Years ago, when I told my brother I was studying the tarot, his first comment was, “How can a deck of cards possibly tell you anything about anything?” I laughed because I thought his reply summed up pretty well the common sense view of the cards. I, too, had my doubts about the tarot, but I found out that the cards can make a real difference in the way you perceive and deal with the challenges in your life. In this introduction, I’ll try to explain why.

The origin of the tarot is a mystery. We do know for sure that the cards were used in Italy in the fifteenth century as a popular card game. Wealthy patrons commissioned beautiful decks, some of which have survived. The Visconti-Sforza, created in 1450 or shortly thereafter, is one of the earliest and most complete.¹

Later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the cards were discovered by a number of influential scholars of the occult. These gentlemen were fascinated by the tarot and recognized that the images on the cards were more powerful than a simple game would suggest. They revealed (or created!) the “true” history of the tarot by connecting the cards to Egyptian mysteries, Hermetic philosophy, the Kabbalah, alchemy, and other mystical systems. These pursuits continued into the early part of the twentieth century when the tarot was incorporated into the practices of several secret societies, including the Order of the Golden Dawn.²

Although the roots of the tarot are in the occult tradition, interest in the cards has expanded in the last few decades to include many perspectives. New decks have been created that reflect these interests. There are Native American, herbal, mythological, and Japanese decks, among others.³

The tarot is most commonly viewed as a tool for divination. A traditional tarot reading involves a seeker—someone who is looking for answers to personal questions—and a reader—someone who knows how to interpret the cards. After the seeker has shuffled and cut the deck, the reader lays out the chosen cards in a pattern called a spread. Each position in the spread has a meaning, and each card has a meaning as well. The reader combines these two meanings to shed light on the seeker’s question.

A simple process, but rarely presented in a simple way. In films, we always see the tarot being used in a seedy parlor or back room. An old woman, seated in shadows, reads the cards for a nervous, young girl. The crone lifts her wrinkled finger and drops it ominously on the Death card. The girl draws back, frightened by this sign of her impending doom.

This aura of darkness clings to the tarot cards even now. Some religions shun the cards, and the scientific establishment condemns them as symbols of unreason, a holdover from an unenlightened past. Let us set aside these shadowy images for now and consider the tarot for what it is—a deck of picture cards. The question becomes, what can we do with them?

The answer lies with the unconscious—that deep level of memory and awareness that resides within each of us, but outside our everyday experience. Even though we ignore the action of the unconscious most of the time, it profoundly affects everything we do. In his writings, Sigmund Freud stressed the irrational, primitive aspect of the unconscious. He thought that it was the home of our most unacceptable desires and urges. His contemporary Carl Jung emphasized the positive, creative aspect of the unconscious. He tried to show that it has a collective component that touches universal qualities.

We may never know the full range and power of the unconscious, but there are ways to explore its landscape. Many techniques have been developed for this purpose—psychotherapy, dream interpretation, visualization, and meditation. The tarot is another such tool. Consider for a moment a typical card in the tarot deck, the Five of Swords. This card shows a man holding three swords and looking at two figures in the distance. Two other swords lie on the ground. As I look at this card, I begin to create a story around the image. I see a man who seems satisfied with some battle he has won. He looks rather smug and pleased that he has all the swords. The others look downcast and defeated.

What I have done is take an open-ended image and project a story onto it. To me, my view is the obvious one—the only possible interpretation of this scene. In fact, someone else could have imagined a totally different story. Maybe the man is trying to pick up the swords. He's calling to the others to help him, but they refuse. Or, maybe the other two were fighting, and he convinced them to lay down their arms.

The point is that of all possible stories, I chose a certain one. Why? Because it is human nature to project unconscious material onto objects in the environment. We always see reality through a lens made up of our own inner state. Therapists have long noted this tendency and have created tools to assist in the process. The famous Rorschach inkblot test is based on such projection.4

Projection is one reason why the tarot cards are valuable. Their intriguing pictures and patterns are effective in tapping the unconscious. This is the personal aspect of the tarot, but the cards also have a collective component. As humans, we all have certain common needs and experiences. The images on the tarot cards capture these universal moments and draw them out consistently. People tend to react to the cards in similar ways because they represent archetypes.

Introduction to the Tarot

Over many centuries, the tarot has evolved into a collection of the most basic patterns of human thought and emotion.

Consider the Empress. She stands for the Mother Principle—life in all its abundance. Notice how her image conjures up feelings of luxuriance. She is seated on soft, lush pillows, and her robe flows in folds around her. In the Empress, we sense the bounty and sensual richness of nature.

The power of the tarot comes from this combination of the personal and the universal. You can see each card in your own way, but, at the same time, you are supported by understandings that others have found meaningful. The tarot is a mirror that reflects back to you the hidden aspects of your own unique awareness.

When we do a tarot reading, we select certain cards by shuffling, cutting, and dealing the deck. Although this process seems random, we still assume the cards we pick are special. This is the point of a tarot reading after all—to choose the cards we are meant to see. Now, common sense tells us that cards chosen by chance can't hold any special meaning—or can they?

To answer this question, let's look at randomness more closely. Usually we say that an event is random when it appears to be the result of the chance interaction of mechanical forces. From a set of possible outcomes—all equally likely—one occurs, but for no particular reason.

This definition includes two key assumptions about random events: they are the result of mechanical forces, and they have no meaning. First, no tarot reading is solely the product of mechanical forces. It is the result of a long series of conscious actions. We decide to study the tarot. We buy a deck and learn how to use it. We shuffle and cut the cards in a certain way at a certain point. Finally, we use our perceptions to interpret the cards.

At every step, we are actively involved. Why then are we tempted to say a reading is "the chance interaction of mechanical forces?" Because we can't explain just how our consciousness is involved. We know our card choices aren't deliberate, so we call them random. In fact, could there be a deeper mechanism at work, one connected to the power of our unconscious? Could our inner states be tied to outer events in a way that we don't yet fully understand? I hold this possibility out to you.

The other feature of a random event is that it has no inherent meaning. I roll a die and get a six, but there is no purpose to this result. I could just as easily roll a one, and the meaning would be the same—or would it? Do we really know these two outcomes are equal? Perhaps there is meaning and purpose in every event, great or small, but we don't always recognize it.

At a party many years ago, I had the sudden urge to pick up a die sitting on the floor. I knew with great conviction that I would use this die to roll each number individually. As I began, the laughter and noise of the party faded away. I felt a growing excitement as a different number appeared with each roll. It was only with the last successful roll that my everyday awareness returned, and I sat back, wondering what had happened.

At one level, these six rolls were unrelated, random events, but at another level, they were very meaningful. My inner experience told me this was so, even though an outside observer
might not agree. What was the meaning? At the time, it was a lesson in the strange interaction between mind and matter. Today, I know it had another purpose—to be available to me now, some twenty-five years later, as an illustration for this very lesson!

Meaning is a mysterious quality that arises at the juncture of inner and outer realities. There is a message in everything—trees, songs, even trash—but only when we are open to perceiving it. The tarot cards convey many messages because of the richness of their images and connections. More importantly, tarot readings communicate meaning because we bring to them our sincere desire to discover deeper truths about our lives. By seeking meaning in this way, we honor its reality and give it a chance to be revealed.

If there is meaning in a reading, where does it come from? I believe it comes from that part of ourselves that is aware of the divine source of meaning. This is an aspect of the unconscious, yet it is much more. It acts as a wise advisor who knows us well. It understands what we need and leads us in the direction we need to go. Some people call this advisor the soul, the superconscious, or the higher self. I call it the Inner Guide because that is the role it plays in connection with the tarot.

Each of us has an Inner Guide that serves as a fountain of meaning for us. Your Inner Guide is always with you because it is part of you. You can’t destroy this connection, but you can ignore it. When you reach for your tarot deck, you signal to your Inner Guide that you are open to its wisdom. This simple act of faith allows you to become aware of the guidance that was always there for you.

We are meant by nature to rely on the wisdom of our Inner Guide, but somehow we have forgotten how to access it. We trust our conscious minds instead, and forget to look deeper. Our conscious minds are clever, but unfortunately, they just don’t have the full awareness we need to make appropriate choices day by day.

When we are operating from our conscious minds, we often feel as if events are forced upon us by chance. Life seems to have little purpose, and we suffer because we do not really understand who we are and what we want. When we know how to access our Inner Guide, we experience life differently. We have the certainty and peace that comes from aligning our conscious will with our inner purpose. Our path becomes more joyous, and we see more clearly how we bring together the scattered elements of our lives to fulfill our destinies.

I use the tarot because it is one of the best tools I have found to make the whispers of my Inner Guide more available consciously. The ideas, images, and feelings that emerge as I work through a reading are a message from my Inner Guide. How do I know there is a message, and it’s not just my imagination? I don’t, really. I can only trust my experience and see what happens.

You do not really need the tarot to access your Inner Guide. The cards serve the same function as Dumbo’s magic feather. In the Disney movie, Dumbo the Elephant really could fly on his own, but he didn’t believe it. He placed all his faith on the special feather he held in his trunk. He thought this feather gave him the power to fly, but he found out differently when it blew away, and he was forced to fall back on his own resources.

The tarot cards may help you fly until you can reach your Inner Guide on your own. Don’t worry for now about how this might happen. Just play with the cards, work through the lessons and exercises, and see if you don’t experience a few surprises.