

Walking in Strength - Breathing Life into an Archetype
By Catherine Pennington
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It's six o'clock on a Saturday evening in February 2001. I'm the Artistic Director of a ritual theater company that is giving the final performance of our collaborative piece *Oracles from the Living Tarot* at a conference in San Francisco. I'm also a performer in the show, and so as I have done for the last five years, I have spent the bulk of my day divided between tending for my actors and crew and going into character. I am the Strength Card. Yes, I picked the card myself and I knew going in what I was getting myself into. You see, while *Living Tarot* is "just" another performance piece it is also ritual – and doing anything with ritual will change your life no matter how hard you try to avoid it. Frankly I think that is the reason I do it all. I have spent the past year leaning what Strength means in a visceral and deeply personal way. It's made me a better person and hopefully a better artist and Artistic Director.

Now, with only a few minutes to go before we begin, I am backstage with the rest of cast. The layers of my costume clothe me in the character and in the essence of Strength. Still the stage fright tugs at me. I feel the chills and shivering begin... this is the moment every performer knows intimately. The moment right before a performance begins. That moment when you know there is no going back and its time to see if all your hard work was worth the effort.

So I stand there, hearing the audience talk and settle into their seats, the butterflies dancing a jig in my stomach. *Breathe!* I say to myself, *breathe!* And the calm settles over me. Inch by inch the character takes root in my body, borne of my soul and hard work, I can feel her rise out of up my spine. Strength tonight will look like a woman with a line's face and a headdress of Eagle feathers... the deer skin skirt is heavy on my legs, but comforting somehow. The bells in the headdress rattle, and a feather touches my shoulder as I turn my head. *I am Strength*, the lines of my monologue flow through past my eyes and the calm deepens. *I am Strength*, I can hear the doors to the hall clang shut, and the music begins. The Gypsies take the stage, setting the space, creating the physical and magical container in which we will work. They are the fortunetellers, for tonight, I am but one of the tools of their trade.

The knot in my stomach begins again... and I breathe, whispering my lines like a mantra. *I am in your words and your deeds... I am Strength*. Then at last the music begins: *Oh Fortuna!* from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. The sound creeps through the room, building and pulsing through me, triggering the spell. Da da da DA... Da da da DA!... one trio of cards/performers steps out into the light, then another. Each set a living moment of the tarot, a trio of archetypes in vivid breathing colors. And finally its my turn... beat, beat walk – out into the light – filled with the power of Strength. Hit my mark... hold, hold, move... crossing behind the Chariot with his medieval shield and urban camo. Then off the stage, past the audience with their shinning curious eyes, into line... holding the power... waiting...

Each card is displayed, each trio of archetypes shown to the audience, a promise of what is to come. They will have their fortunes told tonight. The cards will speak of what is in store for all of us, no matter what that might be. At last all the cards have been presented, and the World takes her place center stage. The room sings with energy and I know we are about to crank it higher. The music shifts – exploding over us, audience and performer alike. You can see it in their eyes, feel it as they breath, if you have the time to notice, but I don't have the time, I don't have any thing but the music and Strength. As the music swells the movement takes us. Living tarot cards move in two lines past each other, around the audience filling with the audience's energy and thoughts, their hopes and questions. Then the lines cross, literally shuffling through each other. I am caught in the lines of power, feeling something indefinable take hold. There is no explaining why or how it works, but it does. You go with the movement and let the energy propel you along its path. It fills me with an ecstasy that only ritual and ritual theater have ever given me... it is the reason I push and struggle and create beyond all reason. It is a moment of connection.

And then its done.

The cards are shuffled. We take our places in the tableaux on stage and the waiting begins again. Waiting to share who I am in this garment of Strength.