

# LETTER X

## Wheel of Fortune, Arcanum of Cosmic Drama

### La Roue De Fortune

*Study guide by Carl McColman*



One of my favorite songs by Joni Mitchell is “The Circle Game,” which appears on her 1970 album *Ladies of the Canyon*, although it had previously been recorded by artists like Ian & Sylvia, Buffy Sainte-Marie and Tom Rush. But Mitchell’s recording is the definitive version, artfully melding a melody that is at once hopeful and wistful under her expressive mezzo-soprano voice. It’s the story of a child growing up, comparing the years that cycle by to a merry go-round: “And the seasons, they go round and round, and the painted ponies go up and down; we're captive on the carousel of time; we can't return, we can only look behind, from where we came, and go round and round and round, in the circle game.”

The song was written as a reply to Neil Young's "Sugar Mountain." Young's song is a lament for lost youth; Mitchell decided to respond with a more hopeful message about how lost dreams give way to "new dreams, maybe better dreams and plenty" — although she still acknowledges that as childhood yields to adulthood and eventually maturity, the kid who was eager to grow up will eventually "drag your feet to slow the circles down."

If we think of life as a simple, one-way journey from birth to death, it's easy to imagine it in a linear way; we even refer to a list of milestones in our lives as a "timeline." But a circle makes just as much sense as a line for being a metaphor of life: in our bodies we carry the cycles of our respiration, our heartbeat and blood circulation, and the endless rhythms of hunger to eating to satiation, or sleep to activity to fatigue — each cycle repeating itself endlessly until "the last revolving year is through."

The cycles of life make sense when we consider how we live in a universe of circles. The earth spins around its axis, creating the circular rhythm of day and night, and it revolves around the sun, creating the seasons. Meanwhile, the moon revolves around the earth, giving us the rhythm of the tides. Larger cycles, such as the sun revolving around the center of the galaxy and the entire galaxy's movement in the universe at large, are too big for us to even comprehend, and yet they are still part of the universe we live in.

Our current Arcana of the Tarot is the Wheel of Fortune — an archetypal image much older than the game show featuring Vanna White! Fortuna is the goddess of luck in the Roman pantheon; but she was capricious, and would spin her wheel to determine whose luck would prosper (and whose would run out) in the relentless flow of things. As a deity governing fate, chance, and destiny, Fortuna represents an element of chaos and unpredictability, and she symbolizes a sense of powerlessness that many people feel when faced with the uncertainties of life.

It's an apt image for the Tarot, especially when used as either a game or a tool for divination (i.e., *fortune* telling). Both games and divination require an element of chance and unpredictability in order to function. Our author, as a proponent of Christian orthodoxy (even in his own idiosyncratic way), used the Tarot not for its randomness but rather for its reputation as a set of images conveying wisdom and gnosis. Consequently, he simply ignores the quality of

randomness or contingency that the symbol of the wheel represents, and instead offers a fascinating meditation on how the wheel, as an archetypal symbol, informs the spiritual life — not in terms of chance or possibility, but in terms of two essential alternatives, what he presents as the “open circle” — the circle of Christ — and the “closed circle” represented by the serpent.

A closed circle contains what it contains, and nothing changes. The author points out that if the universe we live in is a closed circle, with no ultimate creation of new matter or energy and no ultimate loss of anything either, then what *does* exist in the circle is fated (doomed?) to simply rearrange itself in an endless, kaleidoscopic array of change — but because the circle is closed, the changes are finite, and at some point in the infinity of time, everything will realign exactly like it has been once before. Thus, the universe as we know it will eventually return to exactly the same configuration it has today, meaning that our lives (both physically and spiritually) will simply play out again, like a television rerun, at some distant point in the future. It’s the story of the monkeys with typewriters: given enough monkeys, enough typewriters, and enough time, eventually one of them will type out a literary masterpiece like Hamlet (this story is quite humbling for writers to contemplate). But just as the monkey typing Hamlet does not comprehend what is being created, so too if the universe is ultimately a closed circle, then everything we experience is, in a similar way, ultimately absurd.

For this reason, the author’s insight that Christ represents the *opening up* of the circle of the universe is profoundly inspiring. The author looks at the animals on the Wheel of Fortune as depicted in the Marseilles Tarot: the monkey symbolizes the “fall” of the wheel, and therefore represents the forces of dissolution, devolution, or spiritually speaking, the mythic fall associated with the Garden of Eden; likewise, the ascending dog represents the forces of evolution, of ascent, of creativity, of the impulse in our universe toward growth, greater wholeness, complexity, consciousness, and intelligence. Clearly, we see both of these forces at work in every life: we all experience both growth and decay, but triumph and loss, both achievement and misfortune. The Sphinx, meanwhile, associated with the four figures of the Gospels (the Angel, Lion, Ox and Eagle, taken from the vision of Ezekiel), represents the fullness of life and the source of divine grace that exists above the twists and turns of the ever-changing wheel.

If a cycle is closed, the author links it to the serpent, who represents not only the force of chaos and destruction in the Garden of Eden myth, but for our author's purposes also represents the materiality of life and the universe, especially as it may exist alienated from the dynamics of grace and redemption. The serpent represents, therefore, the objective empiricism of science — not to pass on judgment on science, but to acknowledge its limitation as a philosophy which only concerns knowledge of what exists, and not speculation concerning what is possible (as I type these words, it occurs to me that I do not necessarily share our author's view of science, so I encourage you to consider if you agree with his assessment or not).

Nevertheless, the alternative to the closed circle of the serpent is the open circle of grace, a circle where something from outside the circle may enter, thereby changing the dynamic of the circle and creating new possibilities for all contained within it. The author suggests that the supreme example of this is the "radiation of the incarnated word (Jesus Christ)" who brings the fullness of divinity into the closed circle of the creation. But he also acknowledges that other religious figures, such as avatars (like Krishna) or buddhas (like Siddhartha Gautama) also represent means by which the circle can be opened (an avatar represents a deity descending to take on human form, while a buddha represents a human achieving enlightenment, and therefore assuming divine or semi-divine status).

As he attempts to chart the cyclical nature of the fall and redemption as the great story not only of Christianity but of humanity as a whole, I am reminded of the philosophy of Plotinus, the third century pagan Greek philosopher who is considered the most important voice in Neo-Platonism (philosophy shaped by and following the teaching of Plato); Neo-Platonism in turn has had a significant impact on how Christian theology and mysticism has developed. In short, Plotinus saw the essential structure of the universe as consisting of a continual dynamic between the creator and creation; for Plotinus, the creator was simply "the One," and that creation represents a flowing-out from the simply and unity of the One into the multiplicity of all creation; all created things by nature long for a reunion with the One, so the foundational impetus of life is the longing for a return to the One. Presumably it is easy to see how this way of understanding things can be superimposed upon the Christian concept of fall-and-redemption as the essential model of how God and humanity relate to one another: God created us, we fell from grace, and through Jesus we are redeemed and therefore capable of returning to our

primal union with God. It should also be easy enough to see how this model of the universe can be understood as a “wheel” — the descending monkey represents the outflowing of all creation from the One and/or the fall; the ascending dog represents the mystical return to that primal unity, which Christianity sees as made possible by the resurrection.



### Points to consider as you read Letter X:

- The monkey represents the Fall: “degeneration and descent from above below” while the dog represents evolution: “progress transforming from below above.” The sphinx, meanwhile, “represents the plane and the stage of being... where animal nature is united to human nature” (pages 234-5)
- The Wheel of Fortune “portrays the *whole* circle, including ascent as well as descent, whilst the ‘transformism’ of modern science is occupied with only *half* of the circle, namely the half of ascent or evolution.” (page 235)
- For science, the circle of involution-evolution is “a purely natural process, similar to the process of respiration in a living organism” while spiritual and wisdom traditions see the Wheel of Fortune representing “a cosmic tragedy and drama full of the supreme dangers and risks that the traditional terms ‘perdition’ and ‘salvation’ imply.” (page 236)

- The author compares life to a boat where passengers and crewmembers have radically different experiences: for the crew, the safe passage requires constant work and vigilance, while for the passengers the crew is little more than a “part of the boat,” simply taken for granted. “For those who are responsible for the voyage, the passage signifies work, watches, manoeuvring and orientation in order to follow the route and bear the load of responsibility for everything. For the crew, therefore, the voyage is in no way a kind of ‘natural process,’ something which happens quite by itself.” The author suggests that Hermeticists, mystics, and saints are akin to the “crewmembers” while scientists are akin to “passengers,” ascribing to natural processes or causes that which only occurs by the efforts of those who are actively cooperating with the Spirit. (pages 237-8)
- The open and closed circles: the open circle “suggests the idea of unlimited growth and advancement, being through its form only the introduction or antechamber to eternity” while the closed circle “is in principle only a *prison*... a wheel which turns on itself and therefore suggests no advancement beyond its circle. The idea that the closed circle—or wheel — suggests, is that of *eternal repetition*.” (pages 240-1)
- Buddha, Solomon, and Nietzsche each diagnosed the problem of the closed circle. “Buddha rightly diagnosed the world of the serpent before Christ; Solomon wept over it; but Nietzsche—how monstrous!—*sang* of it.” (pages 241-2)
- The closed circle represents a world where only a finite number of possibilities exist: “In a world which is a closed circle, whose matter and energy are a constant quantity, there are no miracles.” (page 243)
- The good news of religion (“all advanced religion”) is that the world is an open circle, not a prison, not a cosmos devoid of miracles. It “has an exit and an entrance. There is an entrance, which is why Christmas is a joyous festival. There is an exit, which is why Ascension is a festival. And that the world can be transformed... this is the ‘good news’ of the festival of festivals, the festival of the Resurrection or Easter.” (page 243)
- The “most general characteristic” of the world of the serpent is *enfoldment*, while the most general characteristic of the “created world” is *radiation*. “The sun is in a state of radiation, whilst the planets are in a state of condensation, i.e. enfoldment.” Radiation is related to light, to creativity, to growth and expansion, to the open circle, while enfoldment is related to the dark, to dissolution, to isolation and closed systems, to the closed circle. (pages 246-7)

- Humankind is shaped by our “most developed brain.” Alluding to the work of philosopher Henri Bergson, our author says, “the brain is... an organ which plays the role of a *sieve* with respect to consciousness: it is an instrument of knowledge and ignorance at one and the same time. Its function is to admit on behalf of consciousness what is appropriate and not to admit—‘to forget’— what is not appropriate... The brain is therefore an organ of *selection*—the epitome of the process of evolution!” (page 248)
- Pages 249-251: the author reflects on the serpent as well as another image, that of the dove, following the baptism of Jesus (John 1:32), offering this nondual take from Matthew 10:16: “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” In other words, unite “cerebral intellectuality with spiritual spontaneity” — the serpent represents the fullness of human evolution, needs to be integrated with the idealism of the dove, representing the Spirit entering our closed-circle system of opening it through the work of grace.
- “Thus, the thesis that we are advancing here is that the work of salvation leading to actual redemption is *universal* concerning both *time* and *space*. For it has acted since the cradle of [human] history and it extends to all groups and religions” of humankind (page 252). The author here is standing in an ancient tradition that understood salvation not as a “special offer” only available to some people (e.g., those who live a good life or fulfill religious obligations), but rather that Christ’s work of redemption results in his making whole the entire universe, and the entire family of humankind, through a process known as *recapitulation theory of atonement*, based on a concept found in Ephesians 1:10 that means “unity” or “summing up” or “bringing together.” Salvation thus is not a matter of private justification, but of communal restoration through the death and resurrection of Christ.
- Page 254f: the author attempts to justify the idea of reincarnation by appealing to Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious.
- Returning to the image of the Sphinx, the author suggests it represents an “evolved” animality as embodied by the four holy cherubim: the Bull, the Lion, the Eagle and the Angel or Man. This leads to an extended meditation on the quest to evolve beyond our animal nature into the fullness of what we are created to be. See pages 256-260 (and the Spiritual Exercise associated with this Arcanum).
- The Letter ends with imaginative ideas concerning the history of the Tarot (“not inherited, but reincarnated”) and of the sacred writings of Hermeticism, which according to the author emerge from the “sanctuary of the everlasting zones” located in the depths of the human unconscious.

- “Saints do not aspire to cosmic *thought*, to a comprehension of the totality of things, but rather to divine *life*” (page 263).

### Questions for Reflection:

1. Does it make sense to you to see the fall and evolution as spiritually linked? If both the fall and evolution are part of the same wheel of cosmic drama, what implication does this have for the integration of science and spirituality?
2. Review the myth of the serpent found on pages 239-240. Is this myth helpful in explaining the world we live in? How so? Does this myth give you a deeper sense of the meaning of the Christian mystery? Why or why not?
3. What are some examples, from your life, of “open” and “closed” circles? Try to avoid the temptation of seeing open circles as automatically better than closed circles, or of closed circles as necessarily “evil” or “inferior” because of their association with the serpent. Perhaps the serpent can be appreciated simply as a metaphor for materiality and embodiment. Especially consider if you know of any closed circles that ought to be opened (or vice versa).
4. Consider the “Law of the Cross” as described on page 259 (see also the Spiritual Exercise for the Wheel of Fortune). Do you agree with this idea that apparent paradoxes, tensions or seeming contradictions can be reconciled in the cross? Can you think of ways in which you have found the resolution of contraries in the cross (and not just the examples that our author uses, i.e. courage and discipline, knowledge and contemplation). What are some other ways that the Law of Cross helps us to find union, reunion, reconciliation, or some other type of coming-together?