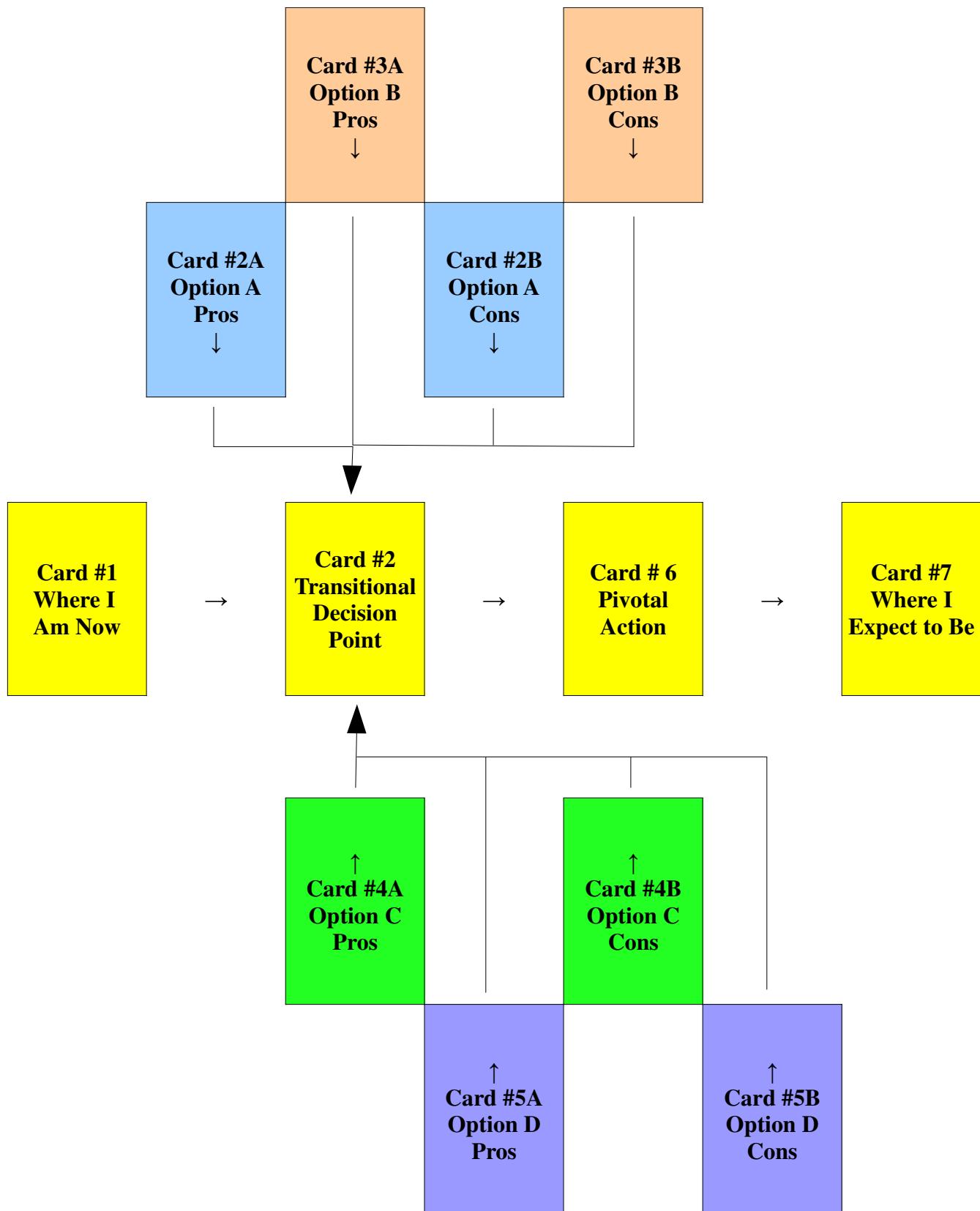


The “Decision Stream” Spread



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Guidelines for Interpretation:

Tarot spreads aimed at weighing the relative merit of two or more available options when making an important decision are often designed in a branching “tree” format, with the divergent forks arriving at distinct and separate conclusions. Here the design recognizes that inputs are “streamed” into the decision process in an additive way, rather like an experiment in baking a cake. Each input is evaluated, perhaps mentally “tried on” to see how it fits, and either adopted or discarded in the final analysis.

Decisions usually amount to making a choice between two competing success paths, although some involve several possibilities. For this reason, the “decision stream” approach offers up to four input chains. Any decision that contemplates more than four potential scenarios probably hasn’t matured enough to be brought to a reasonably coherent conclusion. For example, even the choice between several different college acceptance offers would ideally be narrowed down to a smaller number of leading candidates before a final decision is made. However, the option to add as many “pro and con” pairs as necessary is always available.

The two extremities of the spread (Cards 1 and 7) focus on where the querent is at present and where he or she expects to be after the decision is finally implemented. Card 2 shows the transitional phase where “everything is on the table;” the situation is still fluid and all inputs are valid until proven otherwise. Cards 2A through 5B depict the pros and cons of four possible scenarios, all feeding into Card 2 as shown by the flowchart-style arrows leading from each. As noted above, in the majority of cases, only cards 2A through 3B will be needed; the rest can be ignored unless the decision is more complex. Card 6 depicts the suggested actions derived from the process of sorting out all the options and settling on one path to follow; it is called “pivotal” because it hinges on the emergence of a clear winner and is crucial in taking that vision of the future forward to successful completion. It represents the “tipping point” where the querent should either get on with it or go “back to the drawing-board,” depending on the testimony of the specific card.

The positive, negative or neutral nature of the card in each position will show the relative potency of that data point in the overall picture. For example, a strongly positive card in one of the “pro” positions (2A, 3A, 4A or 5A) coupled with a neutral card in its related “con” position (2B, 3B, 4B or 5B) would promote that scenario as a contender for the “inside track.” Neutral cards in both positions of a set would mark the scenario as a rather lackluster “toss-up.” A positive and negative, two positive or two negative testimonies vying for dominance would reveal a conflicted situation that may require trade-offs if that scenario is selected. These examples are obviously straightforward for purposes of illustration; the reality will frequently be much more complex and require great care in deliberation, especially when two or more scenarios are nearly equal in strength.

Generally speaking, the “keyword” meanings for any card are a good starting point for consideration of its inherent nature. However, over the years many other attributes have been assigned to the cards by esoteric thinkers. Astrological, numerological and elemental factors all have a place in the scheme. Astrological and elemental symbolism is especially potent in decision-making. Typically, cards associated with the Sun, Venus and Jupiter can be regarded as positive, while those under Mars and Saturn would be more difficult in most contexts. The more changeable Mercury and Moon make their designated cards qualitatively neutral in operation. (The “outer” or “modern” planets are not used in most systems.) Traditionally, Wands (Fire) and Swords (Air) cards are positive – meaning active, not necessarily benevolent – in function, while Cups (Water) and Coins/Pentacles (Earth) are negative, or passive. Experience will make the use of these terms effortless.

The point of departure (Card 1) and the destination (Card 7) should first be paired to see if clear evidence of advancement toward the querent’s goal is revealed by the nature of the cards. A positive card in the last position will indicate the direction that growth will take, while a negative card could imply that the querent is better off staying with the status quo. If the outcome is inconclusive (neutral), the decision may not be ripe for pursuit; the querent might be advised to give it more time. If, however, his or her situation is pressing and demands immediate action, an ambiguous Card 7 will show more of a “leap of faith” into uncharted waters than a reasoned transition, with uncertain consequences. The reading then becomes an exercise in making the best of a potentially bad (or at least unpredictable) situation.

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The second step is to read Card 2 in combination with its chain of inputs. In practice, there are a number of ways to approach this. The simplest is to take each of the “pro” cards in turn and read them in a two-card vignette with Card 2 to gauge how sympathetic they are to one another. The more in tune they are, the more likely that choice will be to succeed. The “con” cards would then be treated in the same way, but the object would be to see which is the least contrary to the nature of Card 2. Ideally, a strongly positive “pro” card coupled with a mild “con” card would be the best scenario for favoring a particular option. A three-card sequence is also conceivable, first synthesizing the “pro” and “con” meanings and then weighing the result against Card 2. Another useful technique would be to compare all of the “pro” cards to one another to see if one is decidedly stronger, earning top spot in the pecking order; similarly, all of the “con” cards could be compared to see which is the least onerous. Caution must be exercised with more iterative methods, since they may introduce excessive fragmentation into the selection process. The purpose of the second step is to arrive at a prime candidate from among the competing choices to pass through to the “action” phase.

The third step is to combine Card 2 with Card 6 to examine how the decision might be carried forward into concrete expression. A positive card in the sixth position would clear the way for action of the type shown by the card's inherent nature, while a negative card could indicate hardship, the specifics of which would be exposed through a detailed sifting of the card's layers of meaning. A neutral card could show either that the outcome of the decision will fall into place without much effort on the part of the querent or, alternatively, that there is little enthusiasm for going forward with it. In the latter case, the querent may want to rethink the entire decision-making process.

The final step is to relate Card 6 to Card 7, with the goal of seeing how supportive the proposed action will be to the querent's stated intentions. Sympathetic cards here will show favorable prospects, while more antagonistic cards could reveal unresolved difficulties with acceptance of the outcome. In this case, the “Transitional Decision” steps may deserve revisiting, either at that time or – if the querent's situation permits – in a follow-up reading. Neutral cards in the last two positions could simply show that the outcome will not be controversial or unsettling to the querent, but also that it may not be exceptionally gratifying.

In summary, getting from Card 1 (Where I Am Now) to Card 7 (Where I Expect to Be) can be viewed as a flowing continuum, much like a “river” of decision-making inputs and outputs - some a mere trickle of influence and others a rushing torrent - of varying usefulness and importance to the querent in reaching his or her target destination. It is a field of inquiry perfectly suited to the predictive strengths of tarot.

A Note About “Elemental Dignity”

At its simplest, elemental dignity involves pairing cards in a spread to determine if their natures are compatible or incompatible, thus strengthening or weakening their joint action. This is done by analyzing their elemental correspondences to determine whether or not they will cooperate effectively. A more useful practice is to adjust the value of the center (or “focus”) card in a three-card series according to the testimony of the two cards (the “modifiers”) on either side. Their blending will either bolster or dilute the potency of the central card; the outcome can be positive or negative depending on the context. For example, a marginally negative center card abetted by two more forceful cards of a sympathetic element could be encouraged in its antagonism. On the other hand, abutting cards of a contrasting elemental tone could blunt the destructive impulse of the “focus.” That's the gist of it, but there is no reason why the cards can't be read in series with the second and third cards showing whether the portent of the first card will advance to harmonious fulfillment or be stymied and collapse in disarray.

In astrology, Fire and Air are considered “friendly” elements of an active nature, as are Water and Earth in a passive sense. But too much Air fans the flames to an exaggerated (and dangerous) degree, while excessive Fire with too little Air for combustion is self-extinguishing. A high Water-to-Earth ratio can result in a quagmire, just as too much Earth mixed with insufficient Water makes a cake fall flat. For obvious reasons, Fire and Water are adversarial in nature, while the restlessness of Air offends the rooted sensibilities of Earth. Fire and Earth are neutral to one another and functionally supportive; Air and Water are similarly aligned.