

ESSAY

MEMORY CARDS

The novelist *Jill Dawson* spent her twenties dabbling in spells and spirituality, but it was through studying the tarot that she ultimately discovered deeper, more meaningful truths

MY FIRST SPELLS WERE PRAYERS. 'PLEASE God, let me win the prize,' the nine-year-old me would say earnestly, thrilled and vindicated when my wish came true. Today, we might call it manifesting. By the time I'd reached my twenties and shaken off my religious upbringing (or so I thought), I was keen to explore alternative spiritual practices and began reading up on Wicca and paganism.

I borrowed a book of spells from Hackney Library and invited my sister over. 'What do you long for most?' I asked. Her reply: a long-term partner to have a child with. 'What are your requirements of him?' She wanted an artist or sailor, and if he could have long hair in a ponytail (it was the Eighties, after all), that would be nice.

So we blessed the space in the scuzzy flat with a candle; we prayed, we giggled, we burned incense – I can't actually remember the spell we did, though I am ashamed to say I forgot to return that library book and have it still – and then we went to the pub, the Prince George in Dalston. That night, my sister met Melvyn, an artist working in

a studio near Bethnal Green, whose family were from Portsmouth (sailors!) and who wore his long, dark hair tied back; she has been with him ever since. Only recently, we told her daughter, my 31-year-old niece Lotte, the story of how we conjured up her father, *Witches of Eastwick*-style. She found it pretty amusing, and astonishing that ponytails were once desirable.

You'd think that after this early success, I'd be keen to explore more spells, but the experience slightly freaked me out. My church-going childhood was the source of both my interest and my strong disinclination to pursue it. A spell is a ritual or wish that we hope will effect some kind of change. We resort to magic when we feel desperate or powerless. Lighting a candle at the altar, closing our eyes as we melt a wafer on our tongue, burning sage to cleanse a room, wearing a crystal or talisman. Some rituals are respected; others are mocked and demonised.

When I was about 23, the break-up of my first great love affair was the catalyst for me to visit a practising witch, whose name I no longer remember. I do recall that I found her in *Time Out*, in which she advertised as 'the Witch of Clapham' and offered tarot readings. I think perhaps I was having a kind of breakdown. I remember crying me a river, and a great sea, too, and smashing things, and making a little potato doll of the man in question's new girlfriend and sticking pins in it.

The Witch of Clapham took me from clumsy spells to tarot in one fell swoop. She welcomed me into her cigarette-scented home and didn't mince her words. The first card she turned over was the Tower. 'Your world is crumbling at its foundations.' The next was the Hermit: 'You will be alone for a year.' Third up was World – 'Your world has turned itself upside down' – then, the Devil: 'You are addicted to bad love'. Finally, the Hierophant. 'What's a Hierophant?'

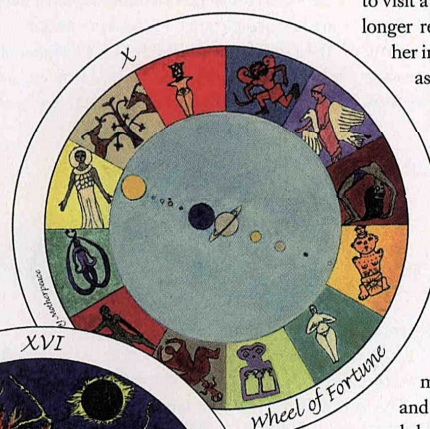
I asked. I had never come across the word before. 'A magical helper. He arrives to assist the High Priestess. That is you,' she said.

I was very tired of the Devil and Hermit phase when I started a job as a market-researcher in central London. Everyone working there was someone else: a dancer, a poet, an actor, a film-maker. We were only doing the lowly tasks, asking questions about Margaret Thatcher for opinion polls to make ends meet before our big breaks. The boy next to me – shaved head, pierced ear, peak of hair at the front like Jimmy Somerville from Bronski Beat – asked me my name. I gave a false one. And my 'real' job? 'Novelist,' I said hopefully, and then: 'What's yours?'

He said he was Simon and that he was a hierophant – I kid you not. Given I'd just learnt the word and not heard it again since, I think my mouth fell open. He said it meant an interpreter and bringer of sacred and arcane knowledge and practices. Simon was a student of Wicca and training to be an astrologist. Again, religion played its part – his mother was one of the earliest women vicars. We went for a drink at lunchtime and never returned to the office.

So it was Simon who taught me how to read the tarot back in the mid-1980s and who introduced me to lectures on astrology, paganism, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the bad-boy occultist Aleister Crowley, known as the Beast. Our relationship was intense and argumentative but soon became romantic, and we moved in together for a while. I remember the scary night of the great storm in 1987 when we'd been to a powerful lecture on witchcraft and probably imbibed something potent, too. We felt pretty spooked when the door to our flat in Bethnal Green took off and blew away!

I used to do a tarot reading for myself every morning. But as I moved away from Simon and his love of the Beast, the deck I was drawn to most was the Motherpeace one, designed by Vicki Noble and Karen Vogel in 1983. Motherpeace is unusual in



PHOTOGRAPHS: MOTHERPEACE TAROT DECK BY KAREN VOGEL AND VICKI NOBLE; PARK CIRCUS TV SOURCE/BBF NATIONAL ARCHIVE; BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE; TV GLOBAL ENTERTAINMENT/PARK CIRCUS PHOTO BY BARON; ALISTAIR PHILLIPS





Left and below left:
 cards from the
 Motherpeace tarot deck

'A spell is a ritual or wish that we hope will effect some kind of change'

having circular cards, and it is illustrated with women from all races, cultures and moments in history. Round cards allow many interesting interpretations of the images as you place them down for a reading – each speaks to the one beside it.

Simon and I split up and my interest in feminist spirituality grew. When I had a baby in 1989, I blessed him with a poem from the Motherpeace pack, a paean to the spirit of nature adapted by the writer Starhawk: 'For behold, I have been with you from the beginning...'

After that, if I was broke, I sometimes read the tarot for others for money, but what I loved most was just to learn. I did once read cards for the writer Kate Mosse, in the café at the British Library, when she was working on an early draft of her book *Sepulchre*. I don't remember saying anything useful. My interest dropped away over the

years, until suddenly, during lockdown, when I was writing my most recent novel, it came flying back. *The Bewitching* is set in my local area in East Anglia, and so, while exploring the folklore of the Fens, the cunning folk (practitioners of helpful magic and medicine) and Cambridgeshire's 16th-century persecution of witches, I picked up my old deck. It was looking pretty shabby, wrapped in a scarf that smelled of the benzoin incense I used to love. (Like the the piney sap from a tree, if you're wondering.) Old friends from far away: welcome back.

The tarot has gone through multiple changes since the first known deck appeared during the Renaissance. I have easily gone through just as many myself. I'm now attending a course about reading the tarot with a Jungian approach; the teacher suggests the cards can be interpreted and read as you would a dream. And like a dream, like poetry or something you didn't know you knew, or needed, there is a language to be heard, if you want to listen. Once you let the cards speak to you, there is no end to what they will say.

'The Bewitching' by Jill Dawson (£9.99, Sceptre) is out now. □

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