

LETTER XIV
Temperance, Arcanum of Inspiration
Tempérance

Study guide by Carl McColman



In the last study guide I mentioned that Arcana XIII (Death) and XV (the Devil) are the most notorious of Tarot cards. They are separated, however, by one of the most beautiful — if subtly strange and mysterious — of the Major Arcana: number 14, known as Temperance. The image of the angel, pouring liquid that can flow at a 45° angle, seems itself to be a profound invitation into contemplation. Dressed in blue and red, holding blue and red vessels, the angel evokes a kind of elemental energy: blue is traditionally a color for water, red a color for fire. As spiritual beings, the angels can be seen as “fiery” creatures, and yet their loving guardianship of, guidance for, and even interactive care of humans suggests a humble willingness to relate to us watery creatures (water forming approximately 55-60% of the mass of most human beings).

So reeling from death, on a trajectory that leads to an encounter with the demonic forces of the underworld, our Fool’s Journey brings us to a place of calm, of respite, of heavenly presence and guidance. An angel! Offering us a vision of peace, and (if we take seriously the etymology of *angel* which means *messenger*) a message of hope.

Perhaps I can quote some thoughts I wrote on the Temperance Card for the foreword to Brittany Muller’s book *The Contemplative Tarot*. Here I am describing the Waite-Smith version of the Temperance card, different in subtle yet significant ways from the Marseilles Tarot. Still, enough of this symbolism is universal enough to be relevant to our study of *Meditations on the Tarot*.

Take, for example, the Temperance card (XIV in the major arcana). This fascinating image presents an angel, red wings spread wide, an aura radiating around the being’s blonde hair. Holding two large chalices, the angel is pouring water or some other fluid from one to the other—but it’s pouring at a forty-five-degree angle, a physical impossibility. Likewise, the angel is standing with one foot on a stone and the other slightly submerged in a pool of water, but the angel’s weight appears to be borne by the foot in the water—again, beyond the laws of ordinary physics. Surrounded by irises and a pathway leading to distant mountains before the setting sun, the entire scene feels like something from a dream.

Christians recognize temperance as a fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22–23), from a Greek word that means “self-restraint” or “self-control.” It implies mastery or power over the self. But it also brings to mind the word temperature, which signifies the measurement of heat or cold, particularly in the human body; we take someone’s temperature when trying to determine if they are sick or well.

So in a matter of minutes, this dreamy angel has encouraged me to consider how taking the measure of what is going on inside of me can be an important way of assessing my wellness—or lack thereof. Which brings me to why I, as a Christian, continue to study and appreciate the vivid and marvelous imagery of the tarot. It’s a tool for getting to know my

interior life, just like a thermometer or a stethoscope can aid a doctor in diagnosing (“knowing”) what’s going on in my body.



The Waite-Smith Temperance adds even another dreamy layer, as the angel stands with one foot on land and the other, apparently submerged in water but not touching the bottom of the pool. Like a yoga balance pose, here the Angel of Temperance invites us into a dynamic position of trust and movement (exemplified by the path leading off to the sunset, or perhaps the sunrise). This angel is not some static image of holiness, but represents a living sentient supernatural being, one who is higher

than us on the evolutionary ladder, and yet who brings all the qualities of goodness — love, care, protection, cherishing, guidance, guardianship — to bear on its free interaction with us mere mortals.

As you read this Letter, you may find yourself wondering if the author is speaking specifically about our guardian angel(s) or more generically about angels in general. I'm not sure that the distinction really matters. Thomas Aquinas is famous for speculation that every angel is so unique that it could be said that each individual angel is a species all its own. But compare that to the notion that there are nine choirs or ranks of angels. This brings to mind the concept of the *holon* developed by Arthur Koestler and used in the philosophy of Ken Wilber: the idea that everything that exists conveys both agency (uniqueness and individuality) but also communion (participation in some whole that is bigger than itself). This principle is easy to see even on the printed page: each letter is unique just joins with other letters to form words, and each unique word then is grouped with others to create sentences, to paragraphs, essays, chapters, books, libraries... So each angel is unique and yet each unique angel is part of a "choir" which in turn is part of the entire heavenly host.

All this is to say, your guardian angel is more than just some heavenly being who drew your name when work assignments were being passed around. Your angel is part of something bigger, and because of your intimacy with your angel, *you* become part of that something-bigger as well, and this unfolding/expansion continues until we all rest in the very heart of God.

Temperance stands for a spirit of uniting, of reconciling, of bringing-together. This emerges from a place of deep love and radical freedom. Out of that free love the angel invites us to know God better (through vision, inspiration and intuition) but also to foster our own intimacy with God (through ceaseless prayer). Given the crisis that awaits us in the next two Arcana, it is wise to fortify ourselves with the graces that the angel of Temperance so kindly offers us.

What to Look for in Letter XIV:

As you read through Letter XIV, here are some points that might be helpful for you as you seek to enter deeper into the intuitive inspiration that your guardian angel wishes to bestow upon you, provided you genuinely wish to receive it.

1. Page 374: the Angel of Temperance stands for “integrated duality” — what we might call *non-duality*. He sees this philosophically, as a move from “either-or” thinking to “both-and” thinking.
2. The integrated duality is related to the Cistercian doctrine of the humanity as created in the image and likeness of God. According to Cistercian theologians like Bernard of Clairvaux, the *image of God* within humanity is indestructible, but the *likeness of God* has been damaged by sin. Our author suggests that the key to repairing the damaged likeness is the grace mediated to us by our guardian angel.
3. Page 377: Guardian angels protect us with maternal love. Our author, writing in the 1950s and 1960s, uses gendered language even while discussing supernatural beings like the angels; in our day, however, we might find it helpful to think of angels as non-binary, i.e., not constrained by male and female gender.
4. Page 378: “Angels are in perpetual contemplation of God.” But the author suggests that angelic contemplation is not a *gaze* upon God, for the angels watch over us; rather, they contemplate God through substantial union with God.
5. Page 379: as we grow into our own recognition of our “mystical marriage” or union with God, the angels will politely leave us alone with the divine. This process is called “freeing of the Guardian Angel.”
6. The discussion of different orders of angels on page 380 (the Seraphim, the Elohim, the Archangels, etc.) is reminiscent of the medieval idea, popularized by mystics like Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, that heaven consists of nine choirs or ranks of angels: Angels, Archangels, Principalities, Virtues, Powers, Dominions, Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim.
7. Page 381: Angels make union with God possible (sounds like as good a reason as any to foster a heart willing to be in relationship with one’s guardian angel!).
8. The “Wings of the Angels” symbolize the non-duality or union of opposites that the angels represent. The left wing symbolizes contemplation of divine wisdom, while the right wing represent’s the angel’s activity or role as a messenger (page 382-3).
9. The author speculates that before the fall of original sin, humans also had wings; and that we still have wings in a spiritual sense (astral and etheric wings) which he suggests must be accessed through the human subconscious. When we spread our psychic wings, they orient us toward God and make it possible to pray without ceasing (page 384-5)
10. Page 385: “The Problem of Fluids” — just as we have spiritual wings even having lost our physical wings with the fall, so too we have spiritual “fluids” that must circulate in our souls to remain healthy, just as healthy circulation of blood is necessary to survive and thrive. The author also suggests that these spiritual types of bodily fluids/circulation represent the likeness of God; i.e., the circulation has been marred by our sinfulness, and can be repaired by the grace of our guardian

- angel. Temperance represents the “just measure” of the flow of the fluids within our circulatory systems; it “is a matter here of the *measure* of the fluidic relationship between the image and the likeness which is necessary for *life* and *health*.” (page 386)
11. Also on page 386: reframing the conflict between Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) in light of the fact that Mary and Martha are sisters (non-duality does not mean erasing differences or paradoxes, but holding them in a larger container shaped by divine unity).
 12. The phrase “Blood Sweat and Tears” — made popular in the late 1960s as the name of a jazz-rock band, and memorably used by Winston Churchill in a speech given on the eve of World War II — is an English idiom that goes back to the Anglican priest and poet John Donne. But the author of *Meditations on the Tarot* links this descriptive metaphor for self-sacrifice to an ancient ascetical idea: the “gift of tears,” a concept with roots extending back into the literature of the desert mothers and fathers. The gift of tears conveys several meanings: the sorrow of compunction and contrition; the painful yearning that can mark intense desire for God; the emotional release of worship and gratitude at the experience or sense of God’s grace, closeness or abiding presence. Our author builds on this, expanding the images of blood and sweat to suggest a process by which we experience the touch of God, our effort to conform to the divine will, and the mystical marriage by which we are enveloped in God’s eternal love. (page 387)
 13. Page 388: “tears are produced by the *intensity* of the inner life.”
 14. The author credits Judaism with giving the world the gift of tears, replacing the rote ritualism of primitive spirituality. Of course, tears — like blood and sweat — represent the physical fluids of the body that correspond to the “spiritual fluids” that the angels watch over, the inner fluidity that promises to restore the divine likeness within us.
 15. Page 389: the author suggests that, according to Christian Hermeticism, “there are three principal modes of authentic spiritual experience: *vision*, *inspiration* and *intuition* — or, perception of spiritual phenomena, spiritual communication and spiritual identification. Although like so much of the author’s meditation we can say that the association of vision with sweat, inspiration with tears, and intuition with blood, is the author’s own contrivance, it’s yet another example of how his mystical imagination gives us potent images to help us make sense of the inner process of contemplation.
 16. Vision, inspiration and intuition are not to be seen as successive or hierarchical; any of these modes of spiritual experience can be received at any time. Furthermore, “authentic inspiration always entails an inner upheaval” (page 389). This can be compared to Evelyn Underhill’s contention that mystical conversion

- is a crisis of adjusting human consciousness to a supernatural order (see *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, especially Part II, chapter II).
17. Beginning on page 393 the author discusses a concept he calls “thinking together” or “thinking with the flood” as the heart of inspiration. This means “no longer to think *alone*, but rather *together* with the anonymous ‘choir’ of thinkers above, below, yesterday and tomorrow.” Made possible by humility, this way of thinking is an expansion of the limited consciousness of our humanity to welcome and include the higher consciousness of our guardian angel, which in turn humbly welcomes the Mind of Christ. “‘Thinking together’ means to say *thinking on one’s knees*, i.e. humbling oneself before the other — diminishing oneself so that he may increase. This is thought-prayer or prayer-thought.”
 18. Pages 395-396: our author looks at other wisdom traditions beyond Christianity to illustrate how inspiration is the essential task of all spirituality.
 19. A common human predicament: either meeting the invitation into inspiration with a self-directed desire to manage or control the process, or a passive, diffident posture of assuming that all the action in the process must be on God’s part. These distortions are equated with historical heresies: Pelagianism (Pelagius argued that humans needed to initiate our salvation through our own efforts) and quietism (an early modern European movement that insisted that only pure passivity would merit the experience of divine union. Once again, we have the angel mixing the fluids: the non-dual nature of authentic inspiration requires both active and contemplative passive response on our part.
 20. Finally, it is the lot of Hermeticists to receive the guidance of the guardian angel and accept the experience of vision, inspiration and intuition — not because this confers any kind of status or privilege, but simply because it is the nature of Hermetic philosophy to prepare the seeker for such interior transformation. For Hermeticists, this is not something to brag about, but rather confers a great responsibility of service and compassion for others.

Questions for personal reflection (and, if you wish, communal discussion on our Course Forum):

1. **Have you ever had an experience of an angel? If so, what was it like? If not, what do you imagine an angelic encounter would be like?**
2. **Our author suggests that guardian angels have five tasks: to guard, cherish, protect, visit and defend those under their care. As you reflect on these tasks of the angels, what insights do they give you about the nature of God, and the nature of God’s ways of relating to mortals? Which of these five tasks do you believe you need the most? Why?**

3. How do you understand the difference between *vision*, *intuition* and *inspiration*? How do you experience each of these ways of receiving guidance from eternity? The author suggests the key to these is humility. What can we do to cultivate true spiritual humility (as opposed to false humility, i.e. low self-esteem)?