

The Wandering Hermit

Learning the Tarot

by Peter Denvind Wright

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The Tarot Deck: The Major Arcana

For your convenience, here is a list of the Major Arcana cards in the order of The Fool's Journey and in the more traditional order.

The Fool's Journey

Card 0: The Fool
Card 3: The Empress
Card 4: The Emperor
Card 2: The High Priestess
Card 5: The Hierophant
Card 1: The Magician
Card 6: The Lovers
Card 7: The Chariot
Card 8: Strength
Card 9: The Hermit
Card 11: Justice
Card 14: Temperance
Card 10: The Wheel of Fortune
Card 12: The Hanged Man
Card 13: Death
Card 15: The Devil
Card 16: The Tower
Card 17: The Star
Card 18: The Moon
Card 19: The Sun
Card 20: Judgement
Card 21: The World

(Traditional order)

Card 0: The Fool
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The Major Arcana

The first 22 cards of the deck are called the Major Arcana, or the Majors, or the Trumps. When re-arranged slightly from their numerical order, they tell a story which is often called The Fool's Journey. This is the story of Myth. It is the same story that shows up over and over again in every culture on the planet. It is archetypal and connects to the collective human subconscious. It is the story of the innocent youth who grows and learns and faces death and pain and becomes the hero. Remember Disney's animated movie Hercules? Remember how it did not follow the original story of the myth? Look at it again after you've studied the Major Arcana. The story was a direct rip-off from the Major Arcana (and so were the Titans—one of each element, Earth, Air, Fire, and Water). The original Star Wars followed the same story line.

First I'm listing the Major Arcana cards in the traditional numerical order, with brief comments on their meanings:

The Major Arcana in Traditional Order

- Card 0: The Fool** An innocent, blessed person at the start of a journey.
- Card 1: The Magician** The teacher who introduces unlimited potential.
- Card 2: The High Priestess** She is our intuition—the mysteries of spirit
- Card 3: The Empress** Represents creativity, fertility, and Nature.
- Card 4: The Emperor** Represents power, structure, and control.
- Card 5: The Hierophant** Traditional religious structure, spiritual guidance
- Card 6: The Lovers** Lessons from love, including loving one's self.
- Card 7: The Chariot** Conflict or decisions. Possibly travel.
- Card 8: Strength** The strength we need to face life's problems.
- Card 9: The Hermit** The solitary search for the Truth.
- Card 10: The Wheel of Fortune** A change of luck as the wheel turns.
- Card 11: Justice** Ability to consider facts and make fair judgements.
- Card 12: The Hanged Man** Sacrifice of parts of Self for the greater good.
- Card 13: Death** An ending or change—metaphorical death
- Card 14: Temperance** Inner and emotional balance
- Card 15: The Devil** The hell and suffering we create in our life
- Card 16: The Tower** A shattering of a current structure in life.
- Card 17: The Star** The gift of our own destiny.
- Card 18: The Moon** Illusion or what we do not see.
- Card 19: The Sun** Joy and brightness and prosperity.
- Card 20: Judgement Day** Paying off old debts for a new start.
- Card 21: The World** A circle that represents the cycle that is now complete.

It is easier for many people to remember the meanings of the cards if they remember them in the context of the story of The Fool's Journey. Here the cards are listed in the order of The Fool's Journey. I've included more complete explanations. I've noticed it's helped many people to compare these to Star Wars. I know that sounds funny, but

the story line of the original Star Wars is the Major Arcana. If that helps you, use it. If it doesn't help you, ignore it.

In many cases I tell you about the meaning of the card in The Fool's Journey. Naturally many will ask, So what does it mean in a reading? Think metaphorically. For example, the Fool is at the beginning of his journey, innocent and pure, but protected. He has no idea what dangers he will face, but his innocence carries him through as he learns more and eventually becomes a hero. So what does that mean in a reading? First, remember General Answer #1. But if you want a little more guidance, here's my thoughts: It means the seeker (you or the person you're reading for) is at the start of a journey. The seeker is innocent and has no idea what is about to come, but they are about to face an adventure in life. It's all metaphor. In my eyes, one of the few mistakes in tarot is to take things literally.

Part I: The Characters in the Fool's Journey

These are the people involved with the Fool in his journey through life.

Card 0: The Fool: The Fool is someone at the start of a journey. They are innocent and pure and blessed and protected. There is a big journey ahead and they have no idea of the trials they face, but they can grow through this adventure and eventually become the hero. It's like a high school freshman. In four years, that freshman is a senior and at the end of the journey. The next step is college where, once again, he or she becomes the Fool and faces another journey of discovery.

Card 3: The Empress: The Fool's earthly mother represents creativity, fertility, and Nature. To some readers this card represents the seeker's mother. It can represent pregnancy, but more frequently represents the birth of something new, or creativity, or abundance.

Card 4: The Emperor: The Fool's earthly father represents power, structure, and control. To some readers this card represents the seeker's father. It could also mean a person in authority, but it can also mean strength and structure. Depending on how it is placed, it could mean the seeker has or is finding power and structure, or it could be what they have to face or deal with.

Card 2: The High Priestess: The Fool's spiritual mother who is Mystery not fully understood. The High Priestess is the enigma or puzzle that we never fully understand. It is the intuition we can't explain but know we must follow. It is the tiny voice that speaks to us from deep inside. We can't explain it, but we know we will do better if we listen to it. Often it speaks without words, but in knowing or feeling.

Card 5: The Hierophant: The Fool's spiritual father who offers spiritual assistance and guidance. This often represents the structure of religion. It could refer to a more rigid attempt at spirituality or the attempt to pigeonhole spiritual ideas and practices. It could refer to ritual or ceremony in any religion. It can also represent direct spiritual guidance.

Card 1: The Magician: The Fool's teacher helps him see he and his abilities are unlimited. The seeker has the power and abilities and tools. Often, though, the seeker does not realize this and is slow to accept it. That's why he needs a teacher to wake him up and say, Look at the power within you!

Part II: The Fool's Mortal Experiences

These are the experiences we learn through the experiences of the flesh, followed by what I call the Mortal or Moral Lessons, which are Strength, Truth, Justice, and Temperance. Although these lessons are learned in one order, that does not mean each one is a lesson if it shows in a reading. For example if The Lovers shows up, that does not mean the seeker has to learn that lesson then go through all the others.

Card 6: The Lovers: The Fool's experiences in love and loss. This is one of the three most misunderstood cards in the Majors. Few readers consider this a sign that there will be love or romance. It either deals with the lessons we learn in love (usually painfully or through the end of a relationship), but most readers I know think of it as an internal card. We don't find happiness in love unless we love our Self first. The Lovers talks of union, but more likely the need for a union inside the Self—a chance for the seeker to fall in love with his or her own Self, not with someone else.

Card 7: The Chariot: The Fool goes to battle—both with others and within himself. In tarot we are not as interested in war and battle outside as inside. This is a conflict or decision within the seeker. Some see it as meaning travel, since many decks show it as a chariot drawn by sphinxes.

Card 8: Strength: Mortal Lesson 1: Inner strength needed to face life's challenges. We have to learn to draw on our own strength to deal with life. It's there, ready for us. We just have to reach it. This card may show a need for strength, but also that the strength we need is there. It is also a symbol of the strength we gain by learning and growing. It comes first in the Mortal or Moral lessons, since we need strength to go through the other three lessons.

Card 9: The Hermit: Mortal Lesson 2: Solitude and the search for Truth. Notice any connection with this card and the title of this website (The Wandering Hermit)? I wonder if that's just coincidence? This is the search for Truth, which is not a group activity. We all have to find our own Truth. That does not mean we don't have a spouse or partner or lover or that there aren't people around, but this is the journey in life that we have to take on our own. We have to learn to listen to and recognize Truth before we can go to the next step.

Card 11: Justice: Mortal Lesson 3: Ability to consider facts and make fair judgements. This may literally mean there is a legal situation coming up. Some readers see it that way, some don't. It can also refer to the balance of making decisions through wisdom and knowledge. It is blindly weighing the facts (remember Justice is blind—she does not look at the person being judged, she just judges) and making a decision. The ability to make this kind of firm decision is necessary before moving on to the next step.

Card 14: Temperance: Mortal Lesson 4: Inner balance and decisions made from more than facts. This is the balance that is more than Justice. It is that emotional balance that lets us be flexible without falling over. Remember Les Miserables? Jean Valjean, as a child, stole a loaf of bread to feed his sick sister. He knew the law, but broke it anyway. Justice is the decision that says, Go to hard labor for many, many years. Temperance would have said, You broke the law, but there is more to consider. Spend a few months in juvenile detention.

Part III: The Fool's Descent into the Underworld

After the Fool learns the lessons he can learn through regular life, he begins to go into the underworld. Spiritually this is going through pain and suffering and the hell we can find in life. Notice that this is much like the story of Jesus being crucified, going to Hell, and being resurrected.

Card 10: The Wheel of Fortune: A change of luck as the wheel turns. Look at the wheel. You can be on top, but then you'll soon be going down and ground under. If you're on the bottom, hang on and it'll take you to the top. Fortune changes and the Wheel of Fortune says a change is coming. The only way to deal with this without constantly losing and winning is to find a center, spiritually, and figuratively. Moving to the center of the wheel and sitting in peace is the only way to avoid the rat race of up-down-ground under-going up-here-we-go-again. The Fool is about to see a change in his life and luck. This could be considered as Mortal Lesson 5 if one so desired.

Card 12: The Hanged Man: Sacrifice of parts of Self so the Self may live to grow and prosper. Think of a forest. A ranger once told me that without human intervention, forest fires burn down a part of a forest on an average of about once in thirty years. The entire forest survives, but that is because parts die off and are sacrificed. What happens when a deer dies? Animals feed on it. Plants are fertilized from the body. Life comes from the deer's sacrifice. This is sacrificing the parts that have to be let go so the whole can grow stronger and keep going.

Card 13: Death: An ending of the way of life that is no longer appropriate as the Fool grows. This does not mean a real death, but a figurative one. It can mean change, as well. Often it means something in the seeker's life is dying, which is good, since it is likely something no longer needed. It could be habits, beliefs, or even a relationship. Death, if fought, is painful. If accepted, one can move past it and onto whatever is waiting on the other side. This is another one of the three most misunderstood cards in the Major Arcana.

Card 15: The Devil: The internal Hell the Fool must face and come to terms with if he is to grow. We make our own devils. We do it to avoid the responsibility of saying, My life is the way it is because of me. Isn't it nice to have someone to blame for all the negative in our life? It means we don't have to take responsibility for making things better. Almost any deck shows the people on this card as able to leave their hell. The chains or ropes binding them are loose. Many just don't want to see the chance to leave. The devil is made by us and

can *always* be overcome by us. This is the last of the three most misunderstood cards in the Major Arcana.

Card 16: The Tower: Society's structure shatters so the Fool can rebuild life in his own manner. Think of this as a complete breakdown of something. In the Fool's Journey, it is society's structure. In a reading, it means there will be some swift change. It could be painful. Something will be shattered. Remember, though, when the tower is shattered, the foundation is still left. Rebuilding a better tower on that foundation is still possible.

Part IV: The Fool's Transcendence of Mortality

After the Fool goes to hell (I just couldn't resist saying it that way!), he grows from his pain and when he takes responsibility to face his devils. After that is light and completion of the cycle.

Card 17: The Star: The Fool (now a Hero) finds his own Inner Light and his own destiny. This is a gift from inside or destiny. It is the light we follow. It is what shows us the path that is ours and nobody else's.

Card 18: The Moon: The Fool/Hero learns much, but there is still much that is unseen or illusory. Some readers consider this an indication of psychic insight or psychic abilities, since that is not always a clear perception. It could also mean there are things that are hidden nearby. (Just because a thing is hidden does not mean it is bad!)

Card 19: The Sun: Joy and brightness is brought into life after the suffering of the long journey. This card basically brightens whatever is associated with it in a wonderful way. (My license plate is XIX SUN using roman numerals for the number 19.)

Card 20: Judgement: It is time to pay off all old debts in money, in friendship, and in emotions. This is like the chance to pay off everything from what you've been dealing with. It's like a senior in college paying off all his old debts and making up with everyone before he leaves. Now, when that part of his life is over, he will not have any debts (emotional, financial, or otherwise) coming back to haunt him later. This is wiping the slate clean by taking care of whatever is outstanding.

Card 21: The World: A circle that represents the cycle that is now complete. The end of the cycle and the card of fulfillment. This is a strong YES and a signal of mastery and ability.

And that's The Fool's Journey complete and completed. The cycle is done. It helps, when reading, to remember where these cards are in the story. The cards toward the end often indicate nearing the completion of a journey.

And just one side note. A friend and the woman who taught me tarot has a story I think is wonderful about the power or significance of one of the cards in the Major Arcana. She used to read at a restaurant in Virginia Beach called The Jewish Mother (back before it was a chain). One night one of the band members sat down at her table. She

asked why he seemed so tired. He said something like, I just keep wondering if this is worth it. We go to regular jobs, then go home and lug all this equipment around, set it up, play all night, then take it all down, and go back to work. I keep wondering if we're ever going to make it. She told him to shuffle the deck and cut the cards. The World came up. She gave him a copy from another deck to keep to remind him they would make it. The last time (that I know of) she talked with the band member, he still had that card pinned up on the wall over his desk. They made it big. You may have heard of them. They're called Hootie and the Blowfish.

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