CHAPTER 4

HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND TAROT SYMBOLISM

In front of me there are twenty-two pictures, the twenty-two Major Arcana of Tarot. The word *Arcana* derives from Latin *arca* as a chest; *arcere* as a verb means to shut or to close; symbolically, *Arcanum* (singular) is a tightly shut treasure chest holding a secret: its implicit meaning. In reference to Greek etymology, *Arcana* relate to *arce* that means origin or inception. Jung conceptualized the archetypes of the collective unconscious as primordial, *original*, images engraved in our psychic constitution; these archaic images may have inspired the artists who designed the Tarot pictures.

The pictures, following each other in a Tarot deck, resemble the illustrations to a fairy tale with its classical theme of a hero’s (or a simpleton’s) journey in his quest for a hidden treasure. The journey is usually full of challenges yet the hero learns from his very experiences; he becomes capable of overcoming obstacles, defeating adversaries or, more importantly, winning over his own complexes, anxieties, and fears personified in the variety of adversaries he meets along his symbolic journey; he becomes wiser and more resilient. For Jung, symbols express themselves via the “images of contents which…transcend consciousness. … [The] contents are real… they are agents with which it is not only possible but absolutely necessary for us to come to terms” (Jung, CW 5, 114).

Sallie Nichols (1980) in her book on Jung and Tarot commented on the correlations between Petrarch’s sonnets and the Tarot Major Arcana, the images of which are sometimes called Trumps. Trumps means Triumphs, and in Petrarch’s sonnets a series of allegorical characters each fought and triumphed over the weaker preceding one, each image symbolically winning over its own precursor by the characters becoming emotionally stronger, more resilient and more conscious after overcoming the challenges of emerging life cycle issues. Mystical allegories are usually based on the eternal motif of virtues “trumping” vices, eventually “triumphing” in reaching the mystical truth, symbolized by the Holy Grail. The same happens during the course of the Tarot archetypal journey where and when an individual Ego is given an opportunity to become the real Self, a whole person.

An isolated human soul as a fragmented spark of primordial Adam whose soul, according to the Jewish Kabbalah, embraced all the souls of humanity, has a chance to recollect with others within the soul of the world, *Anima Mundi*, thus to become whole, to be healed. As Nichols (1980) reminds us, the word “whole” is etymologically synonymous with “holy”, and the original meaning of the word “to heal” was “to make whole”. Jung thought that contemporary neuroses relate to humanity’s lost capacity for holiness and the wholeness of spiritual traditions. Many Hasidic tales tell archetypal stories, in which a person has to go on a journey and carry
necessary, even if seemingly insignificant, tasks that eventually contribute to rescuing
the holy sparks held in captivity.

Laurens van der Post, Jung’s biographer, who called him the greatest among the
great, pointed out that to consider Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious to
be his main interest and his main contribution, is a misunderstanding. A far greater
mystery for Jung remained the realm of human consciousness and its profound
relationship with the universal unconscious as the connection between the individual
psyche and the world. This connection expresses itself by means of the subtle
language of the unconscious. This expressive language is different from, and appears
to be alien to, the orderly ways we usually process information consciously. It
draws from what Freud used to call the archaic means of communication prior to
our logical reasoning that employs “grown-up” conscious thoughts expressed in
verbal language.

The reductive meaning of consciousness as merely an intellectual and rational
state of mind has been challenged by Jung. Identifying consciousness with just an
ability of logical reasoning and rational thought is a simplified linear approach that
goes back to the days of Descartes’ motto, “I think, therefore I am”. Here we are,
sick and deprived of meaning (van der Post in Nichols, 1980); overwhelmed by the
mental disorientation and alienation caused by the narrow boundaries of our ego-
consciousness reduced to an isolated Cartesian Cogito. Yet, becoming conscious
of our many unconscious issues helps; also “recognizing what we are doing, helps,
and …our self-understanding can expand the realm of our choices and possibilities”
(Viorst, 1992, p. 4).

In the due course of the archetypal journey through the array of the Tarot pictures,
the life situations and the feelings associated with them are being externalized and
provide an opportunity to literally look at them as if from the outside while they are
spread on a table in one or other pictorial layout. The journey through Tarot images
is practically a dynamic search for identity and the discovery of meaning and
value in our lives via creative encounters with the unconscious in the process of
individuation. Even if symbols constituting the journey may appear to be (as we
said in chapter 3) of “obscure origin and significance [they remind us of] the set of
pictures in the Tarot cards [that] were distantly descended from the archetypes of
transformation” (Jung, CW 9i, 81, cited in Gad, 1994, p. 179).

So here they are, the twenty-two pictures of the Major Arcana (Fig. 4.1), the
archetypal images of transformation. At the outset, I would like to emphasize
that the descriptions presented below are only general. In chapter 8 we will see how
the same images situated in different contexts and pertaining to different people
acquire specific connotations, thus combining universality with particularity. Another
caveat is that even if the Arcana follow each other in a seemingly linear sequence,
it does not mean that human development proceeds exactly through these successive
stages, one after another. The specific layouts for the 15 participants, in chapter 8,
will have demonstrated the archetypal constellations of both Major and Minor
Arcana in a variety of unpredictable combinations.

Real lives are not fairy tales; individual circumstances and free will do play
important roles. The archetypes do provide a ground for our spontaneous actions