

Beginning Divination - exploring connection

Apprentice Witches are presented with a wide range of lore and skills, more than any one person could ever hope to master fully or to use consistently. We each develop a few specialties. Drawing on each other's specialties frequently reinforces the precious web of community. But it's also true that some of these Craft-related skills are more central than others, some are more peripheral. Which practices are necessary to our work and which are luxuries is the subject of many interesting, and occasionally heated, discussions. I believe that divination is one of the core skills, one in which all of us should develop at least a basic competency.

For the children of Western industrial culture, and that includes most first-generation Wiccans, divination may seem exotic, perhaps a little glamorous, possibly just a bit weird. That's part of the same set of cultural stereotypes that we've had to unlearn to come to Witchcraft at all. In fact, divination has been one of the major specialties of Pagan priesthoods in many different times and places.

That's one of the complications. Had you been raised in a Pagan culture, you would have been presented with just one or at most a couple of native divinatory systems (called "oracles"): the cards or the runes or the shells or the *I Ching* or whatever. One of the reasons that there's more lore in modern Paganism than any one person can handle is that we have access to ideas and techniques drawn from such a diversity of sources.

So, in addition to figuring out whether you want divination to be one of your background or foreground skills, you will have to decide which form of divination you want to try first. Do you think you'll be more comfortable with a verbal oracle like the *I Ching* or a pictorial one like the Tarot? Is there an oracle associated with a Pagan culture or pantheon that particularly interests you? What kinds of classes or study groups are available to you? Don't agonize overmuch about this choice. Whichever oracle you begin with will help you get a feel for the process and skill of divination in general. You can always add or switch to another oracle later on.

One useful way to think of divination, especially for beginners, is as a very specialized form of meditation. You will certainly find divination easier to approach if you've already been meditating for at least several months. They are closely related activities, since both call for the kind of low-arousal altered state of consciousness that increases our receptivity. But there is an important difference between them as well.

Meditation is a kind of unstructured opening up to the world within, and beyond, ourselves. This practice is important because every day, in the normal course of life, we are presented with a lot more information - sheer sensory data - than we can use or even handle. In order to survive and to get anything done, we consciously attend to some of what's going on around us, and consciously ignore the rest. Unfortunately, this perceptual screening becomes so habitual that we don't even realize we are doing it. So the majority of the information our world presents to us might seem to be lost, or even wasted.

Not necessarily. Just as we can handle only a small part of the information that constantly reaches us, our conscious minds are only a small part of our minds. We actually notice, and store, and correlate a whole lot more than we are aware of at the time. So it is said that your conscious mind may be very intelligent, but your unconscious is a whole lot wiser. The wisdom of the unconscious mind is made available to us in many ways, including dreams, meditation and divination.

But it doesn't stop there. Beyond the personal unconscious lies the collective wisdom of humankind, called the Transpersonal or the collective unconscious. And, far greater than that, is the wisdom of the Whole, of the Gods, all that we sometimes call the realms of the Mighty Ones. On flat paper, we can only depict this as a series of concentric circles, but really it's more like concentric hemispheres. There is no trade-off between depth and breadth. As the radius of inclusion grows, the hemispheres become both wider and deeper, eventually reaching to the very foundations of our being.

In our understanding of the term, magic is the art of changing consciousness in accordance with will. Meditation is usually a simple de-focusing, opening consciousness to all that was previously screened out -- and that's one form of magic. Mysticism, in contrast, is a shift, rather than a softening of focus. It is the specific magic of opening our consciousness to contact with the Sacred, however we conceive the Sacred to be. Contemplation is a kind of hybrid of meditation and mysticism, a meditation that centers itself around some very significant idea or story or picture or symbol. Contemplation, meditation and mysticism are activities that are generally engaged in for their own sake, without thought of secondary gain.

Any divinatory oracle can be used as a "pure" contemplative focus, and indeed this is very good practice. But it's not what most people mean when they speak of divination. Divination, as generally understood, is question-driven. It is an attempt to bring the wisdom of the unconscious, the Transpersonal and the Sacred to bear on important or perplexing issues of everyday life. So divination is a nexus, a bridge between the Worlds, a set of techniques for linking Sacred wisdom with ordinary life concerns. As such, it lies at the very heart of our Pagan religious sensibility and the workings of our Craft. Pagan religion, nature worship, conceives the Sacred to be immanent -- for us meaning and value is to be found in this life, in these bodies, on this Earth, here and now. Whatever lore or technique can help us to perceive, understand and live that is, for us, both big magic and major mysticism.

How does divination work? There are a lot of guesses about that, and no clear consensus. One that seems sensible to me is that a reading presents us with a group of symbols. Now, there's an important difference between a symbol and a sign. A traffic light is a good example of a sign; both red and green have clear, unambiguous definitions that you had better not confuse. A symbol, in contrast, is never that simple, rather it is multivocal (ahem, *protean*), carrying a cluster of complex, nuanced, related meanings, connotations rather than denotations.

Further, the symbols that are included in the various divinatory systems are not just multivocal, they are *important*. They represent archetypes, meanings, values that are central to

the cultures within which these divinatory systems were developed. Since a reading almost always contains not just one but an array of such symbols, their meanings also interact, reinforcing and modifying each other.

When you approach these symbols in a meditative, receptive state of consciousness, they can carry you deep into the realm of meanings and values, and help you find entirely new perspectives on whatever question or issue or situation is before you. It only makes sense, then, that connecting the symbols with the situation will come much easier if you have already put some effort into becoming familiar and fluent with the symbols themselves.

As you begin this familiarization process, remember that you are learning a new and subtle vocabulary. This is not just a matter of memorizing some canned meanings from some book or "cheat sheet" -- that's worse than useless. Instead, you will be feeling your way into the symbols, their interactions, and, most of all, the archetypal sources from which they emerge. Be patient with yourself. You will find that the learning process is not only enjoyable in itself - it deepens your spirituality.

Here is a simple, three-step approach that I believe will be helpful to you as you feel your way into your chosen oracle:

Step one: **research**

Explore the history and traditional interpretations of your oracle. Your best information will come from primary sources, materials created within the same culture and at the same time period as your oracle.

Secondary sources are tricky. Much of what is written about divination is simplistic and superstitious. But some is thoughtful and scholarly and can add a great deal to your understanding of the philosophical and psychological bases of your chosen system. So read as many different credible secondary sources as you can, so that you can get different perspectives. Read critically. Look for psychological depth and an understanding of symbolism and metaphor. Be particularly suspicious of any implication that the future is pre-determined and can be absolutely foretold.

Also, take any opportunity to discuss your oracle with others whose insights and values you respect. Perhaps you can join a class or study group, either locally or on the Internet.

Learn as much as you can from all of these sources, always remembering to test whatever you learn against your own internal sense of consistency and rightness. Take what you can use and leave the rest.

Step two: **contemplation**

Research gives you the broad outlines of understanding, a sense of how each symbol

was understood in its native culture and in our own. Inner work fills in the details.

Contemplation and meditation are both good precursors to divination. Meditation helps us open ourselves to deep sources of knowledge. Contemplation, using the symbols of our chosen oracle as focus, helps us explore our complex inner connections with those symbols. Such exploration leads to fluency.

Find a time when you are relaxed, comfortable and unhurried. Start with the symbol. If it's a visual symbol like a rune or a Tarot card, actually gaze at it. That means look at it quite steadily, but with soft focus, observing what may appear in your inner and outer peripheral vision. Let your mind wander around it. Ponder, ruminate, daydream. What shows up in the periphery are some of your own internal associations to the symbol you are contemplating. Others may show up as other sensory perceptions, emotional states or simply ideas that appear in consciousness.

Keep a record of all these associations. "Mind mapping" is one method that works well. To make a mind map, draw the symbol or write its name in the center of a blank page. Then draw radiating, branching and connecting lines to whatever associations come to you. Revisit this exercise from time to time and include the dated results in your developmental journal. They will be useful in tracking your growth.

If you're working with a group, collective associative techniques, such as "bud, leaf, branch" will give you some insight into the way other people might read the symbol, thus widening your range of possibilities. They will also help to create and maintain a "group mind," an intermediate step between the personal and the collective unconscious.

Step three: **expression**

The final step in achieving fluency is becoming able to express or share the insights you derive from your readings. This skill may be developed by creatively expressing the associations that come up for you. Whatever artistic medium you feel comfortable with is just fine for this purpose. Words, pictures or sounds work equally well

If you also happen to be technically skillful, you may achieve some artistically successful results. That's a wonderful fringe benefit, a blessing that you'll want to find a way to share with the rest of the community. But remember that it's not at all the object of this exercise. For now, the idea is simply to get practice in self-expression, to loosen up your ability to share information that comes through symbol and metaphor. So don't stifle your process with judgement. The more you practice, the clearer your channel of expression will be.

There's always more to learn, so these activities are never completed. Understanding of such richly complex symbols can always become deeper and more complex. But eventually, you will want to begin to connect the worlds, to apply the wisdom you can access through your chosen oracle to your own life issues and those of your friends. As with the other steps, the more you

do of this, the better and more easily you will be able to do it. So, here are some important guidelines to remember when reading for others:

- ▶ Divination is not fortune-telling because the future is not fixed. What we do in divination is to look very deeply into the present, and identify the trends and probabilities that are operating here and now, so as to offer the querent some choices about her or his future life. To give the querent the impression that the future is pre-determined is to deprive them of choice, power and responsibility for their own life. To the extent that they believe you, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy and an intensely baneful act.
- ▶ Since the purpose of divination is to empower your querent, not to display your psychic powers, encourage them to talk. Active listening techniques are very, very important. Learn what you can about peer counseling or basic ancillary counseling. Often, simply helping them to formulate the question clearly is the very best help you can give them. In any case, since they are obviously closer to the situation than you are, if you can help them reach within to their own associations to the symbols of your oracle, their own inner wisdom, you are serving them well indeed.
- ▶ Every querent is entitled to full confidentiality and as much privacy as they desire. If they choose to have a trusted friend present, that's their choice, and it should be entirely at their initiative. Don't set yourself up to read in public. Party gigs are for entertainers, not priest/esses.
- ▶ Don't ever rush a reading. Each querent deserves your full and unhurried attention. Always take a grounding and clearing break between readings. Never do more at a time than you can do with full focus.
- ▶ Remember that divination is for us a form of religious counseling, and that you are a priestess. You are entitled to full dignity, as are the religious practices that we share. Avoid the hokey costuming.

One final question that every beginning diviner asks: should you read for yourself? Some of us do, others don't. Try it, and see how it works for you. While pure contemplation will inevitably shed some light on your current life issues, you may find that purposely exploring those issues is a considerably different process. Speaking only for myself, I find the presence of a trusted, supportive and objective person to be helpful, if not essential, when I am trying to work through some perplexity, with or without an oracle. On my own, I could just be spinning my wheels in old habits and illusions, and never know it. That, of course, goes for all counseling. It certainly goes for religious counseling, and divination, as well.

Brief Reading List on Divination

Please note that this list is limited because I have only really explored three oracles, the *I Ching*, the Runes and the Tarot. If you work with some other system, you would do us all a favor by recommending a couple of your favorite books or other resources.

Ashcroft-Nowicki, Dolores

Inner Landscapes: a Journey into Awareness by Pathworking Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, UK: Aquarian, 1989 ISBN 0-85030-623-X 160 pp.

Guided meditations for each of the Tarot Major Arcana.

Aswynn, Freya

Leaves of Yggdrasil St Paul: Llewellyn, 1990 ISBN 0-87542-024-9 260 pp.

Her work on the runes is relatively scholarly and gives some depth. As a Wiccan, she is also sensitive to feminist issues, and has a major section on the Norse Goddesses, information that is not always presented. Interest in the runes makes sense for us, as English speakers. Our language evolved from and shares a sensibility with the culture that created the runes. Rune readers today will inevitably also find the many books of Edred Thorsson. Be warned - stay with the first two or three, which were written before Thorsson became involved with Satanism.

Fenton, Sasha

Tarot in Action! Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, UK: Aquarian, 1987 ISBN 0-85030-525-X 240 pp.

Not all questions fit neatly into a Celtic Cross spread. This book presents a wide variety of spreads and explains how to choose the spread that will best help explore any particular question or situation. Very helpful.

Loewe, Michael and Carmen Blacker, eds.

Oracles and Divination Boulder: Shambhala, 1981 ISBN 0-394-74880-8 244 pp.

A scholarly anthology on divination systems from many cultures, mostly ancient and classical ones. Can shed some light on our roots.

Nichols, Sallie

Jung and Tarot: an Archetypal Journey NY: Samuel Weiser, 1980 ISBN 0-87728-515-2 393 pp.

Instead of the usual paragraph or so of canned interpretation, this book has long, thoughtful chapters on the archetypal significance of each of the Major Arcana cards. I only wish that she had eventually been able to write in similar depth about the Minor Arcana

Peek, Philip M. ed.

African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991 ISBN 0-253-20653-7 230 pp.

A scholarly anthology about oracles few of us will ever use, but sometimes stepping away from the familiar is a great way to look at the general process and philosophy of divination. African Pagan religions were disrupted centuries later than our own and so are much more intact.

Pollack, Rachel

Tarot: the Open Labyrinth Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, UK: Aquarian, 1986 ISBN 0-85030-465-2 159 pp.

In-depth presentations of a variety of Tarot spreads. Good models. Tarot readers will probably also enjoy her two-volume *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom*.

Wilhelm/Baynes

The I Ching or Book of Changes Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950 ISBN 0-691-09750-X 740 pp.

The classic translation of the great Chinese oracle. It contains a foreword by C.G. Jung, which is must reading for all diviners, explaining his theory of synchronicity. I also strongly recommend the middle section of the book, called the "Great Treatise" and attributed to Confucius, for a ancient and utterly clear statement of the philosophy of empowering divination. If *I Ching* is your oracle, also see the several classic commentaries now published by Shambhala.

Wilhelm, Hellmut

Eight Lectures on the I Ching Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960

ISBN 0-691-01787-5 111 pp.

Valuable commentaries by the scholar who did the classic translation (see above).

Woudhuysen, Jan

Tarot Therapy: a New Approach to Self Exploration Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, 1979 ISBN 0-87477-470-5 204 pp.

Written by a therapist, this book explains how to create your own personal associations to the cards. It also has a couple of extremely valuable chapters on communication between reader and querent, which would be just as useful to people working with other oracles.

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