

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." -- James Randi
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Confessions of a Tarot Card Reader

A book excerpt by Lindsay E. Smith and Bruce Walstad

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Q. How did you first get involved in this, Tom?

A. I got a call from an agent asking if I could do Tarot card reading and fortune telling. I said I could, but at that time, I had no experience at all. So when I booked the show, I went to a local magic shop and bought a deck of Tarot cards and a book. This was about a week before the show. I studied for maybe a night, and made notes on how to read the cards on a piece of paper. More

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Editor's Note:

What are Tarot Cards?

According to the electronic version of the Encyclop?dia Brittanica (1997), Tarot cards are "any of a set of cards used in fortune-telling and in certain card games. Claims have been made for tarot cards' having originated in China, India, or Egypt, but their true origin remains obscure. Tarot cards approximating their present form first appeared in Italy and France in the late 14th century. . . ."

". . . . The standard modern tarot deck is based on the Venetian or Piedmontese tarot. It consists of 78 cards divided into two groups: the Major Arcana, which has 22 cards . . . and the Minor Arcana, which has 56 cards [which] have pictures representing various forces, characters, virtues, and vices. . . ."

" The 56 cards of the Minor Arcana are divided into four suits of 14 cards each. The suits . . . are comparable to those of modern playing cards [which are] historically derived from from that of the Minor Arcana"

Tarot cards may have been first used for games, then by Gypsies for fortune-telling. From the 18th century, certain "European writers connected them to diverse traditions of mysticism, divination, alchemy, and ritual magic. The cards have retained these associations and are now widely used for fortune-telling."

The Major Arcana cards refer to spiritual matters and important trends in questioner's life, while the Minor Arcana cards deal with business matters, careers, love, and money. The questioner shuffles the cards, then the fortune teller lays out a few cards (selected by the questioner or dealt off the top of the deck) in a pattern called a "spread." "The meaning of any card is modified according to whether or not it is upside down, its position in the spread, and the meaning of adjacent cards."

As James Randi has pointed out in his Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995 p. 230), "The fact that the deck is not dealt out in the same pattern fifteen minutes later is rationalized by the occultists by claiming that in that short span of time, a person's fortune can change, too. That would seem to call for rather frequent readings if the system is to be of any use whatsoever."

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Q. Did you do anything special to change your appearance?

A. I thought I had to look a little mysterious, so I wore a dark brown shirt, dark brown pants, wore sun glasses and slicked back my hair -- not greased back, but slicked back. The whole time I was there I gave the impression of being serious.

Before I went out there, I went through a process with the cards to make them look older, by bending them and by using shoe polish so they wouldn't look new -- they looked like they'd been handed down through the generations. I didn't carry them in the case; I put them in a hanky. When I unfolded the hanky and brought the cards out, they looked like they were a hundred years old.

This also made it easier for me to mark some of the cards, since I didn't remember what some of the cards meant. The marks would blend in with the condition of the cards.

Q. How did you go about the readings?

A. The first couple I did, I had no idea what I was doing. I had notes written down right on the table to tell me different layouts and how the cards should be set out for a reading, but the people couldn't see the writing or tell what it was because of the angles.

I'd lay out a few cards, sit back in my chair with my fingers pressed together like I was meditating, then -- because I had my sunglasses on -- I could glimpse my notes to see what to do next.

Then I'd start the reading. After a few cards, I'd start interpreting what the cards meant, like good, bad or evil; health, love life or whatever.

Depending on the response, I could pick up what line to follow -- it was basically cold reading. After the first three or four readings, I found that I could pick up things on people that were basically true, just from their reactions. They'd ask leading questions without even realizing it.

Q. For example.

A. I would turn over one of the cards and it would have the Cups and Coins on it. And I'd say something about money, which is pretty universal. They'd say, "I was wondering about that," so right away I know they have a money problem of some kind. And I know the problem isn't that they have too much money; it's not enough.

So right then I say, "I can see you're going through a difficult financial situation." You can say there's been a large financial expenditure that didn't work out, or that someone's just lost a job and -- bingo! -- you've zeroed in on something, based on their response. Then I'd follow that line through the rest of the reading.

Q. How long did all this take?

A. We were doing about five or six readings an hour, and I was there from noon to 7 p.m. with two half-hour breaks. I could have gone on reading all night; they were lining up. I had one lady with a pregnant daughter follow me to the car to see what her future was going to be. I literally had to get in my car and drive away. These are total strangers -- people I'd never met before who didn't even know my name. I would start my reading, and they would pour their life stories out to me many times, asking for some kind of direction.

In the middle of one reading, a little lady came up -- she had a real strange look -- listened for awhile and then cried, "Oh, this is terrible, this is terrible. I've got the power . . . I've been reading for 30 years, but this man has the gift; he has the gift." Now I'm making all these readings up, but as soon as this woman said this, we could have used clubs to fight off all the people who began lining up for readings.

Q. How would you categorize the people who came to your table for readings?

A. Almost all of them were women, from teen-age girls through grandmothers. Most of them were middle-age and most of them were housewives -- not real educated, maybe high school but not much beyond that. I would say these are people much more limited in life experiences -- married, young, had a family -- where life focused around a family and their neighborhood. One group I had a lot of was middle-age women with teen-age children, who were asking me things like, "Is this just a phase they're going through?" or, "Are they going to get out of this?"

Q. How about money?

A. The first time I did this I was paid a flat fee, and the people were charged \$10 a reading. I didn't advertise there at all, because I didn't want people calling me at three in the morning asking me for advice. At the first few readings, people would pull out \$30 or a couple of \$20 bills, ready to hand them over just like nothing for a 10-minute reading. They just assumed, or maybe read somewhere, that was the going rate.

After I'd finish some of these readings, people would want more readings, longer readings, private readings -- and ask how they could get hold of me later. I went into this viewing it as entertainment, but after I did it a few times, I figured I could go around to these neighborhood fairs, get a booth and make enough money in the summer so that I could take the rest of the year off.

Q. How would you respond when someone would ask you a specific question, like "Should I invest my money here?" or something like that?

A. I didn't want to give anyone any specific advice -- I would have felt badly about that. My stock answer, my out, was to say, "I'm not telling you what to do. All I can tell you is what the cards are telling me." This eased my conscience. But you have to realize that these people believe in you and believe in the cards. They're going to do whatever you say, whatever you tell them to do.

Q. Even something outrageous?

A. Yes. I honestly think that if I told people to do something truly outrageous, they would have done it. I had a couple of instances, where people -- after I'd finished the reading -- said, "That's just right on. Now, I know what the cards say, but would you advise me then that it would be a good idea to move out on my husband?" And I'd say, "I can't tell you that. You have to decide for yourself."

These are complete strangers, telling me things they wouldn't tell anyone else. I'm just a guy in dark glasses, sitting at a table, and they're spilling everything they have to me.

Q. How long did you do this, and how did your views of Tarot card reading change during this period?

A. I did this on six or eight different occasions over a period of a year and a half. I was so intrigued by it that I went out after the first week and got a couple more books on Tarot and started reading more for background. I could see how you could really get involved and start believing that you have a power. I got out because I felt dirty doing what I was doing.

You'd start hitting on things in a person's life -- cold reading -- and after you'd hit four or five times, you start to think that maybe there is something to this. You start to become proficient real quickly. It's really basic psychology, but you start to believe that maybe there's something more here. You really get to the point where you have to bring ;yourself back down to reality and say, "No, no, no ... this is all hype."

Q. You also did private parties. How did that work?

A. Basically, these were adult cocktail or dinner parties, with five to 10 couples at someone's home. They'd call me for entertainment. While they were having drinks or dinner, I'd set up my table, covered with a cloth and a pad on top, in a separate room like the family room or a library. Then they'd come in either individually or as a couple and I'd give them a reading. I'd stay for an hour or two until everyone who wanted a reading had one. Then I'd charge the people who were having the party \$30 a person for those who had a reading.

Q. Any final comments?

A. The reason I got out was that I felt dirty. I saw ways to make a lot of money, but I didn't feel good about it.

If you go in as a performer, like a magician, and you do a show, everyone knows it's entertainment. They have a good time and they pay you. The problem I had with Tarot card reading is that a lot of people don't view this as entertainment, and I felt I was taking money under false pretenses. Although the money was good, my conscience got to me after awhile.

I think half the people who read Tarot cards honestly believe they have some kind of power -- but I think the other half are strictly con artists. They know this is a bunch of crap and they just want to get their money and move on.

This is more common than people realize; it's thriving. People are looking for answers to a lot of questions in their lives, and they're more into this kind of thing than ever before. And it crosses all people -- rich, poor, young and old -- throughout our society.

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Lindsay E. Smith and Bruce A. Walstad, *Sting Shift: The Street-Smart Cop's Handbook of Cons and Swindles*, 1989, Street-Smart Communications, Littleton, Colorado.