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# Palmistry, Tarot Cards, and Psychotherapy

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**The author summarizes his experience with palm and Tarot card readers in New Orleans. The history, practice, and psychodynamics of palmistry and Tarot are explored. It's postulated that these practices are forms of archaic psychotherapy, which employ supportive treatment and placebo. These tactics are used to elicit hope for its clients.**

New Orleans' Jackson Square is home to several eccentric Tarot card and palm readers. I became intrigued with them while living in the French Quarter. Each day, these mystics and self-professed clairvoyants sit peacefully waiting for customers. Some customers participate out of novelty's sake, while others use the readings to help them approach life; like a daily horoscope. Initially, I thought that the readers were swindlers, just trying to make a buck. However, during my own readings, they never pressured me for money and only accepted donations. I was surprised to find that they create a warm and empathic environment for their clients. In a curious way, this quality mirrors the work of a psychotherapist. Ironically, readers practice in the very heart of New Orleans, a city renowned for various forms of self-therapy. This paper presents an overview of Tarot card and palm reading and discusses my experience with the French Quarter readers.

Palmistry has two branches: chiromancy and chiromancy. Chiromancy is the study of the lines of the palm, which express a person's emotional tendencies and social attitudes. These characteristics evolve over time, just as the skin on our faces reflects the experiences we endure while living. Chiromancy deals with the shape of the hand, thumb, and fingers, which reveal aspects of the personality. Thoughts and emotions are thought to influence these components; much like the ripple effect of a stone tossed in water.

The origins of palmistry date back to around 3,000 BC in India. Vedas scholars, the earliest sacred Hindu writers, studied the hands to understand the self and relationships with others. The ancient Greeks embraced palmistry as well, and its practitioners eventually reached the same status of physicians. Hippocrates (470-410 BC) and Galen (AD 129-210), both physicians, used palmistry as a clinical aid. Even Julius Caesar judged his soldiers by reading their palms. Later, the Catholic Church forced the practice underground under penalty of death. In the 16th century, however, Paracelsus, a Swiss physician and philosopher, began to write of palmistry rendering it more respectable.

In the 19th century, Dr. Carl Carus, physician to the king of Saxony, correlated palms with personality, which revived the art of palm reading.<sup>1</sup> However, in light of 20th century scientific advances, palmistry has been relegated to a branch of fortune telling or parapsychology, similar to tarot card reading.

The true birthplace of Tarot cards remains a mystery. In the late 14th century, cards similar to those of today first appeared in France and Italy. The origin of the name, Tarot, is unclear. Some think the poem, Petrarch I Trionfi, which uses archetypal symbolism, eventually metamorphosed into Tarocchi. In the 16th century Tarot cards became more accessible after the advent of the printing press. As a result, printers disseminated decks throughout Europe and their popularity began to rise. It is unknown if Europeans originally used Tarot cards for therapeutic reasons or for amusement. Eliphas Levi, a 19th century French occultist, worked to prove that Tarot originally was a manifestation of the Kabbalah, Hebrew for "received tradition." It is a body of knowledge consisting of philosophy, psychology and cosmology. Although derived from esoteric Judaism, people of many faiths have added to this body of knowledge over centuries. In this respect, the Kabbalah is considered universal.

Levi eventually formed a Kabbalah-Tarot system. He cemented this system together by creating the Tree of Life, which incorporated many similarities between the Kabbalah and Tarot. For example, there are 22 paths on the Tree of Life. Each path correlates a letter of the Hebrew alphabet with one of 22 cards. Contemporary Tarot decks are based upon this Kabbalah-Tarot system. The deck consists of 78 cards, which is split into two groups: the major and minor arcana. The major arcana is made up of the archetypal Tarot cards (ie Lovers, Death, and Judgment). The minor arcana consist of four suits. Each suit has numbered cards from one to ten, as well as four court cards. The minor arcana is similar to our contemporary game playing deck.<sup>2</sup>

Many readers in Jackson Square first obtain an introductory book, such as *Tarot for Dummies, The Complete*

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*Idiot's Guide to Tarot, The Palmistry Encyclopedia, and Palmistry 101*. These books provide the basics. Once a fundamental knowledge of each subject is attained, students continue to learn by taking a course or finding a mentor in the field. Overall, there does not seem to be a standard for Tarot and palmistry education. For example, The Tarot School in New York City has courses in Divination Skills (45 hours) and Tarot Intensives (96 hours), which when completed grant the student an "internal degree." This degree "marks and celebrates the degree of change in a student".<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, there is the School of Psychic Development, which grants a palmistry diploma,<sup>4</sup> as well as The Mystic Gryphon School of Witchcraft, which offers a course in palmistry.<sup>5</sup> Many of these courses are completed via the Internet, phone, or mail. The alternative to coursework is studying under a mentor. This is the most informal, but perhaps most useful method of honing a reader's skills. Many readers I have met learned in this way.

Mary, a palm reader, is a fixture in Jackson Square. She is an affable middle-aged woman with long blond hair, a flowing vermilion sundress and cigarette in hand. Upon entering Jackson Square, I look for her signature purple-clothed seats to locate her. Mary is originally from New York City and used to work on Wall Street. However, she was unfulfilled with life and felt that something was missing. After years of interest in parapsychology, a friend inspired her to take up palmistry. Mary insists that she always had a strange intuition about things and wanted to put this "gift" to use. "I just know things and have a feeling about things, but at a young age I didn't understand what I was feeling," she says.

After coming to New Orleans she began to conduct readings in the square. Mary mentions nonchalantly the "light rods" installed in the back of her head, too. She claims that master readers have given these "gifts" to her to help read client's auras. Mary says this with a straight face and in a matter-of-fact manner. I do not question her.

After interviews with several readers, it is evident that they share similar beliefs and practices. First, there is an understanding that they are there to work and make money. At most though, readers ask for a donation of ten to twenty dollars per reading. This is perhaps due to a municipal ordinance that limits street entertainers to soliciting for "donations" only.<sup>6</sup> Second, they believe in giving free sessions. One palmist named Dorothy explained, "I always give free readings because I know that others will compensate. One time a woman gave me a hundred dollars for a 15-minute reading. It's all about giving. Things will come back to you in return."

This karmic attitude is the hallmark of the readers. It conveys their ethos, which is striking especially when contrasted with French Quarter hustlers, who are known to approach tourists with the challenge: "I bet you ten dollars I can tell you where you got your shoes at." (Answer: Your feet.) They also have a component of magical thinking. The spectrum spans from guardian angels, spiritual guides, auras, and magic spells. Some mystics rely on daily readings

or even special environmental signs to plan their day. Finally, palm and Tarot readers quite simply enjoy helping people with their problems and emotional pain.

Sinclair, a reader with long purple hair and a white beard, gently held my hand and systematically evaluated my palm lines: mars, life, love, fame, travel, work, etc. He stoically interpreted, "You authentically enjoy your career, versus working just for money. Also, there is not much confusion or ambivalence in the direction of your life." Internally, I felt he was partly confirming what was familiar to me, but there was a certain added comfort nonetheless. He was like a conduit to the Jungian collective unconscious, letting me know that all was well: I felt connected somehow. Then he asked me to pose a question. Trying to be vague as possible, I replied, "I made a decision about a relationship; was it the right decision?" Then he read the archetypal cards that I pulled from his deck. Each card had a theme and together the cards could be interpreted in various ways. First, the Two of Swords indicates major conflict. Next, the Seven of Swords "brings hope if we rely on ourselves." Then, the Two of Cups represents pregnancy or rebirth. Finally, the Two of Coins means a change for the better, a new departure based on a more solid foundation.<sup>2</sup> Sinclair said, "The Two of Swords indicates the circumstances regarding your decision were painful and conflicting, but the Two of Cups and Two of Coins together mean you have the capacity to turn over a new leaf and take control. It seems that you made the right decision and can move on in your life." Intellectually, I was skeptical, but his words were still comforting and hopeful.

The psychodynamics of palm reading is similar to that of emotional rock music (aka emo-rock). For example, Billy Corgan, lead singer of The Smashing Pumpkins, sends a universal theme in a phrase: "the world is a vampire, sent to drain." In other words, life is painful. The listener absorbs this message and applies it to life. This connection between artist and listener is why a teenager might say, "The Smashing Pumpkins changed my life." Not so, you changed it. They just helped you cope with your problems by underscoring their universality. And so it is with palm and Tarot readers. They also validate feelings and counsel the person on how to approach life. Often readers will predict the future and advise on how to face new challenges as they arise. Sometimes, the future looks bright and happy. Either way, the client feels more in control of her life and more hopeful. Essentially the psychodynamics of palmistry and Tarot are really those of hope.

In fact, many cultures use hope as a healing tool. Burmese shamanism, Filipino psychic surgery, and Caribbean voodoo, for example, each mobilizes the patient's expectation of help and hope.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, this is similar to early medical treatments. Until the last century medicines were seemingly inert and procedures, such as bloodletting, were even harmful. However, patients continued to seek out physicians in hope of recovery. Actually, in many ways, the history of medicine may be the history of the placebo effect.<sup>8</sup> Frank comments that, "Despite their inadvertent reliance

on placebos, physicians maintained an honored reputation as successful healers, which suggests that these remedies were often effective".<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lown MD, a renowned cardiologist and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, adds in his book *The Lost Art of Healing*:

The healing process demands more than science; it requires mobilizing patient's positive expectations and stimulating faith in physicians' ministrations. I know of few remedies more powerful than a carefully chosen word. Patients crave caring, which is dispensed largely with words. Talk, which can be therapeutic, is one of the underrated tools in a physician's armamentarium. Medical experience provides constant reminders of the healing power of words.<sup>9</sup>

Palmists and Tarot card readers try to heal in the same way. Though dismissed as magical thinkers of parapsychology, readers are, at worst, vestiges of ancient entertainment. On the other hand, they could be practicing a form of pre-Freudian therapy, the link between archaic and modern psychotherapies. This remains to be investigated.

Initially curious, I've learned to appreciate the roots of palmistry and Tarot card reading, as well as their therapeutic approach. Unexpectedly, the French Quarter readers have reminded me about the importance of hope in clinical practice. With this in mind, I remind you of a quote by Robert Louis Stevenson in his dedication to *Underwoods* when he stated that "[the good physician has] Heraclean cheerfulness and courage. So that he brings air and cheer

into the sick room, and often enough, though not so often as he wishes, brings healing."<sup>10</sup>

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