

**LETTER XVI**  
**The Tower of Destruction,**  
**Arcanum of Construction**  
**La Maison Dieu**



### ***Study guide by Carl McColman***

It's a classic question: "Where were you when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor?" "Where were you when Kennedy was shot?" "Where were you when the Challenger exploded?" "Where were you when the planes hit the Twin Towers?"

Events like these become hinge events in people's lives — I was just talking to a Presbyterian minister the other day who said we could divide the recent past into "BP" and "AP" — before the pandemic and after the pandemic. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic rolled out over months, with new viral variants prolonging the event and changing circumstances as our knowledge increases and vaccines became available; but events like the ones I listed above occur at a specific moment in time: the first bombs fell on Pearl Harbor at 7:55 AM; Kennedy was shot at 12:30 PM; the Challenger exploded at 11:39:13 AM (seventy-three seconds after launch); the first plane struck the World Trade Center at 8:46 AM, with the second plane impacting seventeen minutes later.

As I type these words, more than 21 years after 9/11, I am struck by how quickly news travelled — even back then, before smartphones and when Internet access for most people still required logging on with a modem. I was at home, working on *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Paganism*; my daughter was at school (she had a field trip scheduled to the airport that day, you can imagine how that turned out) and my wife at her office. She called me after the first tower was struck; I went and turned the television on and saw the second plane's attack in real time. So it took less than a quarter of an hour from the time the attack began for word to get from New York to Georgia to my secluded home!

As that horrible day progressed, like millions of Americans and people around the world I remained glued to my television set, watching with mounting horror as a plane struck the Pentagon (9:37 AM), another crashed in rural Pennsylvania (10:03 AM), and then the two towers collapsed, damaged beyond repair by the inferno caused by the jet planes burning within them.

Remember how, before the buildings fell, some people who were trapped in the floors above the burning planes jumped out of their windows, falling to certain death but driven to desperation by the hellish heat from the conflagration beneath their feet? How vividly I recall that — for when I saw that particular horror broadcast on national television, I thought "We are watching the Tower card, manifest in real life."

After Death (Arcanum XIII) and the Devil (Arcanum XV), the sixteenth card of the Major Arcana evokes the feeling I sometimes get when I watch a long, violent movie (for example, *Braveheart*) — when the trauma just keeps coming, I find myself feeling almost a type of psychic shock. We can walk out of a movie theatre and we can put the Tarot away, but real life is not quite so forgiving. Sometimes the horror really does just keep coming.

But the Tower represents more than just sustained trauma — it also, paradoxically, represents liberation. Sometimes a traumatic event — a divorce, an illness, a job loss or financial crisis — can set us free, even if it's not how we would have chosen for things to go. People in recovery will talk about how they give thanks for bottoming out, since that's what it took to begin their journey to sobriety. Another person with a terminal illness will acknowledge how their imminent death has awakened them to the beauty and preciousness of life and love. What a deep paradox, that the lightning which destroys the Tower also can convey the power needed to set us free.

Most English Tarot decks simply call this card “The Tower,” but our author expands its name to “The Tower of Destruction.” In French, however, this arcanum is called *La Maison Dieu* — the house of God. One might think this is a reference to a house of worship, but in the middle ages, *les Maisons Dieu* were hospitals or poorhouses. Early versions of the Tarot often had different images for this arcanum, such as depictions of Adam and Eve or of the harrowing of hell (Jesus's descent into hell, to set the imprisoned souls free after his death). Some early versions of the card are called *La Foudre*, meaning “Lightning” — a design element that survives in most images of the Tower.

Our unknown author draws on the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, which has often been associated with this arcanum. With this he creates his own interpretation juxtaposing “construction” which eventually cannot help but lead to *destruction*, with “growth” or a more organic process of transformation that results from inner guidance rather than outer grasping — setting up a distinction between building and gardening which calls to mind the moral landscape of Tolkien's Middle Earth.

As usual, this meditation is a kaleidoscopic array of dense philosophy leavened with luminous insights. Of particular interest is the author's beautiful defense of the body, insightful thoughts on positive versus negative asceticism (spiritual discipline), sustained reflections on the mystical wisdom of Saint John of the Cross (another paradox, for the “dark night of the soul” is not traditionally depicted as a moment of sudden liberation, but rather as an excruciating, long-term process of deep and

austere inner transformation), the universality of salvation, and the marriage of opposites, which forms the basis of this arcanum's spiritual exercise.

### **What to Look for in Letter XVI:**

As you read through Letter XVI, here are some points that might be helpful for you as you seek to explore the lightning strike of sudden change, trauma but also paradoxical liberation.

1. The letter begins with a kind of “after-shock” from Letter XV (the Devil), but the author speaks about how evil is something that *victimizes* humankind, not something that reflects our essential nature (especially our bodily nature).
2. He goes on to make a beautiful point about the innocence of the body. Evil comes to humanity through our souls, not our bodies. This is such an important corrective to dualism, which tends to view the soul as innocent but the body as corrupt.
3. This leads to a reflection on the concept of *asceticism*, long associated with monastic and mystical spirituality. Asceticism is often viewed negatively as a kind of body-hatred (wearing horsehair shirts, self-flagellation), but our author suggests we need to differentiate between “negative” and “positive” asceticism. Negative asceticism is the culture of bodily punishment and chastisement that our age rightly rejects. But *positive* asceticism is a kind of physical self-forgetfulness in the interest of love: for example, being so committed to intimacy with God that we do not notice our body getting sore from long hours of prayer, etc.
4. Both forms of asceticism involve a kind of struggle, but where dysfunctional asceticism struggles against the body, skillful/positive asceticism struggles against our capacity to sin (which, again, has a spiritual rather than material source).
5. Original sin, according to our author, should be seen *not* as originating in humankind, but in the “fall” that took place in heaven prior to the creation of the world. This, of course, is pure myth, but it's a subtle shift in our mythology that changes the entire sense of human culpability.
6. Is the source of human evil a matter of *ignorance* or of *illicit knowledge*? Buddhism would certainly say the former, while the “occidental” (Abrahamic) traditions regarding the attainment of dangerous knowledge as the occasion of the “fall.”
7. The author goes on to interpret the mythic stories of Genesis as a kind of etiology of sin. Following the affair with the snake and the apple, comes the first murder (Cain's fratricide), followed by the “begetting of giants” (which our author interprets as the origin of political oppression/domination), and finally, the

- construction of the Tower of Babel (the manifestation of human arrogance and our effort to use technology to control and manipulate our environment).
8. The lightning striking the Tower, then, symbolizes God scattering humanity and confusing our capacity to communicating by introducing multiple languages. It is God's response to human arrogance/sin. The author sees this as an illustration of the disconnect between human will and human destiny; another way to describe this is the reality that our technologies always seem to carry unforeseen consequences.
  9. The Tower of Babel is a metaphor for the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. We build our own "tower" or "purgatory" by the sum total of our arrogance and sin; thus purgatory is less about punishment and more simply a *consequence* of our choices and actions — it has a karmic function, rather than a punitive one.
  10. The author invokes St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* as a metaphor for the purgation of purgatory. It's a compelling idea: to the extent that we submit to the purgations that life brings us here on earth, it lessens the burden of purgatory that we will face in eternity.
  11. Our author goes on to compare the lightning-struck toward to Mary's song, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55). In the *Magnificat*, the Blessed Mother sings, "God has scattered the proud, and put down the mighty from their thrones." He compares this to Jesus's wisdom teaching: "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).
  12. The "construction" that the Tower represents is then compared to the biology of specialization, which is seen as a problem in evolutionary terms (specialization leads to "impasse"). Creatures who evolve in a general rather than specialized way or more able to adapt themselves to emergent conditions (this is why the dinosaurs went extinct; they were too "specialized" to adapt to the changing ecosystem, probably after a comet struck the planet).
  13. Specialization is compared to technological construction, while general evolution is compared to gardening. With echoes of J.R.R. Tolkien's moral universe, organic growth is seen as more holistic and sustainable than unrestrained technological progress.
  14. To further this analogy of construction versus growth, the author holds the image of a *tree* in contrast to that of the *tower*. And more than anything else, the tree is embodied in the cross of Christ. As symbolic of the ultimate kenosis/emptying of death, which leads to the grace of resurrection, the cross represents a fundamental alternative to the hubris and will-to-control that is embodied in the tower.
  15. The Cross represents not only death and resurrection, but the "Marriage of Opposites." The Cross becomes the great agent of reconciliation: not only between God and humanity, but also between the body and the soul, and even

between the “true/higher self” and the “false/lower self.” This is profoundly important, and a gateway to the nondual consciousness that the Cross represents. It does not seek to cut us off from our lower nature, but rather to create a way for us to be fully integrated beings, higher and lower, material and spiritual, imperfect and forgiven.

16. More than once the author quotes John 6:39-40: that “nothing should be lost... all should have eternal life.” The idea that only portions of the created order can be saved are exemplified in the principles of “divorce” or “war” — but these are seen as inferior to the principles of growth and marriage (including the marriage of opposites). The Cross, therefore, is not a sign of division (dividing humanity into the saved and the damned), but rather a sign of reconciliation, of restoring our essential oneness with God and with one another.
17. To illustrate this principle, the parable of the lost sheep is interpreted in an interior way: the “lost sheep” that the good shepherd seeks to save are elements within each of us that resist God’s healing touch or that get lost (perhaps through no fault of our own). Just as the good shepherd will drop everything to save one lost sheep, so we are invited to pour our entire heart into healing and restoring every aspect of our personality.
18. How do we “pursue the lost sheep” within ourselves? Through the progressive healing and purification of our psyches through the practice of concentration, meditation, and contemplation, which the author correlates to the traditional three stages of the mystical life: purification, illumination and union. We never abandon the lower exercises even as we mature into the higher ones. Again, in the Cross we have the marriage of opposites, the complete integration of all the disparate elements of our bodies, minds and souls.
19. The chapter ends with a fascinating description of the spiritual significance of the days of the week (Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, etc.), correlating the traditional pagan associations of the days (Thursday belongs to Thor, Saturday to Saturn, etc.) with a newer/Christian interpretation of the significance of each day. Once again, despite our author’s occasional chauvinistic tone, his overall message is one of generosity as he seeks to draw connections between mystical Christianity and other wisdom traditions that form our common cultural heritage.

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

1. **The author writes “the body is a miracle of wisdom, harmony and stability, which does not merit scorn but rather the admiration of the soul.” He says this as a way of criticizing the unfortunate dualism through much of Christian history which blames the body’s weakness and desire for much of**

human sin. How can our understanding of sin and holiness, or good and evil, be changed for the better, if we truly accept this premise that it is the soul, rather than the body, which is the cause of the mistakes we make?

2. Our author writes, “The marriage of opposites is a principle of universal significance. This is *not* a compromise that one contrives, but rather the *cross* and the magic of the cross. It is thus that the “true Self” is united to the “lower self” in the human being, where the “lower self” is the cross of the “true Self” and the “true Self” is the cross of the “lower self.” (page 454) Does this relate to the concept of “nonduality” that can be found in eastern spirituality (and has become increasingly popular among contemplative Christians for our time, for example Cynthia Bourgeault). How is nonduality like “the marriage of opposites”? How are these concepts different from each other?
3. This chapter offers an interesting way of distinguishing prayer, meditation, and contemplation: “To meditate is to think in the presence of God—just as to pray is to speak in the presence of God” while contemplation is described as “the immobility and complete silence of supernatural communion, where one no longer thinks something from a distance, but where this Thing itself is present and reveals itself. Contemplation is the union of the thinker with reality.” Do these distinctions ring true for you? Why or why not? Do you equate meditation and contemplation with “thinking”? If not, how would you describe these practices?