

THE MAGICIAN'S CARD

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A response to Makoto Fujimura's "On Becoming
Generative: An Introduction to Culture Care"

In memory of Louis D. Rubin, Jr.



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L'AMOUREUX

In the Tarot of Marseille, this card shows the Lover caught between two women, one crowned with laurel.

Once, long ago, there was a young woman who lived in a house of beautiful cards. She had fastened them together with spit and ribbons and thorns, and she lived in the house with its bright pictures happily for a time. If she tired of her work, she could wander about, looking at the Lovers and the Magician, the Empress and Emperor, the Chariot, the Tower, the Star, the Moon, and the Sun. Usually she averted her eyes from Death, the Hanged Man, and the Wheel of Fortune, and only occasionally did she pause to look at the Fool with his little dog as he stepped merrily over the edge of the cliff. She identified with the Fool, and she didn't like to see him about to tumble into the abyss, accompanied by his dancing dog and his bindle. Although fond of the cards, she never thought to use them for fortunetelling; what did she need with fortunes when her present was so fair? It was the beauty and symbols of the cards that she loved, passed down through time.

The young woman had a true love—so it was said by everyone—and she had a cat. As happens so often in a life, the one with fur proved the more faithful, which is why if your own true love turns out to be a Hans the Hedgehog or an enchanted Beast or a Puss 'n Boots, you ought to be content with things as they are. If you still don't know why you should be satisfied, just think about Bluebeard, a very human lover, and how there are more ways than one to remove a young woman's heart. Bluebeard was a genuine modern man, a collector of valuables: and so the young woman's true lover proved.

She looked at the Lover card, seeing that the image was about choices, and that her true love had made other choices. For her, it was the end and it was the beginning. For she, too, would make choices. The loss of him meant that she traveled far away and chose a fresh occupation. Later on, she said “no” when the Lover called once more. She discovered what she had not known until he asked, that she could not breathe in a tower of thorns any more, no matter how she loved him. Then she learned to juggle, keeping the star and sun and moon and planets in the air while the onlookers watched, dazzled or bored or longing to learn. And she bent closer to a thread of words, spinning them until the distaff danced while the little cat chased thrums at her feet.

THE BATALEURE, OR THE MAGICIAN

The journey in the tarot is sometimes seen as the Magician's journey, the story of a creative and powerful person who possesses the wand, the chalice, the pentacle, and the sword. Lifting a scepter, the Magician nevertheless points to the earth, signaling the mystic stance, 'As above, so below.'

Of course, I was that young woman who lived in a house of thorns without realizing, and I ran away to teach and write in a distant place. But before I could do so, I had to find a high perch from which to spy a spot for a new nest, even though the whole world seemed a watery waste with no place to land. I returned to Chapel Hill, where I had been in school, and was given a few literature courses to teach in the fall. That left a summer to cross with no income.

And here a great friend to my young life and my writing stepped in.

I had been teaching part-time but was clearly between jobs and barely out of school, but he finagled and managed to give me a spot with a stipend in his NEH summer seminar. He picked me up out of the sea where I was busily bobbing and perhaps drowning rather than waving, and set my feet on land. I had never been his student. Not even once. I used to go by and talk to him because he was so bright and interesting and forceful. His curmudgeon mask, his pipeweed fuss, his passion for literature, his heart of gold: all of these things appealed to me.

Looking back, I see the young woman who was me crossing a kind of borderlands between one realm of life and another. I see her sometimes agonized and night-desperate, and yet all I feel now is gratitude for one man's help. He died so recently that I can still number the days, but even when the days grow longer, I won't forget my thanks.

In that summer course, I wrote about a poet I admired but did not know personally—I say that just in case poets I did know then should ever read these words! Let's call him Master X. One day, meeting with my seminar director, I was surprised when he waved his pipe in the air, released a few magical wisps and spirals of smoke, and pronounced, "You know, your poetry is better than Master X's poetry."

Earlier he had read some of my published poems and then asked to see more, and

now he was saying something so strong and judgmental that it floated my little peapod of a boat for a long time. I kept it as a secret in my heart, and it helped me through some hard days that summer. I have no idea if he knew how much those words would mean to me, or if he understood that I was far more dedicated to making art from words than I would admit to anyone. I never asked him. But his opinion mattered very much to me.

I am not the only poet and writer he encouraged. Sprinkled across the South and elsewhere in this country are writers he taught or encountered when they were young—people whose writing he judged to be promising or students whose work he shaped as a teacher or an editor.

He wrote and published many books of various sorts, including novels and memoirs. But his calling was never solely about his work and his own accomplishments, though these were large enough to content most men. He was always passing magic to a new generation of wordsmiths.

No doubt he said many things that writers here and there recall as words that gave them encouragement in their apprenticeship—unexpected moments of judgment, words sown on the air that planted a seed and were fruitful. Particularly in the South, he was responsible for nurturing generations of writers. He didn't pass a magic wand to one person; he had a cartload of them to hand out, and is credited with establishing the school of study we call Southern Literature.

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

On the Rider-Waite deck, the riddler Sphinx
 tops the wheel. Angel, eagle, lion, and bull rule
 the four corners, as in the black paternoster—
 ‘Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, / Bless the bed that I lie on.
 Four corners to my bed, / Four angels round my head.’

That friend to my work was to give me a large gift two more times. I see his hand in my life again at the time when I had published three novels but not yet a book of poetry. Today we are awash in new presses and ebooks, and there are many ways to publish a book of poems. Back then it was not so, and I had never been more than a bridesmaid in a major contest. And in truth, I was not very industrious about sending out. He asked to read a manuscript of poems. And then he announced that he had fired the poems off as a submission to Louisiana State University Press. In this way, Claire became my first book of poems in 2003.

Another time, he saved me from the arduous effort of looking for a new agent, a process most writers dread. At the time I had parted from my first agent, perhaps for silly reasons, perhaps not. Even now I am not sure, and I am sorry for having wounded him, and thankful that he found me while my first book was in galleys. My friend wrote to Liz Darhansoff and recommended me as a client; she wrote me and asked for copies of my books. Some short time later, she took me on. Although I have once again parted from an agent, I am entirely grateful for the sweet fact that I have never had to do that miserable thing, search for one.

What a generous man my friend was, making sure of my financial stability, helping my first poetry book to find a publisher, and recommending me to a new agent! Many pleasant things have happened along my path through the publishing world, but this one man was my greatest good luck. One generation to another, he passed on gifts and let me know that he considered my books worthy.

His encouragement and judgment never failed me. I sometimes sent him poems I thought didn't work, and he was always a severe judge, exactly as I wished him to be. Sometimes I sent him ones I thought he would like, and even then he was the only person I

knew who would read and give me a useful comment.

Likewise he was always interested in my forays into fiction. He sent me a box of rare books, obscure primary accounts from the Civil War, when I told him that I was writing a story set during the period. He told me funny stories about my Southern compatriots making absurd errors in their own Civil War novels, and suggested that I not read any novels about the era when I said that perhaps I should read some, as I doubted that I had read much more than some children's books and *The Red Badge of Courage*.

When rereading some of his letters recently, I found one that meant a great deal to me twelve years ago. The time was 2002, and I had sent him the manuscript that, set aside for a long time and then revised once more, would eventually become *A Death at the White Camellia Orphanage*, published in 2012. I had been feeling disillusioned because Farrar, Straus & Giroux did not want the book. They had published four of my books, all well-reviewed—in the adult division, they had published *Catherwood* (1996), which sold well until Harper Collins imploded and took down the newly revived Bard imprint where the paperback was appearing. Later they published *The Wolf Pit* (2001), a book with the peculiar fortune of being delayed until right after 9-11, when the country was thinking about little but grief and terrorism, and FSG appeared to be thinking about little but the same plus Jonathan Franzen, his affront to Oprah, and whether his comments about her choice of “schmaltzy, one-dimensional” books would hurt *The Corrections*. I had no right, I decided, to feel any loss because so many had died in the attack on the World Trade Center, while I was alive to dream and write another day. Meanwhile, the children's division at FSG had published a Southern literary fantasy for the young adult market, *The Curse of the Raven Mocker* (2003), and Ingledove would appear in 2005. (During my time with FSG, both my editors departed, in each case leaving one of my books an orphan—a typical situation for writers.)

Despite a lack of push for my books, a degree of bad luck, and an orphaned book, I had somehow imbibed and believed romantic notions about FSG and their foundational myth of nurturing writers and loving high art. Now all those notions were underfoot, specks and fragments of glitter and glass. “The Little Girl Made of Snow,” a story from one of my favorite books in childhood, *The Snow Queen and Other Stories*, kept flitting through my mind. The childless old man and old woman who find a snow child in the woods appear to treasure her, but when she is lost and then returned by a red fox, they cheat the fox out of his reward of “a nice fat chicken.” The lovely snow girl sees them as she had never seen them before, and while she feels betrayed and perhaps grief-stricken, she flies away to another life, better than what she had with them.

The old couple hear her singing in another room,

See, you do not love me well.
I must bid you both farewell.
You will find you have not caught me.
North I'll fly, beyond the water;
I am the Snow Girl, Ice King's daughter.

When they go to look, she has skipped away, leaving only a puddle on the floor. The child of snow turned to the cold forest and leaped into the arms of Ice, her father, and Snow, her mother, and was never seen again by the old couple. I felt the story then as a kind of mockery—my own lack of understanding made into a jest and tale.

My friend read the rejected manuscript and then made some suggestions in a letter, closing with these comments: "This is a splendid book, written by a craftsman of the art. Now your agent needs to find a publisher for you who will have the taste to recognize how good this is, and the patience to publish it without immediately having a best seller—because it's not Popular Fiction and you, as I've told you again and again, are not a Best-Seller author. In the long run any publisher who will publish Marly Youmans will be building a back-list that will be as valuable as Eudora Welty's or Flannery O' Connor's. So there!" I expect he knew that his comments would be important to me. That I eventually picked up the book again and revised it had a great deal to do with his judgment. By the time I sent it out to the inaugural Mercer Ferrol Sams Award, I no longer had an agent and was not sure I desired one—the world of publishing had changed, and so had I. But the fact that I did not destroy the book had a good deal to do with the moment when I read those words and with the generosity of the man who wrote them.

THE MAGICIAN, AGAIN

In the major arcana of the Tarot, the Magician is often seen as the protagonist of a story. The first numbered trump card, he is the sign of new beginnings.

Like a Prospero, every man of power eventually must lay down the emblems of his kingdom—if not by breaking his wand, then by old age or death. In his time, my friend and councilor Louis Rubin played many parts. A Charleston-born Jew, he became a successful journalist, both in the army during World War II and in private life.

Leaving journalism behind, he became a scholar, professor, and writer. He taught many novelists and poets, including John Barth (at Johns Hopkins), Annie Dillard, Lee Smith, Elizabeth Seydel Morgan, Jill McCorkle, and Kaye Gibbons. He founded one of the first programs in creative writing at Hollins College during his time as Chair of the English Department, bringing writers like Robert Penn Warren, William Styron, Eudora Welty, Allen Tate, Flannery O' Connor, Howard Nemerov, and William Golding as writers-in-residence, and hiring poet and writer R. H. W. Dillard, immensely important to the Hollins program. His time as chair saw the founding of the master's degree study in creative writing in 1960. He began *The Hollins Critic* and the *Southern Literary Studies* series at Louisiana State University Press.

During his time at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he held a chair as University Distinguished Professor, he co-founded the *Southern Literary Journal* and the Society for the Study of Southern Literature. He wrote or edited more than fifty books—novels, memoirs, and seminal studies in Southern Literature, including bibliographic, historical, and critical works.

Toward the end of his time at the University of North Carolina, he founded Algonquin Books with Shannon Ravenel (Hollins graduate and editor), the two discovering and publishing new writers as well as some of Louis's former students. He continued that work in retirement but also pursued an interest in painting; he had long loved to photograph trains and boats, and in his later years he painted ships and boats and harbors. Once, visiting Chapel Hill, I had the great fun of sitting with Louis in a corner of Somerhill Gallery at one of his openings. As he was famous for deafness, among other things, he

accepted accolades from people who stopped by with an amusing mixture of gruffness, pipe-waving, and cheer. (Later, my husband surprised me with one of Louis's pictures, a gift that I treasure.)

More than most people, Louis D. Rubin, Jr. helped to create a world of civility and beauty and truth. He wanted the world to know Southern literature and writers, so he invented the study of Southern literature, established many new publications and institutions and programs for the South, and cultivated young writers through his teaching and his publishing company. He wanted a better civilization, and so wrote about African-American writers and the state of the South. He passed the wand to the next generation. He startled us with his pronouncements, prophetic or judgmental, and showed us that the world could be something rich and strange.

He has left his literary children behind to make the kind of magic we can, whether we are hedge wizards wielding puny stick wands or mighty wordsmiths, whether we are believers in Logos or believers in the material progress of the New South. Born in his wake, inheritors of his wisdom and will and magic that changed the world, we writers born in (or adopted by) the South shall have to try to "do him proud." We are the magicians now, making art out of syllables and air.