

**GAIAN TAROT:
HEALING THE EARTH, HEALING OURSELVES**

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INTRODUCTION & CHAPTER ONE: THE SEEKER

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INTRODUCTION TO THE GAIAN TAROT

Although the first Tarot cards were created in 15th century northern Italy, they embody a set of spiritual principles that are timeless. In her book *The Forest of Souls*,¹ Rachel Pollack writes that the Tarot is a Book of Wisdom like the Bible or the Torah or other sacred texts. Gaia, the Living Earth, is another kind of sacred text, especially for those who practice an earth-centered spirituality. I have brought together these two loves of mine — the Tarot and the natural world — in the Gaian Tarot.

THE MEANING OF “GAIAN”

Gaia is the name the ancient Greeks gave to the Earth. They saw her as the Mother Goddess who gave birth to the sky, the sea, the mountains and the rest of creation. The sense that “the earth is our mother” is not unique to the Greeks but is found in many indigenous cultures worldwide. In our own modern society, we know her colloquially as Mother Nature.

In 1969 people around the world first saw the famous photo of the earth taken from space. There was a collective emotional response to it that led to the upsurge of support for the first Earth Day and the fledgling environmental movement. The British scientist James Lovelock was inspired by the photograph, too. “The vision of that splendid white flecked blue sphere stirred us all . . . There is nothing unusual in the idea of life on Earth interacting with the air, sea and rocks, but it took a view from outside to glimpse the possibility that this combination might consist of a single giant living system.”² Lovelock’s hypothesis, simply stated, is that life on earth functions as single, self-regulating organism. He named his theory after the Greek earth mother Gaia.

The theory was quite controversial in the scientific community, partly because of Lovelock's tendency to use language that anthropomorphized the earth. Lovelock's collaborator Lynn Margulis distanced herself from the personification of Gaia as a living being, preferring the image of an ecosystem of ecosystems.³ But it is undeniable that the Gaia Hypothesis — the idea that the Earth is a living (dare we say sentient?) being — fired up the imaginations of millions of people.

Whether the name “Gaia” is used as a poetic metaphor or as a name for an aspect of the Divine, the term “Gaian” is commonly used today to refer to a worldview that honors the earth as sacred. People who practice a Gaian spirituality understand that humans, plants, animals, stones and stars are all inextricably linked. When we pull on one strand, it affects the whole web. We waste fuel idling our cars, and the ice in Greenland melts. DDT is outlawed in the United States and the bald eagle comes back from the brink of extinction. “Gaians” understand that the way we live our lives each day makes a difference to the rest of the world.

To practice a Gaian or earth-centered spirituality means to both give and receive spiritual sustenance from the natural world. Many of us believe that the Divine is immanent in nature and not transcendent or separate from it. Modern Gaians have much in common with the animistic worldviews of indigenous peoples. “The earth is our mother,” the contemporary chant goes. “She will take care of us . . . We must take care of Her.”⁴

CREATING THE GAIAN TAROT

This deck has been a long time in the making. The seed for it was planted in the 1980s when I was working with the Motherpeace Tarot and comparing it to traditional decks. I wanted to create my own deck back then but the thought of creating 78 separate pieces of artwork

was daunting. I worked with the Tarot consistently until the late 1990s when I set it aside for several years. During that time I moved to a small island and the focus of my spiritual practice changed. I began to spend much more of my time outside, observing the place where I lived and practicing wilderness awareness techniques. Just like I had thrown myself into Goddess studies and Tarot studies earlier, now I became immersed in studying the native plants, birds and animals of my chosen home. I gardened, became involved in the local community and built a straw bale home with my husband.

When I took up the Tarot again, it was with a new focus and a new energy. As I meditated on the meaning of each card and the fresh interpretation I might bring to it, I asked these questions: “What about the earth? What does the voice of the earth have to say? Where is nature in the meaning of this card?”

So the Gaian Tarot grew out of my relationship with the natural world where I live and the people in my neighborhood and spiritual community. Many of the scenes in the deck are based on sketches from my nature journals and photos I’ve taken of local landscapes. Almost every animal, bird or plant in the cards is one that I have encountered personally in my naturalist studies. I know their natural history as well as their mythic resonances — Raven and Coyote are not only mythic tricksters but also neighbors. Most of the models for the figures in my cards are friends or friends of friends. I’ve always loved painting the “numinous” in the everyday person, and that’s what I’ve done here. The human figures in the deck are both contemporary and mythic, in terms of clothing and appearance. Sometimes they are part of this world and sometimes they belong in the spirit world or the borderlands between the two.

TAROT STRUCTURE

I have remained faithful to traditional Tarot structure in the Gaian Tarot, although I have renamed many of the cards. There are seventy-eight cards in a Tarot deck, twenty-two of which make up the Major Arcana. (“Arcana” is a word that means secrets or mysteries. It’s related to the word “arcane.”) In the Tarot, the Major Arcana is the suit of Spirit. This is where we find the deep soul lessons of our lives.

The rest of the deck, called the Minor Arcana, more closely resembles a deck of regular playing cards with four suits of cards from Aces through Kings. The suits correspond to the four elements — air, fire, water and earth. Instead of placing images of swords, wands, cups and coins in the illustrations as we see in most traditional Tarot decks, I’ve used examples of each element. In the suit of Air (traditionally the suit of Swords), I’ve depicted feathers, clouds, birds, butterflies, flutes, pens and books. In the suit of Fire (Wands), we’ll find torches, candles, forges and bonfires. Water (Cups) brings us rivers, fish, rain, beaches, boats and wells. And Earth (Pentacles) is illustrated with gardens, forests, deer and other mammals, crafts and drums.

I’ve also made changes to the traditional “court” cards. Instead of reflecting the class-based society of Renaissance Europe, these cards correspond to the stages of life: childhood, early adulthood, midlife and old age. The traditional Pages have become Children and the Knights have become Explorers. Queens are now Guardians and Kings are Elders. There are two males and two females in each category, which is also different from the traditional Tarot. The Children symbolize the qualities of discovery and birth. The Explorers seek challenges and embody the principle of growth. The Guardians are productive and involved in the community; they represent the concept of fruition. The Elders give counsel and stand for the qualities of dissemination and release.

It is common wisdom in the Tarot community that the Minor Arcana corresponds to the events of everyday life. But I prefer to think of them as embodying the qualities and lessons of that particular element and direction. In a ritual circle, the four elements correspond to the four directions — east, south, west and north — and Spirit (the Major Arcana) anchors the center of the circle.

USING THE DECK AND BOOK

There are as many ways to work with Tarot cards as there are people who use them. Some people like to pull a card each morning and reflect on how its theme might give them insight for the day to come. Some people use the cards as writing prompts to start journaling for self-exploration. Others use them as inspiration for wildly creative projects or for brainstorming sessions. Some play games. And some use the cards as an oracle, a way of accessing divine guidance. We may perceive this guidance as coming from God/dess (the Great Mystery) or from the deep, Wise Self. The Tarot can be used as a spiritual weathervane. It can tell you which way the wind is blowing in your life at a given moment. But only you can set your sail and choose your course.

I hope that the Gaian Tarot helps you to connect with the Divine, in whatever way you conceive that to be. I hope you will be inspired to connect more deeply with the natural world in the place where you live. And I hope my images help create a culture of strong and gentle women and men, working together to create a beautiful, peaceful and just planet.

— *Joanna Powell Colbert*

Lummi Island, Washington

September 2008

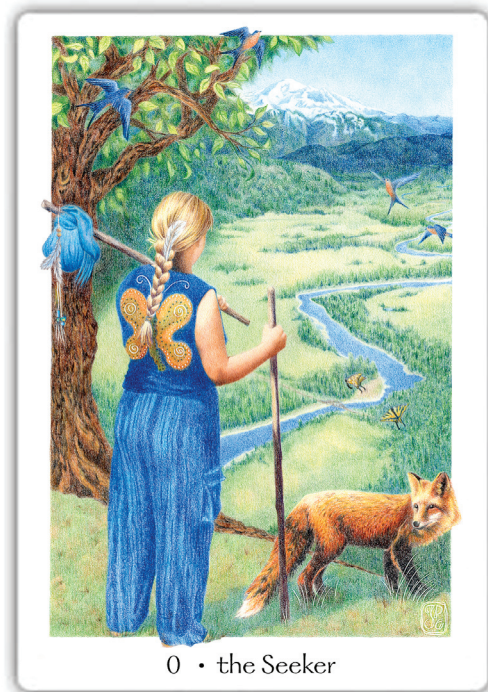
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3. Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*, New York: Basic Books, 1998
4. A traditional Native American chant popularized by the women’s choral group Libana on their 1986 recording *A Circle is Cast*. <www.libana.com>

○ – THE SEEKER

(THE FOOL)

A New Beginning



The Seeker begins a journey, taking a moment to contemplate the road ahead before setting off down the hillside. Perhaps she is murmuring a prayer, or setting an intention. She travels lightly, carrying all that she needs in her bundle. She has embroidered a butterfly on the back of her vest, signifying her delight in taking wing and setting out on her own path. The Great Mountain rises in the east, and the River slowly meanders on its own journey, from the mountain range down to the bay and the ocean beyond. The Seeker is at that stage of life between childhood and adulthood when anything is possible, and her life lies before her like a page waiting to be written. With Fox as her trickster companion, who knows what surprises may await her? Swallows and Swallowtails flit and flutter around her, guiding her way.

ORACLE

When you get this card in a reading . . .

You are starting a new journey, with a beginner's mind. It's time to hit the road, either metaphorically or literally. Every time you set out on a journey, even if it's only a one-day hike, you embark on a spiritual journey as well. Be open to all the twists and curves in the road ahead. Be ready for wonderful surprises, and make room for serendipity. Keep your heart open and maintain an attitude of innocence, trust and spontaneity. Take a risk! Before you is a brand new adventure — the chance for a fresh start and endless possibilities.

DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SEEKER

Number: 0

This card carries the number Zero, that familiar round shape. The Fool stands outside the rest of the Tarot deck and yet is still part of it. She or he makes the journey as Seeker, Vagabond, Jester, Clown, Eternal Child. She moves from innocence to wisdom and back to a different kind of innocence. Like the shape of the zero, the Fool represents the full circle — both the beginning and the end of the Journey, or as Bilbo Baggins would say: “there, and back again.”¹

Themes

Spiritual Quest

Innocence / Childlike Wonder

Pilgrimage

A New Beginning

Simplicity

Adventure

Serendipity

Taking a Risk

The Wisdom of the Fool

Symbols

White feather in hair: Purity, innocence.

Bundle with talismans: Her “baggage” and the prayers, hopes and aspirations she carries on the pilgrimage.

Walking stick: Helps her over the rough patches; something to lean on. May be a magic wand in disguise, a branch of the world tree that connects heaven and earth.

Mountain: Spiritual ascent, clear uncluttered mind, high ideals, peak experience, meeting place of heaven and earth (yang).

Valley: Fertility, cultivation, home (yin).

River: Boundary between one world and another; passage through various worlds; going with the flow; purification; refreshment.

Tree: Tree of life, world tree (*axis mundi*), connects 3 realms (Underworld, Middle World, Upper World).

Birds: Messengers between heaven and earth, soul-flight, freedom.

Swallows: Harbinger of summer, a good time for a journey. “The swallow is a graceful flyer, and spends little time on the ground.”² Take flight!

Butterflies: Lightness, joy, transformation, metamorphosis.

Fox: A trickster in southwestern Native American tradition; a shapeshifter in Chinese

myth. Blends in with surroundings, signifying stealth, cunning and camouflage.
Often seen at the border times of dawn and twilight when the veil is thin between the worlds; can be a guide to the Otherworld.

Journal Questions / Writing Prompts:

- What journey do I begin today?
- How can I cultivate “beginner’s mind”?
- How can I be more childlike?
- Have I lost my sense of wonder? How can I reconnect with it?
- Where or how in my life do I feel foolish?
- Where or how do I need to lighten up?
- What grand adventure would I like to have?
- Where do I need to take a risk?
- How do I make room for serendipity in my life?
- What is shapeshifting (changing shape) in my life?
- What am I carrying in my bundle? Is my baggage light or is it heavy?
- How can I simplify my life?
- What kind of healing does the Seeker offer me?
- What kind of healing can I offer the Earth through the example of the Seeker?

Exercise: Go for a Walk

Go on — get outside and go for a walk. Every day. You may be a couch potato or you may work out religiously in a gym, but you still need to feel the breeze on your face and the earth beneath your feet.

Julia Cameron swears by it. Going for a daily, twenty-minute walk is one of her three essential practices for freeing up creativity. Walking “nudges us out of our habitual thinking. It builds a bridge to higher consciousness. It allows us to access our intuition, to focus on solutions rather than problems.”³ You don’t *try* to do any of these things; they’re just the natural byproducts of a good, brisk walk.

Mindful walking, on the other hand, means walking slowly and matching your steps to the rhythm of your breath. It means being open to the present moment instead of succumbing to endless mind chatter. Joan Borysenko suggests that we repeat one of Thich Nhat Hanh’s meditative poems as we walk:

Breathing in I calm body and mind (inbreath)

Breathing out I smile (long outbreath)

Dwelling in the present moment (inbreath)

*I know this is the only moment (long outbreath).*⁴

If your mind wanders, bring it back to center, concentrating on your breath and the lifting and placing of your feet. Open your awareness to your surroundings, noticing the birds, the trees, the clouds, the flowers in season, the grasses, the weeds — while still keeping your attention on your breath.

If you go on a Nature Walk, you also want to be open to the present moment. Set out with the intention of observing what’s going on in the natural world around you. It’s wonderful if you can do this in the wilderness or a rural area, but even a city park will do. Take along a lively sense of curiosity. Wilderness awareness instructors teach skills that are very similar to meditation or mindfulness practices. Tracker Tom Brown Jr. teaches a way of moving

through the forest or field called “Fox Walking.” As with mindful walking, you slow your pace down to a quarter of your usual stride. Each foot is placed on the ground, ball first, before weight is placed on it. The center of gravity is in the hips. Fox walking enables you to move quietly through the countryside, with less impact on the land and with less strain on the body. You begin to become part of the landscape, instead of an interloper in it.⁵

As you walk with your awareness loose and open, you can also practice what Frank MacEowen calls an “omen walk”⁶ and what I like to call “taking a question for a walk.” As you walk, look for patterns in clouds or intertwined branches or the bark of trees. Listen for the cries of gulls or crows or other birds. Notice what plants and animals catch your eye. Take these images home with you and work with them as if they were dream symbols or details on a Tarot card. What messages might those omens hold for you?

Before you begin your journey or your walk around the block, take a moment to pause on the threshold. Breathe deeply, open up to Spirit, leave your worries behind. No other day has been exactly like this day. Step out onto a new path. Dream a new dream.

Prayer or Affirmation

“O Great Mystery, make of my life a walking prayer.”

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