

The Doors of Tarot

Lessons for the Practical Diviner



John Gilbert

edited by

John Michael Greer

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INTRODUCTION

I met John Gilbert for the first time at a tarot conference in Portland, Oregon over Labor Day weekend in 2001. The Pacific Northwest has a reputation for gray skies and heavy rains, but that weekend did its best to convince us all otherwise: the sun shone, the skies were luminous blue, and the hills around the hotel where we were meeting were vivid with evergreens. It was a propitious time for one of the most important encounters in my spiritual life.

John and I had been exchanging emails by then for most of a year, partly about the tarot, partly about other mutual interests, of which we had plenty. I'd seen photos of him by then, but when we met in person I was bowled over by the intensity of the man. Tall and genial, he carried his sixty-three years lightly and radiated a sense of calm acceptance of whatever the universe could throw at him. Fifteen minutes after our first meeting we were chatting like old friends.

We only met in person two times after that, both of them at weekend events, but for more than a decade we kept the internet and the phone lines humming with emails and calls. Most of those focused on subjects unrelated to the tarot. Our great project was the revival of the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA), of which John was one of the last living initiates, but I also studied and received initiation and

consecration into the other esoteric traditions he had received from his teachers—the Universal Gnostic Church, the Order of Spiritual Alchemy, the Magickal Order of the Golden Dawn, and the Modern Order of Essenes. Over the course of our friendship, I got to know a fair amount about the man.

John Gilbert was born in 1938 in Pierre, South Dakota, and moved to Colorado with his family in his teens. He was an Eagle Scout and an honor student, as well as an enthusiastic athlete, setting state records in track and field. As soon as he graduated from high school he left home and joined the Coast Guard, then used his GI Bill benefits to attend college and take up a career as a high school teacher. While in college, he married his first wife, Judith.

It was at some point in the 1960s—John never mentioned the date to me—that he met his occult teacher, Rev. Matthew Shaw. Shaw was a minister of the Universalist Church who left that denomination in 1952, as it moved toward a merger with the Unitarians. With two other former Universalist clergymen, Shaw founded a new denomination, the Universal Gnostic Church and embarked on a pilgrimage across the landscape of American alternative spirituality. By the time John met him, Shaw went by the name Rhodonn Starrus—“Rose Cross” in Greek—and had joined forces with another remarkable figure of the time, Dr. Juliet Ashley, a student of Carl Jung and Edgar Cayce. In the course of his training with Shaw and Ashley, John was introduced to the tarot cards.

The rest, as they say, was history.

John was an extraordinarily capable tarot diviner, and he also drew on his experience as a high school teacher to become an even more extraordinary teacher of tarot. He loved to give workshops in which a roomful of complete beginners would pick up a tarot deck for the first time and be able to read the cards accurately and easily in a single day. Where most tarot readers and teachers focus on multiple-card readings, John always encouraged students to get as much as they could out of a single card. He used to do single-card readings at tarot and metaphysical events that astounded people for their clarity and accuracy.

Over the years that followed, John was involved in various organizations in the alternative spirituality scene, including several focused on the tarot. His abilities as an organizer and manager were not always up to the same high level as his talents as a teacher and diviner, however, and he fell afoul more than once of the bitter internal politics that

so often plague small groups. It was after one such debacle that he founded a small organization of his own, the Tarot Institute, and set out to transform his most successful workshops into weekly lessons that could be sent to subscribers over the internet. Most of those lessons are collected in this book; the remaining lessons, which deal with issues of spirituality and philosophy rather than tarot divination, are included in another volume, *The Tree of Spirit*.

The first chapter of this book has been assembled from introductory essays on the Tarot Institute website. Each of the remaining chapters was a separate course offered by the Tarot Institute, and each of the lessons was meant to be studied for a week, so there is a certain amount of unavoidable overlap from course to course. I have done only minimal editing, so that John's voice can come through the lessons as clearly as possible.

The Tarot Institute was one of John's later projects, and it found only a modest audience. Toward the end of his life, frustrated by a series of similar disappointments, he withdrew from teaching, and finally he and his second wife Charlene moved to Laramie, Wyoming so he could be close to his children in his last years. He died there early in 2021. I am honored to be able to help get his writings into print so that those who didn't have the chance to meet John Gilbert can still have the opportunity to learn from him.

— John Michael Greer

CHAPTER 1

First steps in tarot

How tarot cards work

Our subconscious mind thinks in symbols. It's in communication with the Spiritual Universe along with everybody else's subconscious mind. Our conscious mind thinks in words. It's in tune with the physical world along with most other people on this planet. Tarot cards are composed of a group of symbols which we define in words. Therefore, tarot cards can be a tool to help our subconscious mind communicate with our conscious mind. Since our subconscious mind is in communication with every other subconscious mind, we can actually use tarot cards to help other people learn about themselves.

At least that's one theory about how tarot cards work. It's the theory I accept because it proves itself to me over and over every day of my life. I can't ever remember when the cards lied to me about anything. I've done my share of misinterpreting the cards, but that's my problem. But as far as I know, the cards have always been honest and forthright with me about everything.

My suggestion is to accept the theory being proposed and give it a try. If it works for you, keep on believing and reading. If it doesn't work

for you, try something else, some other theory. My guess is it'll work just fine for you but sometimes guesses can be wrong.

What tarot symbols mean

Has it ever bothered you that several authors, all looking at the same symbols in the same cards, give several different meanings for those symbols? That used to bother me. In fact, I used to agree with some authors and think the other authors were all wrong. I even remember correcting tarot readers for misinterpreting a card or telling them what a particular card really meant. In this way I announced my own ignorance. I'm sure the readers weren't all that happy about doing a reading for me.

The truth is all those authors were correct. Those symbols mean exactly what they say the symbols mean—at least to them. When they're reading the symbols their meaning is the one that counts. When I'm reading the symbols, my meaning is the one that counts. When you're reading the symbols, your meaning is the one that counts. Each of us interprets different symbols in different ways because of who we are, what we know, what we think we know, and what we've experienced in our life.

Today when somebody does a reading for me, I listen to what they say about the cards. I listen to the meanings they attach to the symbols. I don't judge them or any meanings they assign to any symbols. I listen and strive to understand. I can't begin to tell you how much more I get out of a tarot reading today. I'm sure the readers appreciate not being told "the right way to do it."

The meanings of the tarot cards

Tarot cards mean to us exactly what they mean, no more and no less. When you look at a card and get a feeling about what a certain symbol means, my suggestion is to write it down and remember that. Keep a book of notes about the cards, one page for each card. Review these notes on a regular basis until both your conscious and subconscious mind know and understand what each card means to you, what each symbol on each card means to you. That's my suggestion.

Good tarot readers are good because they know what each card means and they know what the major symbols in each card mean. Their subconscious mind chooses the right card at the right time to communicate precisely what needs to be communicated then. Their subconscious

mind will draw their eyes to the correct symbol within each card to communicate the message that needs to be received now.

Every tarot author has his or her own opinions about what each card means. You can use these meanings if you want to use them. You can use another author's opinion for any deck you choose to use. You can also make up your own meanings.

One way to decide what each tarot card means is to keep a notebook and write down every meaning given by every author in every tarot book you read. Another way to decide is to write down only those meanings you like for each card. You can also select meanings that are easy to remember when you look at the card. The secret is that the tarot cards mean exactly what you decide they mean. Of course, you can always memorize the meanings given by the author of your choice. That may sound like the easy way out, but in my experience it's a more difficult task—unless the key words are printed on the cards.

You'll either make this decision consciously or unconsciously. If you make a conscious decision, you'll better understand the process and probably become a talented tarot reader. If you do it unconsciously, you'll always be in the dark wondering if you're doing it right or not.

Here's the process I suggest:

1. Keep a tarot notebook with one page dedicated to each card
2. Write down all the meanings you select for each card
3. Choose one meaning, one key word or phrase for each card
4. Read this meaning over and over so your subconscious mind knows too
5. Make up a "cheat sheet" and do practice readings
6. When you know the meanings for most of the cards most of the time join a free tarot reading group and start doing readings
7. When you know and understand your cards, start reading for money
8. Change the meaning you use for any card any time
9. Just be certain your subconscious mind knows about the change too

The meanings of the tarot cards are exactly those meanings you and your subconscious mind agree upon. You make the decision and tell your subconscious mind this is the definition for this card. Once you've done this, the responsibility for choosing the correct card for any reading is up to your subconscious mind. Since your subconscious mind is infallible, it'll always choose the right card. Then it's your responsibility

to remember what that card means and interpret it in the reading. That's what the meaning of the tarot cards is all about.

Clearing your tarot cards

It is important to clear negative energy from your tarot decks before you use them, and there are several ways of doing this. These same techniques can be used for removing negative energy from crystals, amulets, talismans, bracelets, brooches, necklaces, magical tools, ceremonial weapons, and other personal or spiritual articles. The instructions given will usually work with one application of the technique.

The first method I want to discuss here is elemental clearing or cleansing. This is accomplished using symbols chosen to represent the elements of Earth, Water, Fire, and Air. The usual symbols are given in this chapter but readers are encouraged to use any similar materials in their own clearing rituals. Clearing with Spirit is called Consecration and will be covered later in this chapter. Clearing with Elemental Weapons is also a form of Consecration.

As a rule, you'll find it easier to clear and cleanse your deck of unwanted negative energies by fanning the deck open and doing the whole deck at once when using Water, Fire, and Air Elemental Cleansing techniques. If extreme cleansing is needed, the cards can be cleared one at a time. As a rule only one form of Elemental Clearing is used. However, readers are encouraged to be creative and use as many elements as desired.

When the allotted period of time expires, check your tarot deck to see if it still exudes any negative energy. If it does, or if in doubt about the outcome, repeat the process as many times as required to clear the deck of all negative energy. When you're done with the cleansing, dispose of the materials used for the cleansing.

Earth Elemental Clearing

1. Bury your protected deck in sand, salt, or dirt for twenty-four hours.
2. Fan your deck open on a tablecloth and sprinkle it with salt and/or sand, and leave it for one to two minutes.
3. Fan your deck as above but instead of salt and/or sand, use any combination of any of the following herbs: basil, lavender, rosemary, sage, thyme, the crushed dried leaves of any plant or tree, or the crushed dried flowers of any plant.

4. Rub your deck for a minute or two with any of these materials.
5. Place your deck under your pillow or mattress and sleep on it overnight.

Water Elemental Clearing

1. Sprinkle your cards lightly with water. Wipe immediately.
2. Sprinkle your cards with salt water (1 tablespoon salt to 1 cup water). Wipe immediately.
3. Sprinkle your cards with consecrated water. Wipe immediately.
4. Sprinkle your cards with any herbal tea or plant infusion. Wipe immediately.
5. Expose your deck to moonlight in a protected area for half the night.

Fire Elemental Clearing

1. Pass your deck quickly through a candle flame. Don't burn yourself.
2. Place your deck on a table with a candle holder and lighted candle on it for five minutes.
3. Place your deck on a table with a candle and aromatic oil diffuser for five minutes.
4. Expose your deck to sunlight in a protected area for half a day.

Air Elemental Clearing

1. Pass your deck five to seven times over burning incense.
2. Smudge your deck with sage or any similar smudge.
3. Take a deep breath and breathe deeply and slowly into your deck three times.
4. Place your deck on a cassette or video player playing good music for one hour.

Cleansing by consecration

Consecration is an intention to make a person, place, or thing holy. By making it holy all negativity is completely and instantly removed from the person, place, or thing. Intention is the most important ingredient in any consecration. If you intend to bless, clear, cleanse, and consecrate a person, place, or thing, and your intention is sincere, then the consecration occurs just as you intend it.

Consecration is usually done in a reverent manner, preceded by prayers of invocation, thanksgiving, and petition. Invocation is a prayer asking Deity, by whatever name you wish to use, to assist in the intended ceremony. Thanksgiving is a prayer thanking Deity for one's life, blessings, gifts, health, family, friends, and happiness. Petition is a prayer asking for something. Be careful, prayers of petition are not begging for fame and fortune. They're prayers asking for forgiveness, assistance, knowledge, and blessing.

To consecrate a tarot deck, first decide what purpose the deck is to serve. Divination, meditation, visualization, and spiritual advancement are typical purposes for a tarot deck. Prepare yourself and your spiritual altar for the ceremony. Invoke the Deity of your choice and inform this Deity of your intention in regards to the tarot deck. Ask Deity to assist you in performing the ceremony and accomplishing your intention.

The next step is to recite whatever prayers of petition and thanksgiving you want to use. Following these prayers is the consecration ceremony. This can be as simple as: "In the name of (name of Deity) I hereby bless, clear, cleanse, charge, and consecrate you to be (blank) for the purpose of (blank)." Fill in the blanks according to your intention and purpose for this deck.

Cleansing with Elemental Weapons

Elemental Weapons are special implements consecrated to be the representative for a particular element. There are some usual correspondences, but readers are encouraged to make and consecrate their own Elemental Weapons of their choice. The usual correspondences are:

- Air – Sword or Dagger
- Water – Cup or Chalice
- Fire – Wand or Spear
- Earth – Pentacle or Disk

Cleansing with an Elemental Weapon is usually done in a formal ritual but this is not required. Any formal ritual may be used including Wiccan, Christian, Buddhist, Golden Dawn, Masonic, or Rosicrucian ritual. Any informal ritual may also be used. The form used is entirely up to the reader and may include Invocation of Deity, Prayer of Thanksgiving, Prayers of Cleansing and Consecration, and closing prayers.

The ritual may include representatives of any of the elements such as salt or sand, incense, candles, and a chalice filled with water, wine, or juice. During the ceremony the deck is normally touched by one or more of the Elemental Weapons accompanied with words of blessing, clearing, cleansing, charging, and consecration.

Other cleansing methods

Using a spiritual space: Placing your deck on your spiritual altar for a day or two can achieve the same purpose. This may sound strange, but readers who use this approach say it helps to inform your altar of the purpose for placing the deck there. By simply saying: "I'm placing this tarot deck in this holy space for the purpose of removing all negativity from it," the process seems to work better.

My personal feeling about this is that holy space is closely aligned with Deity. Whatever you say to Deity or this holy space will be heard by the elementals, nature spirits, and angels assigned to that space. Since these beings all want to work with humanity, it's just natural for them to clear and cleanse any object you place on your altar. By stating your purpose in doing so you remove all ambiguity and give the elementals, nature spirits, and angels some guidance according to your desires. Ask and it shall be given unto you.

If you regularly clear and cleanse yourself from all negativity or place a sphere of protection around yourself, you're a walking spiritual space yourself. You can keep your tarot deck in your aura for a period of time in order to cleanse and clear it of all negativity. You can accomplish the same goal by placing a personal amulet on top of the deck. A personal amulet is a pocket object or totem you carry with you for some purpose such as protection.

You can create a spiritual space anywhere you want by consecrating that space. You could use a drawer, a table or furniture top, a room or a space outside in the yard or garden. Consecrate this space and place your deck there for a day. Again, it helps to let this space know the purpose of leaving the deck there. I also like to announce for how long the deck or object will remain in this place. Usually it's one day but, if the object is really negatively charged, I'll leave it there for a week or even longer.

Using a spiritual object: You can rest your deck on a table or in a drawer with any spiritual object of your choice. If you don't already have a few

spiritual objects on your altar, you can consecrate one and use it with your tarot deck. Telling your spiritual object the purpose for leaving it with your tarot deck really seems to speed up the process.

I usually have one or more amulets of protection, love, and peace available for this purpose. I also use spiritual objects from my spiritual altar from time to time. It doesn't matter what the object is. What matters is the purpose for which that object was consecrated. For example, an abundance wand may not be the best object to use for removing negative energies. Objects used for blessing, protection, clearing, cleansing, and consecration generally work the best in my opinion.

In closing ...

As with most things spiritual, your intention is the most important part of the ritual or ceremony. Be very clear about your intention in regards to any objects you wish to clear and cleanse. Voice these intentions out loud so all your spirit guides, angels, nature spirits, and elementals know your intentions regarding the object to be cleared. Expect good things to happen and they will.

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Duncan Barford, *Occult Experiments in the Home*

John Gilbert was a teacher of alternative spirituality active in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. He was born in 1938 in Dakota into a Christian household, but his personal spiritual vision called him in other directions. Gilbert was an extraordinarily capable Tarot diviner, as well as teacher of Tarot, eventually founding the Tarot Institute. He was also the presiding bishop of the Universal Gnostic Church and the House of Independent Bishops, and the head of the Magical Order of the Golden Dawn, the Order of Spiritual Alchemy, and the Modern Order of Essenes. Gilbert played a very active role in the Ancient Order of Druids in America. He died in 2021 in Wyoming, where he had moved with his wife Charlene, to be close to his children.

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