

**78
ACTS
OF
LIBERATION**

**TAROT
TO TRANSFORM
OUR WORLD**

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 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

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Introduction

The seventy-eight cards in a Tarot deck invite our reflection, giving us valuable insights into our past, present, and future. But once we've gained this knowledge, the real challenge is what we do *after* a Tarot reading—how we choose to put our understanding into practice in the real world.

Our approach to reading Tarot cards usually depends on our initial purpose in reading them. Today, Tarot is often read with the intention of inspiring deeper contemplation in service to self-awareness. Rachel Pollack's beloved book *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom* was foundational to the use of Tarot as part of a journey of self-discovery. More recently, Jessica Dore's *Tarot for Change* further developed the practice, implementing behavioral psychology as a useful language for interpreting Tarot cards in the context of personal change. Both books established the use of Tarot as a valuable tool for gleaning important self-knowledge and using it to foster internal growth.

For me personally, inner work is important, and reading Tarot in order to feel my feelings, self-reflect, and adjust my behavior will always be part of my Tarot practice; but Tarot can also answer questions that go beyond my individual life. Which has led me to ask: What would happen if we asked the Tarot about practical actions we can take in response to larger social concerns?

As an activist, I'm very familiar with the need to strike a balance between inner work (such as unlearning the values instilled by capitalism and white supremacy) and outer work (such as community organizing and protest). In the past few years, I've both witnessed and personally experienced a lot of frustration around the fact that the increased popularity of doing inner work hasn't led more people to do more significant or sustained outer work in the realm of social justice. Whether it's dismantling white supremacy after the height of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, demanding protections for disabled and chronically ill people in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, fighting for body autonomy in the context of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, or supporting transgender people's public visibility and access to health care amidst legislative attacks, it feels like we are forever collectively falling short of structural change.

For a long time, many activists believed that if only more people knew the truth, then they would never stand for the abuses of power that cost so many lives. In support of this belief, we devoted ourselves to consciousness-raising and truth-telling. We have been seeing that, as it turns out, the truth alone will not set us free. We have to act on it.

For anyone who has ever turned over Tarot cards to find answers, this is a familiar realization. Maybe we've gained some insight from the cards—but now what? What do I do with that information? Maybe I know what I need to do, but bridging the gap between knowing and doing is often harder than expected.

It's now popular for progressive, socially conscious Tarot readers to say that they don't give advice. They aim to empower the querent (the person getting the reading) to make their own choices, meaning that the querent is free to take the information and do with it as they please, without the Tarot reader inserting their opinion. It reminds me of how I was trained as a social worker to encourage clients to problem solve, rather than doling out "expert" advice or diagnoses, like a psychologist would. Still, offering encouragement or using empowering language didn't put resources into my clients' hands, or

remove barriers they might encounter like discrimination. Having the freedom and responsibility to make our own choices is only part of the equation. Rarely do we fully discuss the “power” part of empowerment. We may have some agency to choose how we act, but what is it that gives us the motivation, the courage, and the ability to take that action? It’s not always our own inner resources alone; sometimes advocacy, mutual aid, collective bargaining, or even a mass movement is needed to clear the way for us to move forward.

UNDERSTANDING POWER

Not everyone who reads Tarot cards considers themselves a witch or is interested in tapping into the power of the occult, but even more mainstream ways of thinking about turning our dreams into realities are all about power. Power is a taboo subject, which is part of what makes it one of my favorite things to talk about. Everything that I love most brings up power in some way—from magic, science fiction, and technology, to theater, activism, and writing. We mean a lot of different things when we talk about power: talents and abilities, capacities, relationships, feelings, energy, control, and more. Power dynamics are often hidden, and it can be considered rude to point them out, but exposing the roots of power relations can feel very empowering.

One of the first things I remember being taught explicitly about power in grade school was the mantra “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Whether discussing history or literature, there always seemed to be a moral lesson about power. “Power is dirty.” “It’s evil to hunger for it.” “Attempting to be too powerful will bring about your downfall.” Learning about the basis of our government in the US and the social contract that underlies “civilized society,” I was taught that power belongs to institutions so that no single individual ego can enact their every whim; therefore, power is something we all give up in order to have peace.

Yet, there isn’t peace. And certain individuals do have the power to act with impunity, while others are kept in cages. We want the peace and equality that we feel we are promised in exchange for submitting

to the orderly systems and institutions of civilization, but we feel powerless to change much beyond our personal lives, if that.

The field of psychology is in many ways the study of personal power, and it has offered us some amazing, empowering tools for self-actualization. The study of power on a larger, social scale is the field of politics. The word *politics* can leave a bad taste in the mouth, and it can be challenging for many people to see how political power connects to Tarot. However, Tarot has always been affected by the realm of the political—like many other things in life, as those of us who are negatively impacted by power structures which favor white, cisgender, heteronormative, nondisabled, neurotypical, and wealthy people are well aware.

When I use the word *politics*, what I mean is simply one's understanding of how power operates in society, and how one believes that power should be used. This is something we all know intimately through our lived experience. The people who hold the most power are the ones best served by the narrow understanding of politics as the domain of politicians. The same is true of economics. It's not a specialized subject that only economists can understand—we are all familiar with how money operates in our society, and have our own beliefs about how money should be used on a social level. As a working-class person, I grew up thinking that politics and economics are too complex for the average person to comprehend, but that's simply not true. We are all aware of how money and power work and the impact that those with power and money have on those who don't have either. Just as with spirituality and psychology, you don't have to be a professional to develop your understanding; you can ask critical questions and draw on your own life experiences to deeply understand political realities.

REPRESENTATION IN TAROT

Political power as it relates to Tarot shows up most often in discussions around representation and diversity in Tarot decks. The Rider Waite Smith deck has commonly been considered to be “traditional”

and “essential,” but many people struggle to see themselves in cards that depict only upper-class, nondisabled, white, medieval European figures in binary-gendered, heterosexual roles and relationships. In the past several years, there has been an explosion of both independently created and mass-market decks that reflect the true diversity of our world. There are decks created specifically by and for the Black diaspora, decks where every single card is unapologetically queer, and also decks that aim to appeal to a broad audience by depicting a wide variety of races, genders, and body types. Sometimes deck creators attempt inclusivity, but end up being tokenizing—representing different perspectives in image only, rather than truly woven into the content. I’ve witnessed more than one occasion where Black women Tarot reviewers were harassed by white deck creators for writing an honest review, sharing a critique that the goal of inclusivity was not met. When deck creators defend against these reviews by referring to the number of cards with people of color on them, they fail to understand that inclusivity is not only about numbers. For example, depicting people in a way that reinforces cultural stereotypes can be just as harmful as changing the skin color on Pamela Colman Smith’s drawings of white people in the Rider Waite Smith deck, erasing cultural specificity. Everyone deserves to see themselves represented in the fullness of their humanity.

Every card in a Tarot deck creates the context for every other card—the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. There are values and assumptions embedded in the deck that permeate every card, and anyone sensitive to the realities of being treated as a token or an exception will be able to spot it when the values of diversity and inclusion are assigned to certain cards, unsupported by the rest of the deck.

Many of us prefer not to learn or read with decks that uphold what we feel are outdated values and assumptions. At the same time, the feeling of having access to ancient wisdom is part of Tarot’s appeal. One thing that is so magical and liberating about reading Tarot is that it gives us entry into a consciousness we have never experienced—a pre-capitalist consciousness. We access symbols and

meanings that existed in a completely different economic, political, and cultural climate, and they still resonate with us. Tarot can help us see how capitalism distorts our vision. Capitalism is the air we breathe and the water we swim in; it underpins so many of our assumptions about how the world “just is.” Tarot lets us inhabit a different, earlier environment, which can be profoundly refreshing and revealing. However, the period in which Tarot was developing had its own economic, political, and cultural environment. Monarchy and feudalism, scientific ignorance, and religious dogma aren’t preferable conditions, of course. Tarot symbolism is pre-capitalist, but not pre-patriarchal, pre-xenophobic, or pre-colonial. Today’s new decks often feature better representation of more people: women, people of color, queer people, and people of different ages, body types, and abilities. These new images lend themselves to reinterpreting card meanings in ways that challenge the value systems embedded in the earliest versions of Tarot, to a degree. To go further, we can’t just paint new faces on the same old structures—this is true in Tarot as much as it is true in life. Yes, we want to see people with diverse backgrounds and experiences in the seats of power, but we also want that power to be held and used differently. We need structural change, and not mere tokenism.

Just as corporations today are learning that simply “adding color” to their workforce is not achieving workplace diversity and inclusion, and the electorate is realizing that having political leaders of various marginalized genders and/or who are people of color may not translate into policies that achieve racial justice or gender equity, we have to acknowledge that visual representation in Tarot decks is only the beginning of transforming Tarot to be truly inclusive. The language we use when we speak about the cards, the interpretations that are available to us when we read them, and the way we treat querents themselves all matter.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

This book will primarily address the issues of language and interpretation, but my hope is that as we practice viewing cards—and by extension our daily lives—through the lens of power dynamics (politics), then meaningful changes in all of our social engagements, large and small, will emerge as well.

The language we use daily to describe our own experiences is predominantly individual and psychological, emphasizing personal responsibility. It's a heavy weight, to feel that we alone must become the change we want to see in the world. Those of us who have spent a significant portion of our lives as organizers and activists have developed a habit of seeing and describing our experiences in collective, political terms that make it more clear what is and is not our personal responsibility. I invite you to begin to use political language when interpreting Tarot cards, to infuse an understanding of power relations into your everyday experiences. I offer language that highlights not only individual responsibility but also collective and community care—you don't have to shift the world alone, and you can't! We can all practice making collective and political language a more consistent habit and see how that impacts our choices about how we use our time and resources, and how we relate to others.

Tarot was not always read in the language of psychology and spirituality, but many of us have experienced profound changes in our lives through this framework. For example, the Devil did not always indicate that one had “shadow work” to do, and the Page of Cups didn't always invite us into conversation with our “inner child.” The way we read those cards has changed because we have adopted the language of psychology and spirituality into our Tarot practice. There is no reason we can't change our language to embrace political concepts in the way that we have done with psychological ones.

In *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom*, Pollack purposely sets aside political interpretations of the cards in support of her thesis that Tarot can be used to develop self-awareness, but she makes political assertions while doing so. For example, in her introduction, she

writes about the Hanged Man card painted for one of the first Tarot decks in the fifteenth century by the Italian artist Bonifacio Bembo, saying: “It certainly does not represent a criminal hanged at the gallows, as some later artists have assumed. In Italy traitors were sometimes hanged upside down, and in fact many modern Italian decks call this card *L’Apezzo*, the Traitor. But there is no evil implicit in Bembo’s figure. The young man appears beautiful, and at peace.”

With all due respect to Pollack, it is a moral judgment and political position to assert that a traitor must necessarily be evil. Would we not say that a traitor to Hitler in fascist Nazi Germany was on the right side of history, morally correct, and someone we would expect to have been confident and at peace with their actions? Knowing that policing in the United States was developed out of slave patrols and still enforces, violently, the values of white supremacy, do we assume that everyone punished by the criminal justice system is “evil”? Pollack uses the example of the Hanged Man to steer us toward more spiritual and occult meanings of the cards, pointing to stories of Odin, St. Peter, shamans, alchemists, and yogis hanging upside down as acts of spiritual surrender and sacrifice, leaving behind what she calls “superficially a social commentary.” Keeping the Traitor’s social commentary intact, I see this figure as a political prisoner, sacrificing their personal comfort and surrendering self-interest for a greater cause.

POLITICS, ACTIVISM, AND TAROT

Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom argues that the Tarot represents the reality of opposites in tension, shaping a complex whole. I agree with this assertion, and so I wonder what might happen if we went back and picked up that dropped thread of social commentary in the Tarot, to round out our inner work. I intend for this book to be a guide to reading the Tarot politically, with an eye toward justice and liberation, to complement Pollack’s guide to reading the Tarot spiritually and psychologically, with an eye toward self-awareness. The individual and personal can be counterbalanced and enriched

by the collective and political, embracing the whole of life. In fact, the Hanged One, as I and many others now prefer to call it, suggests a radical change in perspective that dissolves the ego, and one might take that as a call to turn traitor against extreme individualism.

I've written *Seventy-Eight Acts of Liberation* to expand the readily available meanings of the cards, to make them more relevant in a socially conscious, justice-oriented world where community is valued as much as the individual. I'm still interested in Tarot for divination and personal growth, but I feel that Tarot is expansive enough to embrace political and social life as well. Doing so might ease the ache to be a part of something greater—to get out of our own minds and limited personal lives and make a tangible difference in the world. To be clear, I don't believe that reading Tarot by itself will manifest such changes, in the same way that sitting down to a reading doesn't automatically initiate doing the psychological work that will turn one's personal life around. Just as when reading to support the inner work of self-awareness and personal growth, Tarot simply points the way. Then it is up to us to act on what we read in the cards.

Small, daily actions sustained over time can have an enormous impact. I hope to encourage as many people as possible to make a habit of engaging with politics and social change at least as deeply and as often as they engage in personal reflection and development—not as a chore that we're required to do, but because it's actually more joyful, hopeful, freeing, exciting, empowering, and fulfilling to live that way.

I have deeply loving connections with people whom I never would have known if I hadn't sustained both my inner and outer engagement with antiracism over decades. I've known the feeling of bursting with pride when Maryland's racist death penalty was finally abolished in 2013, and when legal rights for gay and lesbian couples were first secured federally in 2015, because I was very active in both movements. When there are times that I can't be out in the street protesting, I don't feel it as a personal failure because I know and trust the organizers who are active right now; I know it's someone

else's turn to be out there, and that my turn will come again. When the future feels bleak, I turn to the histories of social movements that I never learned about in school, and being reminded of those victories gives me hope.

SPIRITUALITY AND POLITICS

Readers who already know the pleasures of long-term activism may wonder what Tarot could possibly add to that experience. Simply put, it's spiritual. Spirituality may not be a requirement to have a sense of morality that leads you to fight for what's right in an unjust world, but it helps. Certainly, Right-wingers in the US see no contradiction between their spiritual beliefs and political agenda, and they use both in tandem, which is quite effective. For many people, faith and politics are mirrors of each other, with power consolidated in a single entity. My faith and politics are mirrors of one another, too. I used Tarot for more than a decade before I would claim any kind of spirituality, but the habitual practice of shuffling cards that are supposed to be random revealed over time a striking pattern of communication that was more and more difficult to see as arbitrary. Spirituality crept up on me in these small moments, and I now experience it as multitudinous, nonhierarchical, diverse, cooperative, autonomy-respecting, and Earth-loving. Many people describe that kind of spirituality as animism, or as magic.

In my experience, some Leftist activists have scoffed at spirituality and religion, citing Karl Marx's statement that "religion is the opiate of the people." But we know that spirit is what moved John Brown to take up arms to fight slavery, and that Black churches were instrumental in organizing the Civil Rights movement. I believe we separate spirituality from politics at our peril, even if bringing them together feels challenging at first. Thousands if not millions of people today embrace magic and witchcraft as a spiritual path precisely because it lacks the dogma and conservatism of the dominant religious institutions. Many witches I know have every reason to be politically engaged, but they tell me they want to be involved,