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tarot in the time of the apocalypse

essays on reading tarot in
truly awful times

by marz corbeau

Closing Thoughts

We're going through some intense times and I have no doubt we're headed for some even more difficult ones ahead. The road can feel very dark at times. But we have amazing connections with each other and powerful tools to carry us through. I hope this zine finds you in a safe place. I hope it finds you warm, clothed, fed, with a good roof over your head. But if it doesn't, I hope it'll offer something you can do, some agency you can reclaim for yourself. We need each other, no doubt about that. But we are also powerful healers in our own right. Whether it's distraction or depth, support or spiritual journey, whatever reason you've turned to tarot in your difficulties I hope you find exactly what you need.

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Content Warnings

This zine talks explicitly about upsetting medical emergencies, street violence, and trauma generally.

Author's Note

I'm not a therapist. This zine is just me sharing some of the things I've learned in the last decade of getting through tough times with tarot. I hope they help you, but they're definitely not medical or therapeutic advice of any kind. — Marz

The Role of Tarot in the Apocalypse

I started thinking about writing this essay the night my sister called me from the back of an ambulance. She'd gotten some weird texts from my mom and came in and found her on our kitchen floor. The EMTs suspected a brain aneurysm, a bad one. I talked to her, trying to calm her nerves and get her prepared for what was ahead of her. I grabbed a bag, knowing I wouldn't be home again for quite some time. The first thing I threw in it? My tarot deck.

I started thinking about writing this essay when there was an uptick in shootings in my community. My neighborhood isn't safe generally but I started hearing more gunshots last winter. They started getting closer and closer to the townhouse my partner and I rent. One day as I stood at my bedroom window just looking out right behind my house, I watched in horror as a group forced a teenager onto the ground and held him at gunpoint as they took everything he had on them. I've since seen at least two other muggings like this right behind my house. There've been more shootings. Almost every time, after I've reminded myself to breathe and tried to see if the people involved were okay, I grabbed my tarot deck.

I started writing this essay when COVID-19 hit closer to home. At no point did I underestimate what it could do. I watched the mix of reactions from hysteria to denial as we quietly grabbed extra food when we could. Then the first case in our state was found in my town, in my partner's workplace. I watched as event after event folded, as all our regular hangouts closed their doors, and friends canceled. I watched as stories all over the world poured in about over crowded hospitals, forced quarantine, and supply shortages. And then I watched as people dealt with their anxiety by downplaying the crisis and attacking people for raising the alarm. And again I pulled out my cards, all the while thinking about my underlying medical conditions; wondering how risky it was to leave the house,

A Temperance Ritual

Find the Temperance card in your deck. Display it in front of where you sit.

Find a card to represent all your worst fears about the situation.

Find a card to represent all your hope about the situation.

Take one in each hand and sit quietly with them for a moment.

Feel how they both exist in your body. Observe and name the sensations they bring up.

Shuffle them both back into the deck and draw a new card now. This is the wisdom that their union brings, this is what all those sensations you named are trying to let you know. Sit with their lesson. Live inside their message for a moment.

Thank the card for it's wisdom and put it back in it's deck.

Sit with Temperance a while longer. You can see yourself as Temperance, until you know yourself to be the union of these two realities, of your hopes and your fears. Sit until you're ready to carry them both with you, balanced, whole until themselves and to you.

If you want to make a pretty graphic for your spread or challenge, I've seen plenty of people doing them in Microsoft Paint. Canva.com has also been very good to me with making tarot graphics.

Teach What You Know

Another way to pass the time is to teach what you already know about tarot. Even if you don't think you know that much, try teaching someone if they're around or writing an introduction. Have you been doing tarot for year and years? Write about what you wished you knew in the beginning, what would have saved you time and heartache. Not only does this solidify what you know for yourself but it can help other people if you decide to put it out into the world. Feeling useful is so validating in a crisis and don't underestimate how useful teaching tarot can be.

Conclusion

Tarot can really help pass the time in an emergency situation. It's portable, multifunctional, engaging. With a deck and a notebook or smartphone you can keep yourself busy for hours. We all need a break from thinking about the situations we're facing from time to time. It helps us recover from shutdown or fight/flight. We need that to catch our breath and tarot can help us.

whether I'd talk to some of these people I'd considered friends again, whether this was just the first of many global emergencies to come. And I knew it was time to write.

I've experienced an apocalypse at every level of my life in the last year and every time I turned to tarot in some form to process, recover, and regroup. It's not a cure all by any means. But having worked with cards for almost 12 years now, I think tarot is under utilized resource. I think that there's both more promise for and more concerns around tarot in emergency situations than many people realize. Even for people who never practice predictive reading, there's potential for great help or hurt. My hope in writing this zine is to help you navigate those issues the best you're able for the situation you find yourself in.

Because there are concerns around reading in times like these. For those with obsessive tendencies, tarot may wind up being an outlet for a compulsion to check constantly, fueling that cycle. For those who practice predictive tarot, especially those relatively new to the practice, they might use the cards to make decisions that they shouldn't given their proximity to a given situation. I worry too about people who might see doom or a silver lining where the cards are only being practical and not have the skills to process those feelings on their own.

I don't want to put anyone off of reading in a crisis. On the contrary, I want to encourage people to read tarot more during emergency situations. Reading cards is an amazing way to restore agency in situations that feel out of our control. They often bring us reminders of what we can and cannot control which is vital. By choosing to read cards, you show yourself that no matter what you're going through there's something you can do to take care of yourself, something you can do to make a positive impact in your life.

Tarot in the apocalypse should help you feel centered and grounded, give you agency, and calm your nervous system. If it's not doing those things, if it's activating you and making you feel helpless, I would say step away. But if it's in between, I hope this zine will show some ways to bring your practice more of what it needs in times like these.

- To get a yes/no answer to a question: shuffle your deck and pull 4 cards. Swords and Wands count as No. Pentacles and Cups count as Yes. Reversals don't matter and set aside and majors you draw as further guidance. This gives you a spectrum: Yes Absolutely (all 4 cards are Yes), Yes Somewhat (3 cards are Yes), Maybe (2 Yes, 2 No), No Somewhat (3 cards are No), and Absolutely No (4 cards are No).
- Pick two cards. They might represent two people, two places, two options. Shuffle the deck, turn them over, and look for them. The cards in between them give further insight.
- Pick two cards to represent two options and another to represent yourself or the querent. Shuffle the deck, turn them over, and look for them. Where the querent is in relation to the two options give further insight. It is between them? Or outside them entirely?

These are just a few to try out if you haven't already. There's many more floating around out there if you go looking for them. I'm still learning new methods all the time!

Use Tarot Cards to Create Your Own Spreads and Challenges

Don't have access to the internet? Just not finding spreads you dig? You can make your own. One of my favorite ways to do this is to draw 3-5 cards, decide what I feel like the whole spread is talking about, come up with what questions I feel like each card is asking, write it down, and then shuffle and do the spread as an actual reading.

You can also do this to create your own challenge. Pick a theme or pull a card to determine a theme. Pull 1 or 2 cards for each day of a month. Write a prompt based on the card(s). And voila! Your very own monthly challenge.

Sometimes I do this in a paragraph form but I like making the information scannable. It takes a while to do but it's genuinely fun to dig into each card and understand it deeply. It pays to research symbols, astrological significance, and elemental associations if you don't already know them. Any deck I've done this with, it's shaved literal years off of the time it took to be able to use it really well. It's a long term project that takes quite a bit of focus. When I've worked on them during emergencies they've done an excellent job of keeping me occupied because I always found myself wanting to work hard to finish that suit or those numbers, however I was organizing it. It's worth your time and effort.

Collect Spreads and Challenges You Want to Do

I absolutely recommend doing a month long tarot challenge. They feel really great to accomplish. But they're usually designed with someone who doesn't have a lot of time in a given day in mind. But you my friend have a lot of time. So I'm here to say that it's completely valid to complete all of a tarot challenge in a day. They're two totally different experiences but they're still worthwhile.

Practice New Methods

There are a lot of methods of reading you might not be familiar with and now is a good time to perfect them. Here are just a few to try.

- Pick a card to represent what you're reading about - yourself, someone else, the situation - shuffle it into your deck. Turn the deck over and look for your card. The cards on either side of it give more insight into your situation.
- Pick a card to represent what you're reading about. Pull it out of the deck and lay it in front of you. Shuffle your deck. Pull as many cards as you like to get more insight.

When to Predict/When Not to Predict

One of the hardest calls I've had to face in my tarot practice during a crisis is whether to predict. When someone you love is in a hospital bed, when you're facing a daily threat, when the money runs out - it's incredibly difficult to balance the help that knowing can bring with the harm it can bring as well.

For those of us who do deep magical work to improve our divinatory abilities, there comes a point where you see ahead whether you want to or not. In these cases, it's less about whether you look ahead and more about how you process what you see.

For newer readers starting out, you may wonder whether it's worth trying to look ahead at all. I remember being in that situation very well, asking myself, should I pull cards if I know there are some that could come up that might make me regret pulling them in the first place?

I'm speaking more to newer readers here but these aren't bad to consider even if you've been reading a long time.

Purpose

First, consider why you're doing a predictive reading in the first place. What needs is this reading meeting? Are there non-divinatory ways to meet those needs?

A lot of people read cards in crisis situations because they need reassurance that everything is going to be okay. But there are better ways to get reassurance and about more solid things. It's better to reach out to a friend or family member and get reassurance they're there for you and care about you. While tarot can also be a source of reassurance and comfort, predictive reading may not be the best way to do accomplish that.

There are needs where a predictive reading is exactly the sort of thing to fill it. Looking for unknown factors that may make a situation harder or easier to handle and how to cope or capitalize on them is a great use of predictive readings in my experience. I tend to ask "what do I need to know to make this go the best it can?" rather than "what's going to happen?" when I'm reading in a crisis.

Scope

Another consideration is what you'll look ahead at. Will you look just for your portion of the situation? Does this situation involve a handful of people? A community? A country? The world? The larger the scope the more vague the reading can be and that can trigger more anxiety for a lot of folks. On the other hand focusing too strictly on your facet of the situation can set expectations that others will face a similar fate when they may not. There's a balance to strike between going too wide and too narrow in predictive readings. What you look for will determine what you turn up. Consider what all you need to look at without it getting too overwhelming.

Agency

Does knowing the result allow you to do anything differently than you otherwise would or would knowing the result just fill you with dread?

I only recommend predictive reading if there's a chance you can change something about the result or about the experience of getting to the result. We as humans have a very hard time with feeling like there's nothing we can do. It can actively be triggering to folks with PTSD/CPTSD.

I don't tend to look ahead or do readings if it doesn't seem like there's anything I could do to make a meaningful impact on the scope of the situation I'm looking at. Sometimes this means I need

Tarot to Pass the Time

One of the hardest parts of getting through a crisis can often be hurrying up to wait. I remember one of the hardest parts of my mom's aneurysm was how there'd be really intense discussions about surgeries and medications and then it would just be hours or days of waiting for something to change before another intense flurry.

Tarot can be a great way to pass some of that down time. You can read for anyone and everyone that'll let you. I've been known to read for my pets on occasion if I'm really pressed for a querent. But say you're in a situation where tarot is frowned upon or you're isolated. There's still lots of ways to use a tarot deck to keep your mind of the crisis at hand.

Create Your Own Little White Books

This is one of my favorite ways to pass time with tarot. The Little White Book (LWB) is the little paper guide that comes with most tarot decks. Do you have a deck that you absolutely love but the guide is a little sparse on details? You can create your own. I prefer to do mine digitally but a lot of people buy notebooks for theirs or bind their own booklets.

The information I like to include is:

What do the number and suit tell me?

What symbolism exists in the artwork?

What elemental and astrological associations does it have?

What vivid memory does it remind me of?

What practical outcome does it predict?

What spiritual outcome does it predict?

What three words sum up the card?

Keep Readings Actionable

Querents tend to leave a reading feeling better when they have clarity on what to actually do so try to make sure you give them an actionable takeaway at the end of a reading. This will completely depend on the reading and the cards you've pulled so it's difficult to give examples. This is part of why having a strong care practice ourselves allows us to assist others with theirs but it also helps to read widely to hear how other people work through the challenges facing them. If you're at a loss, consider giving them an actionable way they can lean on one of their strengths.

Include Messages of Comfort or Advice Cards

People find a lot of strength and comfort cards like these. You can add a card or two to your usual spreads, just look for a theme generally, or check the bottom card of your deck. If you're non-theistic or non-magical, you can convey it just as a piece of advice. If you're comfortable with spirits, consider pulling a few cards to represent a message from their guides, ancestors, or the like. Feeling like they're not alone and that someone is looking out for them can go a really long way. However you're most comfortable, I cannot recommend working them into a reading enough.

Conclusion

Tarot readers have an incredible gift to offer people struggling with intense challenges. Not only do we have our skills as diviners but we also know how to have supportive caring conversations with people. In doing so, we help regulate their nervous systems. When we prepare them for the challenges ahead, they are better able to face them. When we give them messages from the other side, we help them know they're not alone. Don't doubt your ability to help as a tarot reader. We play an important part in the ecosystem of spiritual support; in sickness and in health, in tragedy and deep joy. Never doubt what you offer your fellow humans.

to narrow the scope of the reading to a point where I do have agency. And sometimes it means deciding against it for my mental health.

Acceptance

Probably the most important consideration in my book is whether you have the ability to accept what you see. Even if everything else lines up, if you're not confident in your ability to breathe through what you find out, prediction isn't a good idea.

You have to consider both sides of the coin. What relief would knowing the situation is likely to resolve to my benefit bring me? What despair would knowing the situation is likely going to end in the worse possible way bring me? Especially if you're reading for a situation where your agency is limited, this is what everything hinges on.

When you can look ahead, you have to start considering the experience of getting to the point you're trying to look at and what you want it to be like. Knowing the result impacts the experience of getting to it. If you're not in a place where you can evaluate that trade off, of whether knowing is going to make the experience of getting through the situation worse, then I highly recommend passing on predictive reading until you're in a place where you can.

A Possible Spread

Taking all this into consideration I've designed a spread that unfolds in stages, allowing you to go as far into prediction as you'd like. At each stage, check in with yourself and see if your gut says to continue or not.

The spread follows on the next page.

The Results Spread

Stage #1

Card #1: What need am I trying to meet by reading tarot?

Card #2: What's the best way to meet that need?

Card #3: What will trying to predict bring me?

Stage #2

Card #1: What will catch me off guard?

Card #2: How much agency do I have in the situation?

Card #3: What strengths can I bring regardless?

Stage #3

Card #1: What is the most likely outcome?

Card #2: What will the impact be?

Card #3: What can I do to improve the outcome?

Conclusion

I really wish I could divide things neatly into columns of yes you should or no you shouldn't but in my experience it's incredibly personal. There's always some reason you shouldn't and always some reason it would make sense to. My guidance to you trying to decide whether to do a predictive reading in a crisis is that what ever decision you make should be able to support your wellbeing.

Read for Future Challenges Not Outcomes

Normally, I organize my readings using a Challenges, Strengths, Outcomes approach but when someone is really going through it I tend to skip Outcomes and use Advice or a Message of Comfort instead. I will only read Outcome for people I know well and trust to handle the information wisely. Most people in my experience do better not knowing the Outcome and usually won't outright ask. Those that do will usually yield if you say you're not comfortable with that type of reading.

Another option is to read for warnings. Look for cards that indicate things to watch out for rather than outcomes. This works really well in more widespread emergencies where panic is more diffuse but can still backfire if what a person is dealing with it particularly personal. So try to gauge where the querent is at. Dealing with a pandemic generally is different than being high-risk. Dealing with increased violence generally is different than it happening in your yard or home.

Focus on Internal Resources They Have Available to Them

I try to keep the bulk of readings focused on what resources they have available to them internally, ones that are unlikely to be taken away do to circumstances. Examples might be their internal strengths, skills, character, relationships with spirits, and mindsets. This is super important because what situation a client might be having when they reach out can rapidly change during a crisis. They may be reaching out to you while they're healthy and just concerned about a pandemic. They might start having symptoms that night. They might have a safe home until they don't. You want to focus on traits that will likely be true regardless of how their situation evolves.

When the Querent is in Crisis

Sometimes when widespread challenges hit, tarot readers will find people turning to them for guidance and support. It can be really overwhelming. I remember the first time I found myself in that position I didn't understand why people were coming to me or what I could possibly offer someone. What good can a tarot reading do when people are facing mass layoffs, a global pandemic, or the full weight of climate change?

Quite a lot of good actually which is why we tarot readers can really help by being thoughtfully prepared. Building on the essay "When to Predict/When Not to Predict", I want to explore some other considerations for how to give great readings that actually help people when they, and often also we, are in crisis.

The Goal of a Reading During Crisis

First, let's talk about what my goal isn't. My goal isn't to tell the querent that everything is fine. That's a mistake I see a lot of people making. It's often not what the cards are saying and it's not helpful to the querent in the end. My goal also isn't accuracy at all costs. I try hard to pull in two directions - I will tell the truth and I will do what's best for my client.

My goal when reading for a querent who's going through a crisis, whether personal or global or anything in between, is to get them prepared for what lies ahead. I want the querents I read for in a crisis to leave with renewed resolve to do what they need to do; whether that's rally against, prepare, or accept the situation they're facing. I want them to feel a little less afraid and a little more capable than they did when we started the reading. I want them to have a touchstone for strength that can carry them through however their situation evolves after they walk away.

Tarot as Nervous System Regulation

One of the more life changing frameworks I've been introduced to in the last year or so has been Polyvagal Theory. Through exploring it, I've come to value the wellbeing of my nervous system so much more, especially in times of crisis. It helps me see that all the intense feelings and sensations in my body aren't a mark of my character but of how my body is remembering my past and processing what's in front of me.

What I've not seen a ton of talk on is the intersection of tarot and Polyvagal Theory. I've seen in my own life how tarot can have a regulating effect on my nervous system under the right circumstances and I've definitely helped coregulate with other people in my role as a tarot reader.

Resources to self regulate or coregulate can be impacted by a crisis situation. They may be fewer, less impactful, or far away. Tarot offers a lot of advantages in an emergency - it's pretty portable, can be used a multitude of ways, and it's a practice within your agency regardless of other people. So it felt important to explore the intersection of Polyvagal Theory and tarot specifically in the context of getting through high stress situations.

An Incredibly Brief Introduction to Your Polyvagal System

At it's core, Polyvagal Theory is about how mammals regulate themselves and their communities. It shapes how we connect as well as how we respond to perceived danger. It identifies the three main nervous system states we spend time in - safe/social, fight/flight, and shutdown - and how they serve to keep us alive.

It also posits that these states exist in a kind of ladder. Shutdown is what we experience when the brain thinks what we're facing is life threatening. If we're in this state and want to get out of it, we have to then move up into fight/flight which is our survival/movement

mode. Then we can move up into safe/social where we feel calm, can rest and heal, and are able to connect with others.

These states are controlled by nerves that are a part of the Autonomic Nervous System - the system that takes care of things you don't need to think about like breathing and digestion. That means we shift in and out of these states without thinking. Being aware of that process allows us to care for our nervous system and regulate it ourselves (self regulate). One of the most effective ways to tap into this system is through breathing. Faster breathing will activate us and shift us into fight or flight. Slower breathing, with long exhales especially, helps shift us into safe social.

The Polyvagal Role of Tarot

In addition to breathwork, there's a lot of ways to soothe the nervous system. But for the purposes of this essay and this zine I want to focus on the potential tarot has to help.

For those in shutdown, the movement in reading cards is gentle. It allows us to begin to move without having to think too much.

Readings have a familiar rhythmic pattern - taking the cards out, shuffling them, laying them down - that's straight forward and easy to follow.

For those in fight/flight, the movement can begin to help us wind down. It still gives us the purpose and agency we crave in that state but puts it toward something that neither attacks or avoids the object of our concern. It also demands we focus on one thing rather than bouncing between many if we're to interpret our reading.

Choosing to work with a deck with lots of natural imagery can also help regulate us. Being out in a natural space helps bring us into safe/social but even pictures of natural spaces can help. Consider working with a deck that either features landscapes or plants.

Decks with cool and earth tones also having a relaxing effect.

Conclusion

I hope this essay helped you begin to think of how you can release your stressors, evaluate your emotions, and write new stories.

Being critical of the stories we tell ourselves is not the same as abandoning ourselves. It empowers us to be more fair and compassionate to ourselves and others. And in a challenging time, we could all use a little more of that.

sake. Empathy is just very helpful for me in releasing stress around an event. I feel especially empowered when I can empathize AND set boundaries I need. This spread helps me do just that.

Self-Other-Story Spread

1. What am I showing up to this situation with?
2. What is the other person showing up to this situation with?
3. What story did I make of the situation?
4. What factors are at the root of the situation?
5. What factors from my past influence the story?
6. What's a different story I could make of it?
7. What's another story I could make of it?

I like having two alternate stories to end on because it shows that stories that there are many stories available to us and we can choose a different one at least somewhat. It helps to pair this with my spread on boundaries. Pull three cards for each of the following prompts.

Boundaries Spread

1. What are my unmet needs?
2. What request could I make of others?
3. What could I do that would empower me to meet my own needs?

Remember that you don't have power over other people so if they choose not to give you what you've requested, think of how you'll maintain that boundary. In some emergency situations it might be hard or impossible to get space. That's why it's important to think of what you can do for yourself that's within your own power too.

Repetition and routine has a soothing effect on the nervous system. The repeated motion of shuffling, of laying down cards helps us. The routine of a reading helps us. The familiarity can help communicate safety to our nervous systems.

Practical Polyvagal Tarot

It's possible and I encourage you to, at some point during a crisis, read with the goal of soothing yourself. The closer to safe/social you are, the easier it is to rest, heal, and digest food. That in turn allows you to make better decisions and be more resilient as you go through the challenging time you face.

Polyvagal Theory books I've read have mentioned that just imagining getting hugged or remembering times when we felt safe and connected with others can produce a real effect in the present. Spreads that encourage us to reflect and remember our positive experiences can be very helpful in shifting into a more safe and social state.

How Am I Connected?

Card #1: What positive qualities do others see in me?

Card #2: What makes me a good friend?

Card #3: What makes me a good colleague?

Card #4: What makes me a good family member?

Card #5: What gift do I bring to the world

As mentioned earlier, repetition has a soothing effect on the nervous system. Having a go to general spread that you can work with repeatedly both before, during, and after a crisis can help ground you and feel a little safer. Look for one that isn't terribly predictive and focuses on strengths. Use is at least once a week or so regardless of whether there's a stressful situation going on so that you can begin to associate it with states that aren't necessarily in crisis and it

can be act as a touchstone to move you up the Polyvagal Ladder when you need it.

My Toolkit Spread

Card #1: What personal strengths do I bring to this?

Card #2: What resources can I draw on?

Card #3: Who in my life can guide me?

Or another option and personal favorite of mine.

Signifier and Strengths

Pick a card to represent yourself. Shuffle the deck (with that card in it). Flip the deck over and look for it. The cards on either side are the strengths you bring to the day/week/ situation.

While doing a reading, try to notice your breathing. Try to make your exhales longer than you inhales. Sit in a natural space or facing a natural space if you're able. If you can't get outside, consider listening to nature sounds while you read our cards, particularly sounds of running water.

Conclusion

Tarot plays a positive role in regulating our nervous system. In times of crisis, it really can shine as a resource to utilize for regulating ourselves. I've found it hugely helpful personally in some of the crisis situations I've faces this past year. Since I've been reading so long, the repetition is especially helpful. But I saw it was helpful for my partner too who's a newer reader. So I really do think anyone can benefit.

Then work through the following questions to determine whether it's a primary or secondary feeling:

1. Is the emotion getting more intense? (secondary)
2. When the event receded did the emotion? (primary)
3. Do you feel this way more often than this? (secondary)
4. Is the emotion fairly straight forward? (primary)
5. Does this feeling protect/shield me? (secondary)

It still might be hard to tell. The biggest difference for me is that my primary emotions are fairly uncomplicated. They're feelings like sad, fearful, hurt. Secondary emotions tend to be more complex and might contain a belief about the world embedded in them like rejected, defensive, isolated. Secondary emotions can often be rooted in the fears of the Inner Critic. The best way I've found to resolve them is to try to figure out what the Inner Critic is trying to protect myself from and find a better way to respond to it so it'll back down. Primary emotions tend to dissipate on their own, but if they don't, I try to sit with them mindfully or give them space to be released using TMS journaling.

Self-Other-Story Spread

So far I haven't talked a lot about tarot in this essay. I do use tarot in the other forms I've talked about but it's very much based on gut feelings or what will be helpful. If you think drawing cards would be helpful to any of the above methods, I heartily recommend going with your gut.

But for those who like something a little more structured, I do have a spread I use in my shadow work practice called "Self - Other - Story". It helps me separate my Narrating Self from the event it's narrating and encourages me to empathize with the other people involved. I don't think empathy is necessarily for the other person's

out. I do think it's a little less effective and harder to neutral where you need to be, but just beginning that process can be helpful.

In the last example, it helped me realize that them pushing me away probably wasn't personal. I'd had a challenging relationship with my family in my teens and early adulthood, as many queer folks do. In that time, they'd gotten used to dealing with things by themselves and it's what they were defaulting to now even though I was available. I still think they should have included me more but I wanted to empower myself. It pushed me to consider what I needed in that situation and what I needed was to find a different way to help the family, one they maybe weren't considering. So I took on the family reunion that my mom had originally volunteered to plan and began making arrangements. I also set up a website and put updates up as I got them. It helped me feel connected to my family but I also didn't keep trying to help in ways that they didn't want or need so I felt more useful and less rejected.

Primary and Secondary Emotions

Another model for parsing emotional reactions is through primary and secondary emotions. Primary emotions are the initial responses that come up in response to an event. Secondary emotions are the emotions we feel about the emotional reactions we have. They turn our initial responses into more intense experiences and tend to trigger the Narrating Self into coming up with more intense and traumatizing stories.

I recommend starting by pulling up a list of feelings or a feelings wheel on your phone. If you search for those terms, lots come up. I prefer the wheel because you can kind of work your way to a specific feeling rather than having to recognize it upfront. Take your list and copy down all the feelings you're feeling in response to an event

Tarot as Shrine and Altar

One of the reasons my main tarot deck is the first thing to go in my bag when I'm packing is just how many different uses it can have while away from my home. I use them for predictive readings, reflective readings, communication with spirits, creating temporary shrines, performing spellwork, and much more. Tarot decks truly are spiritual swiss army knives in that way.

So I want to talk a little more practically about how to use a tarot deck for things other than readings. This is especially helpful any situation where you're forced to leave home for a while or into a situation where you're living with other people and it wouldn't be prudent to have a shrine or altar up all the time. But they can also be great for daily use too. I've leaned on them heavily when money was too tight to collect or buy the supplies I preferred.

But First, Why?

Why even bother setting up a shrine or altar when the world around you is falling apart? Precisely because it's falling apart. Claiming some space for your spiritual work, or just for yourself generally, can help us feel grounded when we've been totally uprooted. Claiming spiritual and personal space also restores agency to us and allows us to set boundaries with people in our lives and spirits that we work with at a time when that feels exponentially harder. Shrines and magical work can help us retain our identity when we're thrown into situations where that might be difficult like having to live with or work closely with our families of origin.

It's great if that space is a room with a door we can close but don't underestimate claiming a bed, a chair, or even just a bag. When I was couch surfing or sleeping in my car and didn't know where I was going to stay from night to night, I made my bag my center.

Having it with me helped me feel like the space around it was also mine and kept me feeling less vulnerable in an intensely vulnerable situation.

Container

There's a lot of superstition about what container to keep your cards in but I urge you to be pragmatic above all else. You can keep them in their original boxes by all means but consider getting another slightly bigger box so you can keep other supplies close to it. Personally, I keep my deck in an old Warby Parker glasses box and it works amazingly well. It has just enough room left over for me to fit my divination dice set too. Bags work great too. I kept my first deck in a small novelty silk bag with some paper and a small pen. It's also worth considering a container that makes the deck non-obvious. Some pencil and makeup cases work great for this.

Supplemental Supplies

My go to extras are a candle, an electric lighter (so there's no concerns about lighter fluid), a dish, and an essential oil. I usually also have a water bottle or two on hand that I'll sometimes use for water offerings or dissolving sigils. I highly recommend at least having some battery powered candles or a candle app but a stack of tea lights are what I prefer. Past that it's good to have a journal of some kind or just pen and paper generally. I actually recommend instead of thinking of extras to include, look at what you already tend to keep on you and think on how you could stretch them further magically and spiritually. Also think about what you can grab when you get most places. Salt is easy to grab at just about any fast food place or hospital cafeteria. Nature cuttings can be taken discretely even in cities (please ask the plant first).

Putting Together a Shrine

My most common type of shrine I put together is my daily divination shrine. I pull two cards for the day and roll my dice. I

up an uncomfortable emotional response?

After a few weeks of that, she has prompts for working with your Narrating Self when you're experiencing and emotional flashback or feeling triggered by an event generally. It important to keep the neutral parts neutral and the emotional parts emotional. This helps separate the emotion we're feeling from the event itself so we can see things more clearly.

1. I felt the emotion of ____ while triggered.
2. I felt the emotion of ____ when ____.
3. The event of ____ means ____ to me.

A mundane example of this might be

1. I felt the emotion of anger while triggered.
2. I felt the emotion of anger when my partner didn't do a chore I asked them to do.
3. The event of not doing something I'd asked them to do means that they don't care about me to me.

A more challenging example of this might be

1. I felt the emotion of sadness while triggered.
2. I felt the emotion of sadness when my family wouldn't ask me for or let me help while a parent was seriously ill.
3. The event of my family not letting me help a sick parent means to me that they don't trust me, don't love me, and don't see me as a true part of the family.

This can be extremely hard to do even under decent circumstances but especially so if you're going through a challenging time. But separating out what we feel from what happened can help us see things in a new light. I think the tool is still useful even if you don't do the two week of ego introduction and I recommend trying it

release our stress it's like walking around a pool with a beach ball between our legs. Absolutely everything is harder. But when that beach ball comes to the surface, it makes a big splash, maybe scares us for a few minutes, but then it can drift off to the side of the pool. And then it's easier to move and we can see that it's not nearly as scary as we thought it would be.

For a personal example; when I first found this method, I was having some bad stress related health problems. I decided to try it and immediately what came to the surface was disappointment I was feeling in my relationship. I remember even as I was writing I felt terrified to be writing all these angry thoughts I had. But when I let them all out and hit delete, I realized they were just thoughts. They didn't mean I didn't still love my partner and wanted to stay with her. I'd been fed unrealistic ideas about long term relationships growing up and I realized that getting angry, disappointed, or restless was pretty normal. Acknowledging those feelings was a much better way to deal with them than repress them and let them bubble up in my actions. My health and our relationship greatly improved.

I recommend this method first because sometimes all we need is to just recognize whatever terrible thoughts and feelings we might be repressing. Once we see they can't control us, that they don't have any power over us, the stress is released and we can adjust the meaning we make of it.

Narrating Self Work

Dr. Nicole LePera- "The Holistic Psychologist" on most platforms - has a great tool she calls Ego Work. Ego is closest to the Narrating Self in my model so that's what I tend to call it. She recommends taking time to let the Narrating Self introduce itself but responding to the following prompts once a day in a stream of consciousness style: How often do I speak about myself? What was an adjective I used to describe myself? Did anything in that conversation bring

line everything up in my box and make it look pretty so whenever I see it throughout the day I'm reminded of what it's trying to teach me. I like to light the candle while I'm pulling my cards and journaling as a way of marking the time as separate and special.

In college, my most common shrine was a deity shrine. I would pick 1-3 cards that represented the deity I was working with and set them up behind a dish and a candle (electric ones when I was in the dorms). I'd read source hymns to them, sing songs, give water - simple offerings. Highly recommend Googling for some hymns ahead of time, copying them down, and keeping them with your deck so you don't have to rely on having an internet connection.

For those who do shadow work, you might find that in an emergency you find actively engaging your shadow to be too overwhelming and draining. You can set up an shrine to the major parts of the psyche - Inner Critic, Inner Child, Narrator Self - or whatever model you work with. You can then write letters to them and leave them on the shrine, give treats to the Inner Child, give comfort and safety to the Inner Critic, and just generally spend a little time each day giving them attention they need even if you're not actively engaged in the work.

For those who do planetary work, get to know the connections between the cards and the planets and stars. Many people use the major arcana for planets but I like to use the major arcana for the 12 signs and the court cards as the planets.

Using Tarot Cards for Magic

There are too many ways to use tarot in magic to really dive into here but I wanted to give some ideas that I've found very useful.

When traveling or any situation where you're getting bounced around a lot, you don't have the benefit of permanent wards or protection spells. One strategy is to take the four knights of your

deck and use washi tape to tape them facing out protecting the four corners of your room. Need it to be more discrete? Tape them facing out and defending the four corners or your bed. Have you set up camp on some chairs in a hospital or other public space? Tape them facing out under your chair.

Sleeping can be incredibly difficult in a crisis so I recommend picking a major arcana card to be your sleep guide. The Star is best for this in my experience. She's generally a positive and hopeful guide to have present in sleep. The High Priestess and the Moon are also very present as sleep guides but they can trend toward shadow work and lucid dreaming which, while fruitful, might be kind of exhausting at times.

My personal belief, and also my experience, is that the cards are connected to spirits/egregores. You can petition those spirits to bring about whatever change they're best at. Make sure to match your request to the cards specialties. Even the minor arcana are great for this - perhaps especially the minor arcana. They're much more specific than the rest of the deck so consider using them for this as well.

You can also treat cards as representations in spells. Using the principles of as above so below and vice versa, you can create a representation using the cards of what you're trying to bring into existence. Pick three cards that represent the outcome you're trying to bring about and put either a candle or a representation of a candle in the center. Focus your energy on the cards, don't try to picture a specific outcome just sit with them for as long as you can, and then release.

Conclusion

A tarot deck can go a really long ways in a crisis. Consider what you can set up now in case you ever have to leave your home or what you can grab easily now if you already have.

Challenging the Meaning Made

When I first started digging into understanding trauma, one of my big takeaways was that the meaning we make out of an event can be just as damaging if not more than the event itself. This thought might not be for you right now and I completely get that. It wasn't for me for a long time. But when I did come back around to it, I realized the agency it gave back to me. Because I don't have control over a lot of what happens but I can choose how I narrate.

I think this concept is especially important in times of turmoil because stress is cumulative. It builds up in the system until we deal with it. There's research that shows even small stressors if exposed to continuously can eventually lead to poorer health outcomes. That's part of why it's so important to try to watch how we're narrating our experiences in the moment and try the release that stress right away. But these methods have also worked for me even with old stress, with stress so built up I was totally numb. So no matter what stress you're dealing with, I hope these strategies can help you take the edge off it.

TMS Journaling

If you've read any of my work before, you'll know I am a huge fan of TMS Journaling. It consists of setting a timer for 20-30 minutes, writing stream of conscious style without stopping, and then deleting or tearing up the result when you're done. If you absolutely don't want to delete or tear it up then put it away for at least 6 weeks, but I really really recommend you get rid of it.

The rationale is that this gives you a place where you can release your stress without fear that anyone might find it or your future self might find and judge you for it. That helps you dig deep and actually write what it is you're thinking, feeling, and experiencing rather than constantly editing it for the benefit of others or your future self. The analogy one teacher used was when we don't

headphones with white sounds, and picture myself walking down a spiral staircase until I get where I'm going.

So where does tarot come in? A few places. For one, when I feel very lost and like I can't get the kind of advice I need to deal with what's in front of me, I will essentially journey into a card. I usually do this with the major arcana as I see them as my teachers and mentors. I'll select a card that I think is good for what I'm dealing with and put in a place where I can easily see it while I'm journeying. When I get off the staircase, I'm in a space that resembles that of the card and I walk up to the figure of the card and ask if I can speak with them. If they say yes, I tell them about my problem and ask for their guidance. This has been exceedingly helpful at many points in my life and I really do recommend trying it even if you're skeptical.

You can also do a reading to help you set your intent for the journey. I like to pull a few cards for journeys even if they're fairly casual and not very involved. They're there to give me a heads up to anything that might be troublesome and to help me focus.

The Map of a Journey

Card #1: What do I bring to this journey

Card #2: What challenges will I face while journeying?

Card #3: What benefits will I gain while journeying?

Card #4: Most likely outcome of the journey?

Conclusion

I'm deeply thankful for how tarot has helped keep me connected even in times of stress and isolation. It's a practice I'd be a lot worse for wear if I hadn't developed over the years. I hope this sparks some ideas for you.

You Are Not Alone: Tarot, Spirits, and Isolation

I'm writing this at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is only just getting started. I expect to see many more closures, cancelations, and even quarantine before it's passed. Assuming it does pass and doesn't become a seasonal fixture. It's hard to say what role it'll play in the coming weeks and years but I do know right now that a lot of people who are used to being in contact with people are experiencing intense isolation for perhaps the first time.

As a chronically ill person who's at points been immunocompromised to the point of not being able to leave the house for weeks on end, I want to share some spiritual strategies for coping with that isolation. So first and foremost know that if you're really struggling with it that it's absolutely normal. It is painful, it is hard, and it's sorely underestimated by those not experiencing it. We're a social species and we do best when we have contact with others even in passing. Not having that has a very real physical and psychological impact.

So what can we do? The strategies I talked about in the essay on tarot and Polyvagal Theory can help but I want to explore more spiritual options as well. When I've been cooped up, spirit work, deity devotion, and journeying became key supports for me. They helped me see that I'm not alone in the world and keep me connected not just to others but to my ancestors, gods, local spirits, and more. They keep me grounded in a sense of time that extends far beyond my present circumstance and even beyond my own time on earth. This is the work that keeps the overwhelm of isolation at bay.

Tarot and Spirit Work

A really helpful tool for spirit work is having a way to get a yes or no from a tarot deck. My personal favorite way is to shuffle and pull 4 cards. Swords and wands are no with cups and pentacles

being yes. I set any major arcana aside and count the other cards regardless of whether they're reversed or not. This gives you a spectrum from yes totally, yes mostly, maybe, no mostly, hard no.

It's not a bad idea to start with the spirits closest to you - literally. Land and house spirits are usually fairly easy to get to know, especially with regular effort. Even if you're not in your home and you're in a hospital, hotel, or someone's home, you can get to know the spirits there. Start by using your yes/no method to ask questions. If it's clear they're interested in saying more, try a spread.

A Spread for Spirits

Card #1: What card signifies you?

Card #2: What do you like to assist with?

Card #3: How can I assist you?

Card #4: What would you like me to know?

I also include ancestors under the umbrella of spirit work. I tended to push away ancestor rituals when in high stress situations, particularly medical ones, until a friend of mine pointed out that my ancestors were exactly the spirits who would care most if their descendants were suffering. I have a complicated relationship with my ancestors so sometimes I will call on my transcestors (trans ancestors) instead, particularly in issues of harassment where my ancestors might not be able to relate. You can use the same strategies as you would with place based spirits to communicate with them. Consider doing a free read though where you ask them what message they'd like to pass on to you and then pull as many cards as feel appropriate.

Tarot and Deity Work

I've been really blessed to have a very close relationship with main goddess for the last decade and it's carried me through periods of intense isolation. If you have an established relationship with a

deity, that's ideal. While I firmly think deities can act outside of their areas of influence, I still think they're most effective with what they know (much like most people). So if you're working with a deity you already know, it's helpful if you can spin what you're dealing with to one of their specialties though definitely not necessary.

New to working with deities? It's still worth reaching out. A relationship forged in a crisis can still develop into a wonderful connection. Consider going to deities who specialize in what you're dealing with. Much like people, they're much more likely to be interested in working with you on it even without a prior relationship if it falls into their area of expertise.

Whether you're working with deity that's new to you or one you know well, emergencies demand we take stock of our work with them. Tarot can be a great way to evaluate where you're at and what their expectations are for you through it all.

My Work, My Deity Spread

Card #1: Signifier for you

Card #2: Signifier for your deity

Card #3: The work you're doing with/for them

Card #4: The challenges your situation poses to it

Card #5: What your deity would like given the situation

You can also use the yes/no method to essentially converse with them or pull several cards for a general message from them.

Tarot and Journeying

Journeying could be its own zine honestly but the bare bones of it is getting into a relaxed meditative state and journeying into your own consciousness or outward into the astral plane. My preferred way to journey involves laying down on a bed, putting in