The Summary Card or "Quintessence"

The practice of drawing a "clarifying" card (or cards) as an enlightening postscript to an inconclusive or puzzling outcome is useful as far as it goes. But the advice thus obtained is merely tacked on to the reading, it isn't an organic expression of the totality of the spread. A better way would be to use numerological summing and reduction to arrive at a distillation of meaning from the cards already on the table – known as the "quintessence" or "quint" card. In this approach, each card in the spread is given an individual numerical value as follows:

The Major Arcana (the 22 "Trump" cards) are assigned the values shown by the numbers or numerals on their faces.

The Minor Arcana (the 40 "small" cards) are given the numbers associated with their places in the suit sequence, from one to ten, again as shown on their faces in most tarot decks.

The unnumbered Court Cards (the 16 "royal" cards) are allotted numbers from 11 to 14 (Page/Knave/Princess = 11; Knight/Prince = 12, Queen = 13, King = 14) or, more esoterically, numbers related to their positions on the Qabalistic Tree of Life (traditionally, they become 2 [King = Father], 3 [Queen = Mother], 6 [Knight = Son] and 10 [Page/Knave/Princess = Daughter]). Either of these methods will work as long as consistency is maintained from one reading to the next. (Note that not all readers include court cards in the calculation.)

The numerical values of all the cards in a completed spread are summed and then reduced in accordance with standard numerological principles to produce a number between 1 (the Magician) and 22 (an archaic numeration for the Fool). The Major Arcanum card corresponding to that number is then chosen to represent the "quintessence" and is read to reveal details that were left untold (or poorly told) by the original outcome card. Reversed cards in the spread can also be treated as negative numbers that are subtracted rather than added during the calculation, allowing an otherwise unattainable reduction to zero (position of the modern Fool). If the result of the numerical reduction is a negative number, the quintessence card is considered to be reversed. Quintessence cards that also appear in the body of the spread would be of special importance to the reading since their emphasis is magnified and brought forward.

There are other ways to arrive at the same destination; the possibilities are limited only by the ingenuity of the reader. One is to introduce interim summary cards that can be read as narrative vignettes supplementing the main story-line. An instructive example is a routine 9-card "3x3" spread, in which 3-card sequences are often read as mini-tableaux. Each of the three-card columns, rows, diagonals, and any other possible three-card combination can be numerically summed and reduced to produce a summary card for each sub-set. The assembled "sub-quintessences" are then read as their own sub-plot to the overall tale, or their separate values can in turn be summed, reduced and added to the cumulative value for the 9-card sequence to arrive at a "grand quintessence." Applying this transitional method to other types of spreads that don't exhibit a natural ternary structure (like the Celtic Cross) would require an adaptation of the technique described here.

Using numerology in this fashion, a more informed, integrated rendering of the subtle or concealed aspects of a spread can be obtained using cards already laid without resorting to a "cold" draw from the balance of the deck.