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As told to Shy Watson, 2423 words.

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On the importance of retelling our stories

Author and tarot expert Sasha Graham discusses the intimacy of magic, becoming vulnerable through ritual, and freeing yourself through shadow work. What initially led you to Tarot?

Witchy, creepy, strange things turn me on. I'm a Halloween baby. My grandmother always called me the good witch of the East. I got my first tarot when I was 12. I ran home from the mall, tore the cellophane wrapper off the cards, so excited to read them. But flipping through the 78 cards was disheartening. I didn't know what I was looking at or how to read them. The experience became the impetus of my first book, *Tarot Diva*. I didn't want anyone to feel overwhelmed or intimidated by the process of reading tarot.

I really appreciated that you made it so accessible. You took away the intimidation. I feel like a lot of times you go into the metaphysical store and everyone seems to be safeguarding their secrets and staring you down and you feel like an idiot, like a child at a tattoo shop.

Exactly! You know, back in the '80s, I'd visit occult shops like The Magickal Childe in NYC. They went out of their way to make you feel like an outsider. How ironic that witchcraft could be as standoffish and snobby as Catholicism and other organized religion. But that's the nature of organized anything, from PTA moms to Pagan covens. The power of tarot and witchcraft is its solitary element. You don't need anyone else. You can be a solitary witch. Nature will teach you everything you need to know. A tarot practice is a sacred intimate relationship between you and the cards. Count yourself lucky if the right teacher appears. But to unlock true magic, you have to give yourself permission to step into the unknown.

What does tarot have to offer the average person?

Is there an average person? Is there such a thing? Tarot can be as simple and fun as getting a reading at a Halloween party. But tarot can be applied to anything. That's why authors, artists, fashion houses, and filmmakers are constantly sourcing the cards for themes and inspiration. Everyone under the age of 30 seems to now have at least one tarot deck. If you are an intimacy junkie, tarot is a great way to get to communicate. The minute you put the cards in front of someone, all of their defenses tend to come down. You can get intimate really quickly.

It's like when you go to therapy. You want to be honest with your therapist because you want the right answers. You have to be open in that kind of situation.

But it's challenging because even when we want to be open, we're so attached to our stories, our "stuff," things we carry and grind on for years and years. It is hard to be clear and open. Lighting a candle and shuffling a deck of tarot clears you. It's ritualistic, it's sensual. Your body and mind perk up. That's why sacred ceremony—from Catholicism to yoga to Judaism—all use the same elements: costume, incense, music... it opens the secret architecture of the soul. It seduces the senses into becoming vulnerable in a way that we can receive something, a message, a teaching. Once that space opens up inside of you, there's a bit of room for possibility. You can see, hear, or discover something you hadn't or couldn't have seen five minutes ago.

In *The Magic of Tarot*, you call yourself a storyteller. How does storytelling contribute to tarot and magic at large?

Storytelling and tarot are inseparable. And tarot is the story of *you*. When you read tarot for yourself, you flip a card, the story is about you, your potentials and possibilities. You are the master storyteller narrating what is seen in the cards. And when you sit down in front of a tarot reader or an intuitive or a psychic or a medium, they're telling you a story and you apply yourself to that story. And it's the same way that astrology columns work. There's only 12 star signs, but millions of people read their monthly scope and are like, "Oh my god, yes, that's so me," because we all bring our own experience to whatever story is told for us.

Storytelling and magic occurs when we expand the understanding of who we are, of what's possible, by retelling our stories in deeper, profound, and complex ways. Tarot is super helpful for that because it's a mirror of our psyche. It's a reflection of who we are. It's taking everything out of our brain and spreading it out on the table in front of us. So we're not stuck with it all inside our head.

You've traveled a lot for readings. In your book you mentioned the highest meditation cave in the world in the Himalayas—which I was very intrigued by—the Dead Sea, and Chinese tea houses. How did you make a career for yourself in magic, and how did these opportunities become viable?

I cast a travel spell. I had already published a ton of books and tarot decks. I craved travel and adventure. But I had a young daughter and finances didn't really allow for it. But I have to practice what I preach. I decided to cast a spell. I decided, okay, I'm going to for 15 minutes every day, put myself in the space of a traveler, of an adventurer. And so when I was in the city, I would spend 15 minutes walking around like a tourist.

But when I was up at our farmhouse in the Catskills, I traveled via nature. I found snow drifts that looked like the sands of the Serengeti. Or I gazed into puddles and found rivulets and it looked like I was flying over the great plains and looking down at rivers. I made a point to be in the traveler's mindset. And within a year and a half, my foreign rights started selling. I developed relationships with my foreign publishers. They started bringing me over to teach in their respective countries.

I had the incredible opportunity, it was actually four years ago this month, to visit Mount Everest base camp—the highest point on Earth—and the Dead Sea, all in the same span of four weeks. So, from the highest point on earth to the lowest point on earth. Or to put it in magical terms, from the earth's crown chakra to its root chakra. I'm going to tear up. I don't know that I have yet integrated the experience. It was extraordinary and it was just proof of magic, of the power that we have, and it was amazing.

Wow, the full scope.

It was wild. And to go from Tibet, a Buddhist country, which is heartbreakingly subjugated by the Chinese government, to move under prayer flags whipping in thin air, glacial lakes and ancient monasteries and meet stunning, peaceful people and then to be thrust into the thunderous clash inside the walls of Old Jerusalem and floating in the Dead Sea. There had been a flare-up on the Gaza Strip and it was one of those teetering points where they were on the edge of war again. And to go from such a high altitude where the entire religion is based on losing the ego and then to dive into the heart of the desert where religion and culture fight each other in the midst of religious Disneyland-style tourist culture..It was beautiful, wild, and absurd.

You explain much of tarot by use of archetypes. I was curious if you've studied Jung or if you bring psychoanalysis into your interpretation of the tarot.

Archetypal understanding helps you break tarot's visual code. I am not a formally trained Jungian but have read so many of Jung's books. He's fascinating. And I'm schooled in the Rider-Waite-Smith cards, that's my specialty. The RWS came out of a secret society that organized at the turn of the century in London, The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was not just a bunch of Dungeons and Dragons-like people meeting covertly in basements and backrooms. It was a collection of middle class and upper middle class artists and intellectuals that included novelist Bram Stoker and poet and playwright WB Yeats, actress Florence Farr and all of these interesting characters. And what's fascinating was the way that magic was developing at the turn of the century. It was unfolding at the very same time that Freud and Jung were developing psychology. So it was this big explosion. You had modernism and organized magic and psychology. It feels like it was all part of that same intelligence that was coming through at that period of time. So it aligns really well.

Your Dark Wood Tarot deck is super beautiful, an entire world onto itself. What was it like to work with illustrator Abigail Larson? And other artists in general?

Abigail is amazing. It took the publisher and I over a year to find the right artist for Dark Wood. But the minute I clicked on the link to Abigail's site and saw her images, I knew she was the one because Dark Wood is a shadow deck. I needed to seduce the reader into looking at the not-so-nice sides of their personality. Visually, I wanted to make it impossible to look away from their own shadow side. And Abigail's art style is cozy, dark, sexy, yet safe. It was just everything.

And, as far as working and collaborating with artists, it's interesting. When I make a tarot deck, I write the script for the entire deck first. It is like writing a film with 78 scenes and a guidebook. Once we find an artist, I take on the role also as a project manager as the deck springs to life. In an ideal world, the artist takes what you give them and turns it into something so much more beautiful than you could have ever imagined.

Tell us about one of the wildest readings you've ever given.

For some reason when I first started reading professionally, I had a lot of crazy, high stakes tarot readings. Talk about jumping into the deep end of the pool. These weren't 20-somethings looking for love. And in the midst of that period, I wound up reading tarot for an environmental activist who had been part of a group who had destroyed property in Seattle. The government had just passed new domestic terrorism laws because of September 11th. He came to me for a tarot reading because he was standing trial and on his way to jail. He wanted to know what the journey would be for him.

Now, the cards don't lie. And it was fascinating. I knew there were a lot of things he wasn't telling me. And he seemed like a really nice guy, but he was heading off to prison. I was scared I'd say the wrong thing, use the wrong words, and he'd head off to the "big house" with bad advice from me. Plus, you are sharing space and energy with the person you read for and I was completely unprepared for the intensity of the subject matter.

The job of a tarot reader is not to pass judgment on the person sitting across from you. You are there to read their cards. One time, this guy wanted to know if he could get away with cheating on his wife. The cards said thumbs up and I told him as much.

It is wild when you are super attracted and have insane chemistry with a person you are reading for. Years ago, I did a Fashion's Night Out event at Chrisian Louboutin in Soho. I read for a super sexy-on-every-level NFL star who was the bright young thing of that season. He'd just signed all these endorsement deals and we were up in the VIP lounge flipping cards.

And to be in an energetic alignment with someone who's also in an energetic alignment with what they're doing...it was like being on heroin. And he was gorgeous and it was just so fun. Readings can be hot and exciting and flirty and fun. They can also be terrifying because you're talking about really grave moments in people's lives and oftentimes the stakes couldn't be higher.

You teach classes. How's that been?

I never set out to teach. Public speaking and lecturing made me uncomfortable. In the '90s, I was a B-movie horror actress. I can memorize lines, become a character, and pretend to be someone else all day long. But it took me years to learn how to stand up and be my unscripted self.

My absolute favorite thing in the world to teach is shadow work. I am obsessed with shadow work for a million different reasons. Shadow work goes to the core of all of our issues. It is the most evolutionary examination that you can do, on every level. I lie awake at night and I am like, "Why, why, why does history repeat itself?" "Why would someone who is abused as a child grow up and abuse their own children knowing first hand how painful it is?" "Why does a culture or country that has suffered the ravages of war, wage war?" "Why do the amazing friends we had as teenagers grow up and morph into cranky versions of their parents 20 and 30 years later?"

All of this, personally and collectively, has to do with the shadow. All the things we know but hide from ourselves. Shadow work is about being honest with yourself, taking responsibility for yourself and your emotions, rather than projecting onto the people around you. And shadow work, when done, well, will set you free.

It feels like tarot, shadow work, and the magic I teach makes a difference. Makes the world a better place. Plus, I have to be that much more on point with all of my bullshit, because I would be a hypocrite if I was standing up there and preaching this stuff and not applying it to myself. So I love it. And that's sorcery of darkness, all potential. That's me. That's you, too. You are filled with magic and infinity. The question is, are you brave enough to unleash it?

Sasha Graham Recommends:

Believe in Magic.

Embrace the Fool card.

Do it now before you are dead.

Be kind to yourself.

Pull a tarot card every day.

Name

Sasha Graham

Vocation

tarot expert and writer

Fact

Bill Brady

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