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Cards for Chaos

Pen and colored pencil on bristol

This installation represents a form of healing I use to unpack and move through a plethora of emotions: tarot. My choice to make tarot cards centered around my topic – alternate approaches to healing trauma. These cards were introduced to me when I was at a very low point by a trusted mental health counselor of mine, hoping to provide me with a new coping tool. Tarot readings allow one to explore their day-to-day burdens through an outside source, interpreting the cards in a way that rings true. They've helped to guide me through both everyday troubles and traumatic experiences, inspiring me to make a deck of my own.

For this project, because there are 78 cards, I selected 22 to draw: the Major Arcana. I illustrated each card with an important person in my life in correspondence with the card meanings; the Major Arcana represents big life events and these people have made great impacts on my life. I drew inspiration from a multitude of tarot decks, making sure to keep the imagery that carries from deck to deck while incorporating my personal artistic style. Each card was drawn using pen, with the back design being produced using colored pencil, photoshop, and sticker paper. The process of making this installation was tedious, providing me lots of time to reflect on my relationships with the people I drew. The figures include Oxbow peers, friends, family members, and therapists, with the most painful yet cathartic one being my abuser. I made this piece to recognize and appreciate both the healing tarot has provided me with and those who have helped and hindered that journey. The viewer is left with only imagery and titles to interpret the cards, allowing each drawing to evoke different emotions.

Tarot: a Tool for Trauma Healing



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On January 25, 2021, I was admitted to a mental health residential program. Harmful thoughts had been building up internally for awhile, and as I am a very stubborn person, I hid the dark, scary feelings from the very people who needed to hear them. Light was shed on those thoughts after I had a two-hour meltdown to my parents, and within three days I was on standby for a spot at the program, Edgewood. During the week-long buildup, I was forced to put those scary feelings and urges on hold; I wasn't going to be in a completely safe, self-harm proof location for 7 whole days. It was ironic, as the very reason I was going to the program was because my thoughts were so hard to quiet down. The seven days passed, I miraculously kept myself safe, and was prepared to be admitted.

Upon arrival, already anxious, I had to get a tuberculosis test, where they shove a needle in your arm and leave a little bubble under your skin—what a warm welcome! The anxiety died down soon after, when I was greeted by a bubbly, green-haired counselor wearing a bunny hat. Her name was Noreen, and she quickly became one of my favorite staff; a safe person and a little speck of joy in an otherwise gloomy environment. Although she wasn't my therapist there, I confided in her quite a bit, and we grew close. I shared how much I was struggling to find hope; it seemed like no matter how much effort I put into healing, my thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and environment would all stay the same. I was tired.

One of those days, she asked me if I'd ever heard of tarot. I answered yes, and that I've always been intrigued. She proceeded to tell me she had an extra deck and that she wanted me to learn, for it was something that could keep my mind and body occupied without engaging in one of my old patterns. Not there, but when I was home, more stable and in my personal safe place. That gift gave me something to look forward to when I got out. It gave me a new thing to learn, to

practice, and to share with others. I highly doubt she knew that gesture would evolve into 'Past Client J's' final project for art school.

Before the Final Project was even introduced, I had planned on making tarot cards. Ideas around the medium and number of cards evolved throughout my brainstorming process, but the general theme stayed the same. I made sure to choose something personal but not distressing, challenging but not overwhelming; I'm making 22 cards, the Major Arcana, not the whole 78 card deck. When the assignment was explained, and I discovered I would be writing a research paper, I was a bit caught off guard, unsure of what to focus on. The history of tarot would inform my art piece, but it wasn't something that I wanted to write ten pages about. While wrestling with ideas, I realized what drew me to tarot in the first place. It wasn't the history, it was the emotional regulation aspect. Tarot is about focusing on an intention, or what you want to get out of the reading, and then interpreting the cards in a way that feels true to you. I've been able to do readings about strained relationships, bouts of depression, traumatic events, and other aspects in my life that need clarity. This outlet not only allows me to process difficult, confusing happenings, it keeps my mind and hands busy, bringing my loud head back to the present. The reflection I did that brought me to these realizations also led me to my essential question: how can different approaches to processing trauma make a meaningful impact? This topic allows me to write about methods of trauma healing and the art of tarot while explaining my personal relationship to both.

Trauma is treated in a number of different ways, CBT, DBT, and EMDR being the most common psychotherapy approaches, all of which I've tried. CBT is cognitive behavioral therapy, meaning the focus is on thought patterns. It's used to help patients notice where their thoughts go, what cycles they go through, and how to either shift out of them or build healthier ones. I began CBT therapy in sixth grade to address my anxiety and insomnia. I shared what was making me

anxious and my therapist provided mindfulness tools to help soothe. As sessions went by, my sleep improved immensely; nighttime panic attacks became rarer and rarer. This form of therapy changed my thought patterns around sleep and got me in touch with a psychiatrist, highly improving my quality of life for some time.

DBT is dialectical behavioral therapy, another form of cognitive therapy, where the therapist works to shift thoughts and behaviors while forming a balance between acceptance and change. It uses four main skills: distress tolerance, emotional regulation, interpersonal effectiveness, and mindfulness. DBT addresses the harmful behaviors first, then provides over 20 tools to use in situations of confrontation, suffering, overwhelming urges, and more. My experiences with DBT came years after the insomnia had dissipated—my mental health struggles now included depression and anorexia on top of the pre-existing anxiety. I was acting on self-harm urges, eventually getting me placed in a DBT therapy group, which involved me and 10 other self-destructive teenagers sitting at a table, discussing how shitty we felt. Staff would listen and validate, then bring our attention to a few DBT skills that coincided with our complaints. As much as I didn't want the help at first, my willfulness became willingness and I absorbed so much. Granted, I did the program two separate times, but I came out the other end no longer self-harming. On top of many things, DBT taught me how to keep myself safe even when my mind was extremely dangerous.

The last form of therapy mentioned is EMDR, or eye-movement desensitization reprocessing, used almost exclusively for processing trauma. EMDR involves building skills around distress tolerance with a therapist, describing and visualizing the traumatic happening, and engaging in a form of bilateral stimulation, whether it be rapid eye movement or tapping different body parts. Slowly, the therapist has the client shift into more pleasant thoughts and memories,

with the hope of reducing the emotional charge provoked by remembering such events. Unlike CBT and DBT, I'm still in this kind of therapy and in turn don't have the ability to share how my life has changed post-EMDR.

Though therapy has been extremely beneficial to my mental health needs—that is a fact— it is not a solution to everything. I've found some form of relief for all of the mental health issues that were directly caused by traumatic events, but am yet to find relief around the events themselves in therapy. Talking about or visualizing the trauma makes things worse, as the memories send my body into a state of shock, leading to flashbacks and dissociation. Not talking about trauma makes things worse as well, since healing cannot happen without acknowledging the happenings. In this seemingly lose-lose situation, my only option apart from continuing to silently suffer is to personally find ways to escape the state of dissociation that remembering causes. I brought up the dissociation with my EMDR therapist, and she told me to find grounding practices to bring my mind back to my surroundings. She told me sensory and tactile activities might help but that she could not give me a specific exercise; what calms one person doesn't necessarily calm the next. It's personal. I reflected on this long and hard, and the most grounding thing I found was reading tarot cards.

Tarot is, simply speaking, a deck of cards used for divination. They originated in 15th century Italy and were used for traditional card games, similar to bridge. Each deck has 78 cards; the Minor Arcana, made up of 56 cards divided into 4 suits, and the Major Arcana, an additional 22 cards with no suits. The Major Arcana cards are seen as the most valuable in the deck, both for games and divine purposes. Each one holds a different illustration, which often inspired game players to assign them traits and personalities. The cards became storytelling characters, each with their own personal role. It wasn't until the 1700s that Jean-Baptiste Alliette connected these stories

to divination. He believed the cards came from ideas from the Book of Thoth, an ancient Egyptian writing, and produced his own deck with a set of meanings for each card that borrow ideas from the Egyptian text. From then on, more and more decks were made with specific divination purposes and tarot's main function became readings.

Tarot readings are a way to either give or gain insight on a specific matter. One starts with a focus and an intention on what they want to gain from the reading. They bring this to a card reader, who either does a spread or simply draws cards to interpret the meanings of the cards within the context of the participant's intention. This is meant to bring awareness to certain aspects of one's life, not to tell them how to live. Because each card has so many meanings attributed to it, card readers are able to make the reading personal, explaining the card in a way that makes sense to the participant. When Major Arcana cards are drawn, they are meant to represent big change and life events, whereas the Minor Arcana are meant to bring light to day-to-day happenings. The suits correspond with different traits, as do numbers; readings require a lot of knowledge and a *lot* of patience, but the intricacy makes each one even more rewarding.

When I'm dissociating, spiraling, or dealing with any sort of intense emotion, I feel out of control. All the things that help involve redirecting my attention to the present, usually by doing something tactile or distracting. Tarot does both. I burn incense, pick out crystals, knock on my cards, shuffle, and lay them out. Each of those actions are sensory, shifting my focus to things I am touching, seeing, and smelling in the present moment. At the same time, I'm concentrating on my intentions for the reading. Those suffocating, confusing emotions I carry going into a reading can be sorted out through the cards. Unpacking thoughts through personal interpretation rather than through a clinician's interpretation empowers me in a sense. I am in control. I can choose what I want to address and process it at my own pace. There is no time limit or set schedule for

when to do readings. And as helpful as therapy can be, being restricted to one 50 minute session a week does not allow me to share everything I need. Often, I have very eventful weeks but come to a blank in therapy, because I didn't have the session in the exact moment I needed. Feeling constricted while sharing deep, dark thoughts isn't healthy, in my opinion. This is not to say therapy is always constricting, but when a session ends while I'm getting something out, it feels that way. Through tarot, I have all the time in the world.

Tarot has personally helped me quite a bit, but on a broader scale it's a very ornate, calming coping mechanism that can be beneficial to many. It falls into one of the categories of DBT skills: mindfulness. Mindfulness is all about awareness, whether it be of your thoughts, feelings, sensations, behaviors, or surroundings. Tarot forces one to bring awareness to what needs to be unpacked and accepted, while simultaneously bringing light to new ideas and directions. It's a form of meditation. On another note, the cards always point to ideas of self-compassion and how to move forward from tough points rather than attack or shame the reader. Readings can be a form of teaching to those who need guidance in a way that enforces radical acceptance and healthy change, further linking tarot to different branches of DBT. Although tarot may seem like a silly deck of cards, it is an extremely safe and comforting form of meditation, almost like a ritual, that can aid one through many mental struggles.

As previously mentioned, I was given a deck almost a year ago by an adult who showed an immense amount of care towards me. Two months ago, the same thing happened. Oxbow is a fantastic place. I have met so many wonderful characters, made so much artistic progress, and grown so much as a person here. Unfortunately, I am still burdened with the same thoughts and emotions I have at home, just without my usual support team. Instead of that team, I have gained a new one; one with peers and staff who all care so deeply and work so hard to keep me and

everyone else safe. One of the most supportive and important people I have met during my time at Oxbow is Maya Alter. She has taken care of me without being patronizing, something *many* adults can't do. She let me do therapy with her kitten, brought me food when I was too anxious to eat in the dining hall, freed up her apartment for me to take a mental health break—the list goes on. Maya continues to break her back for all of the students here, giving us so much individual love and respect.

She's the person who gave me my second deck. It was a similar scenario; I was internally struggling a lot, having a hard time keeping myself safe and hopeful. I had gone home for a few days to take some space, something very hard to come by on campus, and came back emotionally charged and much more myself. The night I came back, Maya pulled me aside and gave me a tarot deck, saying it reminded her of me and that she was glad to have me back on campus. As someone not used to school staff being kind to their students, I was shocked. Staff not only care about my wellbeing here, they care enough to learn who I am as a person. The gift made my stupid little intrusive thoughts that think I am unimportant to everyone go nuts. That deck means so incredibly much to me.

For my Final Project tarot deck, I wanted to find a way to make it just as meaningful as the decks gifted to me. Each card in the Major Arcana has specific imagery that carries throughout decks, so I couldn't design the cards however I wanted. In fact, that would defeat the purpose of the cards, as the imagery is where the card meanings and interpretations come from. Instead, because the Major Arcana represents major life events, I decided to draw important people in my life as the figures on each card. Many of them have people from my Oxbow experience, some have family members, and one has Noreen. For Noreen, I chose the High Priestess. This card represents sacred knowledge, awareness, and divine feminine energy. Noreen provided me insight on

maintaining a healthier mindset, making time for myself, and getting out of unsafe or uncomfortable situations. She is full of wisdom at such a young age, exuding powerful, beautiful energy. She is divine.

The most challenging yet powerful card I created is the Hanged Man. This is a card that upright represents being stuck, and reverse signifies being selfish, and I didn't want to connect someone I love to such an unpleasant card. Rather, as my project focuses on trauma healing, I chose to process through this art project; the Hanged Man is my abuser. Tarot is all about intention, and mine is to heal.

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