

THE FOOL'S JOURNEY



This is the Fool, from the Intuitive Tarot deck. If you look at him, really see him, how do you react? Do you find him repellent, fascinating, odd, intriguing, or does he leave you cold?

The image of the Fool has been exercising human minds for aeons – perhaps as long as we've been recognisably human. He is capable of jumping off a cliff without a second thought, a free spirit whom we secretly admire and often revile. He's the insane idiot who throws everything away on a whim, and the Holy Fool who understands nothing – and everything.

I first met him one evening in 1972. I had been doodling idly, watching TV, and when I looked down I found I had drawn this figure – unmistakably the Tarot Fool, but a very different Fool from those I had encountered previously. With him came a sense of some enchanted land I knew and loved well but had somehow forgotten – the world of dreams and reflections, hinting at depths and wonders if I could but get into it. His eyes – quizzical, otherworldly, looked straight into my soul, and challenged me to follow him.

Well, there was no doubt that I would follow – if I could. The '*could*' was problematic, though. Born in Holland, brought up in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), I had wanted to be an artist from the age of five, but exhibited little obvious talent. My secondary education, at a church school run by high-church Anglican nuns, was unhelpful, especially when I was forced to take science instead of art, in one of those nonsensical choices the education system foists on us. Because of this my dream of taking a fine art degree at the University of Cape Town disintegrated, and I ended up instead at a technical college in Natal, studying for a diploma in commercial art. I felt years behind the other students in every way, spending most of my first year trying to catch up with life... and failing miserably, after my first love affair ended in feelings of terror and disintegration. When I decided to transfer to fine art my father refused to support me (he thought being a fine artist was tantamount to starvation in a garret). I left the college, spent a couple of desperately painful years in Rhodesia and finally, as a sort of rite of passage, travelled to Britain in 1971. Here I found an environment I relished. London in the early 1970s was stimulating, full of contrasts and off-beat humour; Rhodesia was by this time a war zone. I stayed in London, married in 1972, and have never returned to Zimbabwe.

It was obvious, however, that my father was right: art college had left me with even less confidence in my creative abilities than before, and no way could I attempt to make a living as an artist in London. I found myself the first of many 9-5 office jobs and tried tentatively to paint at night.

Thus the Fool's appearance was a challenge I wasn't sure I could meet. But the sense of homecoming was so strong that I knew I had to try. When the Magician also appeared

without effort – golden, sensuous, flirting with the elements, I was amazed, enraptured, and completely hooked.



My love affair with the Tarot had taken a while to develop. When I first became interested in the cards – in 1972 – I found the concept interesting, but the available packs seemed crude or boring, or both. Later I discovered the occult bookshops in London and the decks I had missed first time round: Crowley's Thoth pack, which I found particularly satisfying visually and, of course, the Rider-Waite Tarot, with its pictorial Minor Arcana – slightly debatable in purists' eyes, but a necessity as far as I was concerned. These packs, and Alfred Douglas's *The Tarot* (I have three copies of this book, in various stages of decrepitude), became my main references. Before designing a card I researched meanings and followed up references, and through this I discovered Jungian psychology, mythology, medieval and ancient history, alchemy and Taoism, the I Ching and the

qabalah. The Tarot not only educated me, but also placed me on my spiritual path; after leaving school I had rejected organised religion with fervour, but now I realised that for me a direct, gnostic connection to the numinous was essential. The spiritual journey depicted in the Majors showed me the way.

I also realised the Tarot was a mirror. I found some cards very hard to design, and they were painted and repainted – for example the Empress, the Devil, and the World. It was a while before I understood the reason: the inability to work through my own primary issues. That these were many and various became obvious when, in 1976, I began a course of psychotherapy that would continue for eight years.

In the meantime, I had completed the Major Arcana and stopped there, pleased with my endeavours. I knew I'd done well, and anyway I'd never contemplated painting the Minors – after all, there were *fifty-six* of them! But after a couple of years the thought became less daunting, and I began again. Once I got into the swing of them, the Minors flowed through with ease. I'd sketch out a few tiny thumbnails until I produced one I liked. I'd then paint it full size (5" x 3.5"). At the beginning I had no idea about colour combinations and used a colour chart to check what worked – so for those who figure they can't work with colour, take heart – like everything, it can be learnt!

Slowly the pile of finished cards grew and finally, in 1981, the pack was complete, and very special. People started asking for copies, so I enquired about publishing.

At the time Tarot was a highly specialised niche market, the main publisher being US Games in New York. Taking my courage in both hands I visited Stuart Kaplan there and found him interested, but a bit daunting. He wanted the originals and the copyright, and fig-leaves put on the nude men. I decided to wait until the time was right. It took twenty-two more years.

The Mind-Body-Spirit movement took off in the '80s, and tarot decks sprang up everywhere. Occasionally I tested the waters by sending samples of the cards to a publisher, but the lack of a stated theme was a problem. It seemed you needed to produce a Babies' Tarot or a Witches Brew Tarot. To say it was a general tarot just didn't cut it. I carried on waiting. In the meantime I progressed on to meditation, self-development workshops, and the next two stages of my artistic journey (large figurative, visionary oils like *Shiva*, below, and at last, my childhood dream, a university degree in Fine Art).



And in 2002, the rest of the dream happened. I had reached the point of desperation in my 9-5 graphic design job and contemplated asking for redundancy; but the time *still* didn't seem right, so I carried on waiting. Then, in August, I discovered my tribe, who turned out to be a group of 21st Century druids. This was a surprise: throughout my life I had considered myself almost a professional outsider, and didn't take kindly to ritual or robes. But these people were all outsiders. Every one of them was intelligent, passionate, searching for answers. They wore their robes with intensity and laughter. I'd found another home.

At last, the time was right to leave the 9-5 world and set up as – well, I didn't really know what, only that it had to include art. By November 2002 I had taken redundancy and was at the druid Samhuin camp, where I met Philip Carr-

Gomm, Chief of OBOD (Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids). I discovered that he was producing a set of Druid tarot, and bravely showed him my cards. To my delight, he thought they were outstanding, and provided me with names of publishers and agents, and a draft proposal to use as a template.

As I began writing my proposal, the pack finally got its theme: the title 'Intuitive Tarot' was suggested by yet another helpful professional. This was the last link in the chain: the accompanying book could emphasize the reader's own intuition, offering possibilities rather than hard and fast interpretations. Surprisingly few writers have mined this aspect of the Tarot, even though it is primarily an intuitive tool. Perhaps the theme was waiting for me!

In January 2003 I sent my proposal off to the packaging company Philip had recommended and received an answer the following day (I was too inexperienced to realise how unusual this was). We had a dream meeting – they loved the cards and liked me; and the feeling was mutual. I had managed to send my proposal in at exactly the right time; a month later the

London Book Fair took place, and publishing rights to the cards were bought by St Martin's Press, New York.

Then it was just a matter of writing the book, which was a joy. Like the artwork, writing about the cards linked me into that Otherworld which is my true home. It was a wonderful year – mini-miracles happened constantly, and everything seemed to flow and connect. I began running workshops, as well as reading the Tarot professionally – up to that point I had mostly read for friends, as I can't do the 'you will meet a tall dark handsome stranger' style of readings and thought this was what most people wanted. But now it appears that my approach – which emphasizes various possibilities, energies, and self-awareness rather than prediction – is perhaps more appropriate today, in the age of quantum physics and Chaos. It helps that the cards have always been phenomenally accurate, although it took me a while to accept this – I was, and still am, quite sceptical and like my proof incontrovertible. But the proof is there, and the more I let them speak the better they get.

So now, as I look back over this journey that began with a doodle, I see the cards about to launch themselves into the world. The publisher and I both felt that the pack has had its own agenda and momentum – almost as if our role was merely to birth it. Now it will develop its own separate life; and will, no doubt, grow and change in ways I can't even imagine. In fact, this process has already begun, and it's a constant inspiration; in workshops and readings, I hear everyone's interpretation of the images, and there are always new and fascinating angles to consider. This reciprocity – experiencing how 'my' creation has in turn allowed me to grow, and continues to nurture (and challenge) me – is an incredible privilege. Through the cards, I have found my soul work, discovered my spiritual path, and (the biggest challenge of all) been able to leave the 9-5 world and carry out the work I was put on earth to do – art, the Tarot, and whatever else comes in the future.

When the Fool appeared on my page so many years ago, I could never have imagined the richness of spirit he brought into my life. Today as I see him standing there, that strange smile tugging at his mouth, I smile back and follow him - now, and always.

Cilla Conway
September 04