson. Look at all this powerful woman has gathered round her. She stands before a



backdrop that has it all—stars, clouds, earth, water, and a stairway into the unconscious, all the settings we have seen in our previous cards. She’s used all her experiences in these realms to become strong, as indicated by her power to tame lions, and that she is at home in wilds beneath her feet. The man watching her in the distant background shows that she has a companion, and that she, Strength from experience, companions those of us who see her now. As our most recently completed life lesson as a church, the strength and stamina we’ve gained by crossing troubled waters, getting our house in order, and envisioning a better and more just future, is precisely what has helped prepare us to have the stamina to succeed in our current life lesson, to carry on in these difficult times, believing we can and will make a real difference. That’s why the card includes a dark cave in the background, because we have the strength to get through it.



The next card, the Seven of Pentacles, representing What Works Against Us, symbolizes, “Gain Through Commerce.” Wang says, “This is a powerful card of almost certain financial reward through business, investments, stocks or baking.”⁷ Being in the suit of Pentacles, it is, again, a card that obviously has to do with important worldly necessities. Being in the place of What Works Against Us shouldn’t lead us to the immediate assumption we’re paying too much attention to finances. As we have seen, other cards in this spread have shown such attention to be a great source of strength and positioning ourselves to fulfill our mission. In recent years, I’m very happy to be able to say that we have learned to maintain a realistic and sustainable annual budget, that our endowment fund is healthy, growing, and will soon become an additional source of financial stability for us, and that we are currently working on a plan to reduce what we owe on the loan that helped us install a 75-

panel solar array on our rooftop. All of this reflects the good financial position we’re in, and the seriousness with which our leadership takes its fiduciary responsibilities. What I think this card reminds us of, rather, is not to let our financial goals overshadow our larger mission, our purpose for being. Again, as Wang puts it, “Generally the pursuit of money and rewards is done at the exclusion of all else.”⁸ Thus, the meaning I ascribe to this card, given its placement in the spread, is that we can’t lose sight of the path we’re on while paying attention to the details, we can’t lose sight of the forest for the trees. Let’s celebrate achieving our financial goals, but remember they are a means to greater ends, not an end within themselves.

⁷ Ibid., p. 117.

⁸ Ibid.

Finally, we have the Three of Cups in the place representing, What Works for Us, symbolizing (here's another name that seems to have uncanny significance) "Secure Environment." Wang describes it as "a space into which one may safely withdraw, that gives nourishment for life's fray outside the walls."⁹ It's a good card to conclude with because it serves to remind us of just how special and important this church is in our lives. It really is our "safe place" in a world that seems upside down, in a region of the nation where it's otherwise difficult to



find supportive friends who share our same values. It's a place that reminds us we're not alone; a place that give us hope we can still



make a difference; a place that empowers us, working side-by-side, to make the world more just. I see this on Sunday mornings when we come together and are free to contemplate life through our liberal perspective. I see it afterward, during our social hour, as we visit with old friends and make new friends. I see in our groups, like our Tuesday night Logic and Emotional Intelligence gathering, in which we not only work on individual skills, but linger afterward to chat with the friends we are bonding with in this unique process. I saw it yesterday, at the hospital, where several of our members came to embrace, to sit with, to weep with, and to offer support for one of our families in crisis. I see it in these dark and uncertain political times when people show up feeling

broken and anxious, but leave whole and hopeful. In short, what works for us is our presence in the community, and being present for each other.

So that's my interpretation of these images, my way of ascribing meaning to them. In a nutshell, Superman isn't going to swoop in to shield us from speeding bullets, but who needs Superman when we have each other.

⁹ Ibid., p. 83.