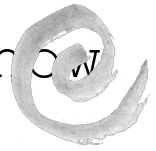


On valuing what you already know



Tarot author Jessica Dore discusses the time it takes to refine your craft, drawing on the knowledge you possess, and the value of making your work accessible.

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As told to Meredith Graves, 3270 words.

Tags: [Magic](#), [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Mental health](#), [Focus](#), [Inspiration](#).

How do you think a person goes about—or should go about, maybe—developing a practice with the tarot, developing a style and a voice?

I think people need to value the knowledge that they have from whatever fields or areas they're really into. For me, that was what it was. I was working in self-help publishing for years and reading about psychology, reading about behavior and change. And when I got my first tarot deck, I was really entrenched in a lot of these ideas: mindfulness, acceptance and self compassion, distress tolerance, emotion regulation. When I started to look at the cards, I saw those things. I think there's a lot of ways to connect whatever it is that you're really excited about with tarot, with the images and the symbols.

So I think when it comes to building a tarot *practice*, it's starting where you are and really honoring the knowledge that you've gathered. For a time I wanted to be a therapist, and I trained in graduate school to be a therapist. I remember having this experience doing my clinical internships, realizing all of the lived experience that I've had with mental illness. Basically, *"I can use that knowledge. Finally, I can use that knowledge somewhere and work with other people who are having similar experiences."* It's this idea of being able to draw on what you know, even if you think that what you know is useless, or doesn't have value.

It seems like so much beauty has come out of you being willing to approach material that can be difficult, or scary, in a way that drives you to make these generous offerings to the community and to other people. How do you approach stuff—that's-difficult?

It just takes a long time—with tarot, with learning about psychology, with learning about behavior change, with learning about how to experience emotions and tolerate distress, any of those things. I started to notice changes in my life after working with these psychology books and manuals and self-help books and workbooks for a few years after reading them. Reading these ideas, sometimes over and over and over again, it's almost like a mantra or something that you just have. It gets ingrained in you. Then you start to see: "Oh wait, I'm having a feeling that I want to escape. And I know that I'm going to do this thing to get away from it and okay, at least I'm seeing that I'm doing it, I'm going to do the thing anyway." Gradually you start to notice those things.

And same with tarot. I spent probably three years pulling a card every morning and every night when I first got my deck, just getting to know the cards. Yeah, there's no way around the time that things take, and learning. I think, "I'm loving the process" or, "I'm not loving the process," but understanding that the process is the thing.

Right now we're in a moment where a lot of people are talking about spirituality and tarot and witchcraft and similar topics on the internet, and not all of them are doing it with the size of audience that you've accumulated over years of making this work publicly available. What is it like to talk about arcane subject

matter with an audience that size, on platforms like Twitter?

Well, it's interesting because to me, the captions and the daily cards on Twitter, for example, the subject matter itself is usually not too esoteric at all. That's sort of the way it was able to amass a following. It was like, okay, I'm going to take these ideas that I was exposed to over several years of studying these behavioral science and behavioral health topics, and ideas about being human, and trying to grow and change and learn and understand the mechanics of how this human apparatus works with the thoughts and the feelings and the energy and the behavior, and how these things interact—and pairing them with an image from *specifically* one of Pamela Colman Smith's [tarot] images. It's never been totally clear to me whether I'm writing about tarot or I'm writing about the human experience. When I pitched my book, I actually was sort of like, "I kind of feel like this is a self-help book that's illustrated by tarot cards. Here's all these ideas, and here's an image that goes really well with this idea." So it's never felt like I'm trying to communicate something really esoteric.

It's funny and it's amazing that some of these same ideas sit and collect dust in self-help books that people buy—and it's well known in the health field that a huge percentage of those books are bought and they're never read. It doesn't matter how amazing or life changing the idea is if you package it in a way that is not accessible, not juicy and soul stirring, and doesn't draw you in. It's not going to help anybody. So I think when you pair those ideas, conversely, with an image from Pamela Colman Smith's tarot, it's like, "Whoa, now I'm paying attention. Now I'm listening. Now you have my interest." The idea becomes more soluble and catches you by surprise because it's a Twitter tarot reading. *I wasn't expecting to get this tip for how to do behavioral activation*, or something like that.

When did you begin to realize that writing about the tarot or writing with the tarot was kind of the passion?

So I worked in book publishing for six years and in 2016, I left. I was living in the Bay Area, applying to graduate school to do social work or marriage and family therapy, I wasn't sure which. I went to Jamaica, to Kingston, for five months; there was a yoga teacher there I wanted to practice with, I had some friends there, so I went, and it turned out there were a bunch of people around who were really into tarot. I felt so encouraged, in a way that I think I wasn't really feeling.

While I was in Kingston, I bought the domain for jessicadore.com and started a blog, which was originally like—I was posting vegan recipes, and wrote this thing about the Tower, just whatever was going on for me while I was freelancing, writing articles for Psych Central and doing work with other psychology publishers. I just very humbly started making these offerings, writing about tarot cards, started a monthly newsletter, and sharing tidbits from the newsletter on Twitter.

Honestly, this is like, very unromantic, but the way that I knew it was a thing that I wanted to be doing—I remember I was in Philadelphia, because I was planning to move here and looking at apartments. Actually, at that time, I thought I wasn't going to go to graduate school. I was going to become a bread baker. I was really into sourdough and thought I wanted to be a bread baker. So while I was in Philly, meeting bakers I was hoping to work with and looking for apartments, I posted a tarot card on Twitter—I think it was the Knight of Pentacles or something. It was the card that I had pulled for myself and a bunch of people liked it and I was like—oh, cool. I just kept doing it, and I didn't have very many followers, then it just kind of took off; then the newsletter started to get attention, the platform's building, people are paying attention to what I'm doing. 2017, things started making a little bit of sense. I started grad school fall of 2017 and through grad school, my writing started getting attention, my writing on social media, but also my newsletters – it just all happened fast. Now I feel like I do write about tarot, but I mostly write about the human experience in psychology and philosophy and I read all kinds of things.

What are things people should think about when they're getting ready to read for other people, if they choose to do that with tarot cards?

Where I've focused a lot of my energy is actually the ideas that are taken on by people who want to be tarot readers, or see themselves as tarot readers. I remember myself, when I started reading cards, I had all of these ideas about what I was *supposed to do* that weren't congruent with what I had learned over the years of reading

books about how to do counseling and therapy, which is so much more about the person feeling safe and feeling empowered and all of these things – values that really you don't see at all in a more traditional style of tarot reading, which is very much like, okay, the tarot reader is the expert and they're up here.

I mean, this is a life skill, you don't have to be a tarot reader—What is your idea of what a tarot reader is supposed to do? It's almost like, you make a list of those things, then on the other side make a list of, "What are the things that actually feel true to how I understand relating with people and being in conversation with people, and what are the qualities that make for a good conversation and a good dialogue." What do people that I care about generally need when they're exploring life questions? How do I create an experience that is truly collaborative? How do I use the cards to draw in?

Another of [psychologist and author James] Hillman's ideas is that of psychological faith. He talks about it as trust in the imaginal. It's like trusting in image, and you can evoke that in a person that you're working with. That person, as a human being, has connection to image inherently. And if you choose to get in the way of allowing them to access the connection that they have to image, then you sort of hog that for yourself. "I'm the only one that gets to connect with the image and translate it." And it's like, that's such a disturbance!

So you can invite the person just to sit there and look at art. What do you do when you go to a museum? You don't—okay well unless you're like the docent or something, and you're giving the speech about every piece—you don't have to be that kind of tarot reader.

What about establishing a good, safe physical practice of reading—not so much the understanding or voice, but literally how you shuffle or choose cards, the method? What do you think are things that people could keep in mind, and what are some things you yourself do?

I think this is another area where I think people are often surprised by how basic I am with every class that I do. People are like, so what do you do? Do you do any kind of cleansing or drawing like energetic boundaries or that sort of thing? And I mean, over the years I've experimented with various things like that.

But really, my rituals are things like saying basically the same things to every person that I work with in the beginning—"okay, so here's how it's going to go," and using the same sort of metaphor for how I describe the cards. "We're going to think of them as doorways. We're going to walk through them. And we will have walked through each one before the end of our time together. Some of them are going to have a little behind them, and some will have a lot and some will have tunnels leading to the other ones, and some will be sort of just a tiny closet and you'll have to look really hard to find anything of value." And I mean... that's it. Oh, and: I use the same deck. I use Pamela Colman Smith's deck *exclusively*.

The advice that I would give to people is: experiment, and just really be paying attention to what's feeling good for you. I mean, part of my thing has been that I work with tarot in a different way than I understood a person could work with tarot when I started tarot readings. It's not that I want to secularize or take any spiritual life out of the practice, I don't want to do that at all, actually. But I also understand that first of all, people are very diverse in their spiritual beliefs, practices and what they're comfortable with and what they're not comfortable with. Not to keep saying straightforward, but I'm going to use very straightforward language, very secular language with you. I'm going to explain to you a metaphor. I'm going to say, basically, we're going to take a look at these and see what comes up. And those were the rituals that felt right for me.

I think depending on who you're working with and in what context, experiment with what feels good for you. Maybe it's something that is really created organically in every meeting with another person, like you're checking in with them, and you're saying, "Are there rituals that you would like to do? Is there something you want to burn or a prayer you want to say, or do you want to call anyone into the room that you might see as a guide, or you would want to be here?" Are there ways to open the discussion for that so that people can bring in every spiritual aids they want? That also gives people the chance to say, "No, I'm good." That's probably what I would do—"No, I'm all right. We'll take it from here"—but yeah, I think just experimenting and seeing what makes sense and what feels right, which is what I've done. Then once I find something that makes sense, I tend to stick with it for years on end.

What cool new things did the cards teach you in the process of actually writing this book?

Well, that is a big one. When you're working with the cards, it's not in a reductionist way, saying, "Okay, I'm going to figure out what these mean, and I'm going to nail it down. And I'm going to give the most precise interpretation.", which is not at all what you get. It's a set of reflections that are open ended: here's one doorway, then you walk through that and there's hopefully 20 more. That was what I wanted to do with each of the pieces about each of the cards, and that in itself was a tremendous learning experience for me. I went in with my little understandings of the cards. And then I worked really closely, closer than I was before with them, trying to write the book and then turned in the first draft and then got the first draft back and had been studying tarot and studying other things for six months at that point and had 10,000 new secrets that I wanted to share.

And at a certain point, my editor was like, stop. You can't just be adding things. Actually, it was the piece that I wrote about the Sun, where I connected it with the golden ball motif in fairy tales and the Frog Prince story where the princess is playing, and she has this golden ball and it bounces down the well, and then she meets this frog and she makes a deal with him. Marie-Louis von Franz says it symbolizes the self, that it bounces into the forest accidentally. It has this way of bringing you into these shadowy spaces that you wouldn't necessarily consciously choose to go, but somehow you continuously find yourself in exactly the situations that scare you the most.

And you're like... how did this happen? But that addition, for instance, of the Frog Prince story came *after* I turned in the first draft and I made all these cases. I rewrote some of the cards entirely - and my editor was like, "Well, it was really challenging that you did so much rewriting, but the thing about the Frog Prince was really good. So I had to let you keep it." And I was like, "Yeah, I know the Frog Prince is awesome. And an awesome way to understand that card."

I think what I learned was that the tarot is endless, and books are so strange in that you have to stop at a certain point and it's really counter to the energy that's trying to express itself through the tarot. So thankfully, the ancillary materials to this book are the deck of cards themselves. You can ideally have the book beside the cards, and the book can support them, but the cards will continue to create more webs and fan out and blow your mind out of this world. And the book will kind of stay flat as books do. But yeah, I mean, hopefully I can be like the *Meditations on the Tarot* guy and can be like a time traveler - or the book itself, not me.

If you look at the legend, the mystics were sitting around, wondering where they would put their secrets for union with the absolute, and they eventually decided to tuck them into the set of playing cards so that they could actually stand the test of time - unlike books, which get burned and oral history, which gets so obscure. They were talking about how tarot, it has this flourishing life and then it goes underground and then it comes back and then it goes underground and it comes back, and when it comes back, it has to be refreshed according to the day and to the interest and the sensibilities of the people at the time.

So not to sound like I think I'm doing something so amazing. It's not even that. It's just, I feel like that's what this is. A lot of the things that I was reading about tarot, even Rachel Pollack's *78 Degrees of Wisdom*, which is probably one of the most popular tarot books, if not *the* most popular tarot book that I recommend to people all the time-I didn't understand 75% of what I read in that book when I first bought it. That just wasn't the language that I understood. It didn't make sense to me. It didn't feel relevant to me. And so, okay, how do we look at these images and update them for the mythology that we're creating today, and in terms that make sense to us that we can actually use, so that they're *not* this esoteric thing?

And maybe that's blasphemy, you know what I mean? Maybe to take something esoteric like tarot and do these interpretations that are like self-help style, like pop psychology, easy to digest - maybe that's total blasphemy, just like maybe it's blasphemy to take ideas from a field like the counseling field, and share them far and wide on Twitter. Maybe that's blasphemy too. I don't know. I just know that some things feel like the right thing to do.

Jessica Dore Recommends:

Five books I'm excited to read this winter:

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, by Gloria Anzaldúa

A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

Longing for Running Water, Ivonne Gebara

Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy, Philip Cushman

The Beginning of Difference: Theodore Hiebert

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