



# wheels within wheels

## 30 YEARS OF WEAVING WOMAN'S CULTURE WITH THE Motherpeace Tarot

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during a period of physical and spiritual transformation, a dear friend bestowed a *Motherpeace Tarot* deck upon me. Familiar with tarot, and having used various decks for nearly 20 years, I appreciated the chance to delve into the cards, explore the pictures and discover their divination properties. What I wasn't prepared for was the feeling of comfort and healing I experienced almost immediately. I smiled at the whimsical images, enjoyed the roundness of the cards, felt empowered by the written words of the companion book and saw, in these portraits of Amazons, Shamans and Goddesses, a lineage of strong women that I had only begun to relate to as ancestral elders. This wasn't a simple tarot deck created for play and musing — this was a history.

These cards bore the faces of women from many cultures, instructing other women on how to use the power divined within to create, guide and transform. Unlike the more traditional decks of Waite and Crowley (*The Rider-Waite* and *Thoth*), or the *Morgan-Greer* that I used for years, these cards celebrated woman-as-leader,



-healer, -teacher, and -communicator. The women of *Motherpeace* transcended energy and time, and walked seamlessly between the realms of imagination, nature, spirit and the Goddess. It was an education — one that I wasn't aware I needed — and the lessons inspired strength, confidence and gave me both peace and nurturing assurance during a tumultuous period. I am forever grateful for their timely arrival as I walked my own path of self-awareness and renewal.

This year, the *Motherpeace Tarot* celebrates thirty years of providing a tool for healing, learning and expanding the knowledge of matriarchal cultures. Since their publication, more than 300,000 decks have found their way around the world. The deck has found a beloved place among the altars and sacred spaces of women, provoking praise throughout the three decades of its existence. Author Alice Walker has said, "The *Motherpeace Tarot* has been a wise and loving oracle. A clear mirror, also, that constantly shows the truest face."

I had the honor to speak with co-creators Karen Vogel and Vicki Noble the history of the *Motherpeace* deck early this spring. Their answers were thought-provoking, and embodied the passion, dedication and humor that created these iconic representations of feminist history.

The two women met in the early 1970s in Colorado Springs, Colorado while studying and taking part in the protests and activism of that time. They traveled together to Berkeley, California, in the



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latter part of that decade to continue their studies, activism and spiritual healing. Coinciding with their efforts was groundbreaking work by Merlin Stone, Z. Budapest, Marija Gimbutas, Starhawk and Susan Miller. It was in Berkeley that *Motherpeace* found its birthright, as Nobel and Vogel's spiritual and artistic passion combined to not only create the deck and Nobel's subsequent companion book, *Motherpeace: A Way to*

*the Goddess through Myth, Art, and Tarot,*

as well as Vogel's *Motherpeace Tarot Guidebook*, but to share that knowledge with their community. Though I spoke separately with each woman, I asked them each similar questions as to the creation and legacy of the *Motherpeace*.

**NIKKI JARDIN:** *What were the influences that moved you towards creating the Motherpeace Tarot?*

**Karen Vogel** Berkeley in the late seventies was interesting — the whole feminist Witch era had almost peaked. Z. Budapest was going off in her direction and Starhawk in hers. It was starting to morph into a more shamanic kind of spirituality and that is where I think Vicki and I were both being pulled, though without really knowing it. Not that we didn't relate to the European Witch tradition — because that's an important part of who we are — but it wasn't in that sort of formalized way that we felt resonance. When you look at *Motherpeace* and how we drew on so many different cultures and time periods, it felt like we were trying to pull together a shamanic worldview that has really been so foundational with us and with a lot of cultures.

**Vicki Noble** Karen and I moved to Berkeley in 1976. I had read one book by Elizabeth Gold Davis about ancient cultures who worshipped the Goddess. Karen and I were interested in researching the Goddess and women's sexuality. I had also gotten sick, and was learning about holistic healing. I said "no" to Western Medicine, and I started to have all these extreme psychic openings. You know, we've always felt that our whole relationship was fated to make the *Motherpeace* cards.

**Karen** We got into a flow; it felt like there was a spirit door that we walked through, and got access to information that was way beyond our scholarship. This was a time when women were saying, “Ok, there’s a whole of material that we need to recover, access, figure out and look at.” Vicki had so much of that in women’s studies and I did as well in my field, which was anthropology. At U.C. Berkeley many female anthropologists of were thinking, “Was male domination universal? Why did it look that way and how did it change over time?” Going back over the historical record, as soon as cultures were contacted by European colonizers the (male) archaeologists would go and talk to the males (of the indigenous culture) and things would immediately change. No wonder cultures look that way (male-dominated) because its men who has been doing the field work and writing the history. So as the field workers changed — that is to say, as women entered the discipline — the findings change. At this time, people like Marija Gimbutas were seeing that goddesses were everywhere. So, we were finding our way towards cultures in which people were still deeply connected to a shamanic worldview, to seeing the rest of the world as being alive.

*And you weren’t seeing any of this in the other tarot decks?*

**Karen** No, because it was all Waite and Crowley. I learned a lot from each of those decks. They were a good balance: the *Waite* deck was so straight and medieval and Crowley’s *Thoth* deck was so flamboyant. Both of them were useful tools, but I couldn’t relate to them; they just seemed too limited, reduced to that European world. That’s understandable, since that was where the Tarot came from, but there’s so much more in all the artwork that we were looking at from prehistory and non-European cultures. Also we were being really drawn to the patterns that come out of textiles or pottery, designs that have a certain kind of spirit and deity in them.

*In the patterns themselves?*

**Karen** Yes, in the mandalas or in the weavings and the textiles and patterns that have been with us for so long. They’re like drum rhythms, ways that we access and are known in the spirit world. It seemed like the deep knowledge was coming through the patterns. The designs in baskets, the designs in fabric, the designs on pottery, and so on — all those got put into the cards.

*Vicki, how did you come to the tarot?*

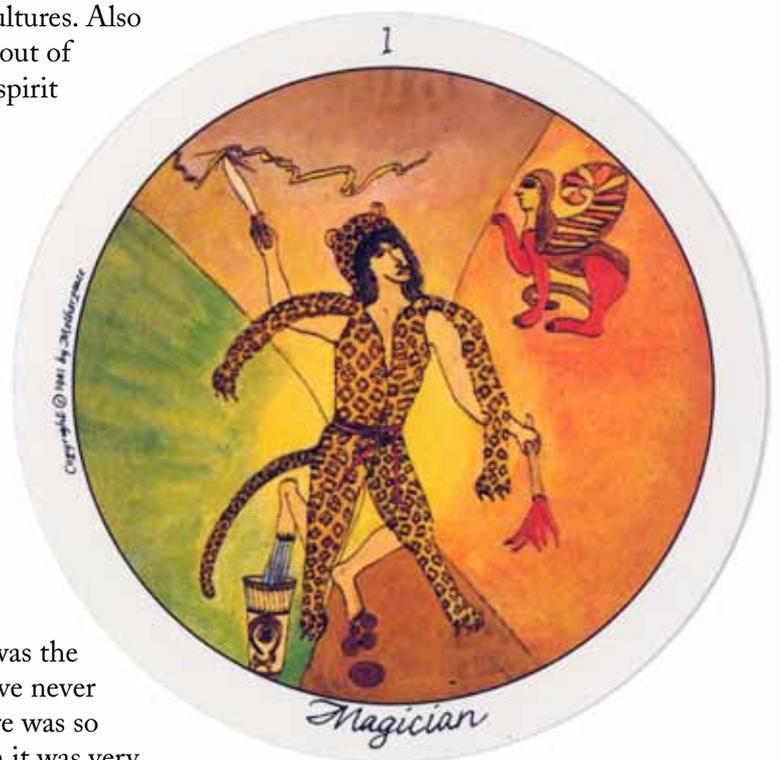
**Vicki** A friend bought a deck in 1978 — which was the first time I had ever seen a tarot deck and — and I have never been so obsessed. I saw the Goddess in the cards; there was so much of the divine feminine in the deck (even though it was very

white, and male-dominated) but there was something about the oracular process that completely captivated me. Tarot woke up capacities I didn’t even know I had and we began playing with them in every kind of way.

*How did you go from studying the tarot to creating your own deck?*

**Karen** It was lightning fast; within six months after being introduced to the tarot we were drawing the deck. People were aghast. “What do you mean? You can’t do your own tarot deck,” they said. I can understand; what presumptuous little whippersnapper thinks they can do a tarot deck!

**Vicki** We were not identified with art; neither of us had ever drawn pictures before. My daughters went to live with their father and I decided they needed a tarot deck. I found one at a flea market but it was missing two cards. The first one I copied was the “Page of Swords,” and I decided to change the Page into a young Amazon girl. That same week I wondered what kind of tarot deck I would make, and then created the first image — the “Six of Wands.” It’s a Shakti image; I think I had probably seen an East Indian image of



a fiery woman in a wheel, and then an artist friend looked at the deck and said, “oh, so it’s going to be a round deck!” There was such synchronicity; it was beautiful, such a flow. Buddhists say that when the streams come together in just the right way, that’s when your fate can manifest. And I think we were in some kind of cosmic flow and everything just was perfect. It’s the most fun I’ve ever had.

*How did you decide who was going to draw which cards?*

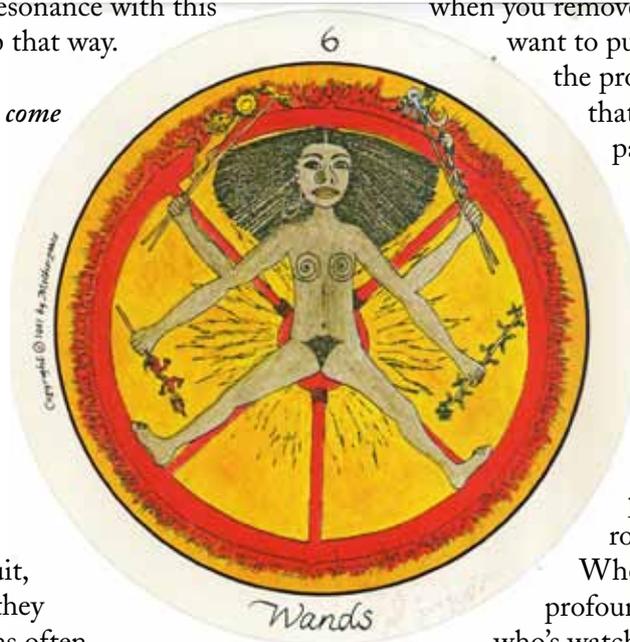
**Karen** We sort of did the fire-and-water thing. Vicki being an Aries and me being a Cancer, she did most of the wands and I did most of the cups. The other cards we talked about; we already had a working relationship so it was an easy process for one of us to say, “I feel a resonance with this card,” and divide it up that way.

*Where did the imagery come from?*

**Karen** Some of it was reinterpreting a feeling, like the concept that men who were the primary movers behind previous tarot imagery were afraid of the feminine. For example, water, as a suit, was harder for them; they didn’t inner expressions often seen in the water suit weren’t necessarily depression, just a form of internal processing. The same with certain numbers: Crowley believed that the number “7” was weak and feminine; we said to each other “what is that experience (of a seven) really?” For example, the Seven of Swords, one of my favorite cards, has negative connotations in many decks, but I looked at what that energy really is and sometimes that kind of strategizing and planning on how to get what you want is totally appropriate. Or with the “Eight of Swords,” I thought of that card as having to do

with anxiety dreams and ways we can block ourselves in. Or how crows have laughed at me sitting there going, “Why are you so serious and wound up?”

**Vicki** There was a lot of healing happening for us at the time. We were taking a psychic class and learning basic skills, like how to use your sixth sense, making left-handed drawings...and so the cards came out of that context. One of my cards — the “Priestess of Cups” — has one of my left-handed drawings. We were doing so much of the kind of psychic work where you go into the chakras and see what’s there in the way of cords and entanglements, and all of that work was pouring into the cards. We learned that when you remove something psychically, you always want to put something beautiful in its place or else the problematic thing will return. So we felt that since we were cleansing ourselves of patriarchy that the *Motherpeace* images were positive, female-centered, female-loving images to replace some of the garbage we were discarding.



One day I realized that we needed to imagine a positive male principle or we’d be in trouble, energetically and psychologically speaking. That was the beginning of my understanding that patriarchy patriarchy is a distortion of the root of male experience, not its essence. When I made the “Son of Wands,” I had a profound experience. I was like the little girl who’s watching and pointing to the figure in the card, and that represents was my early experience of my dad when he had a lot of vitality. Later he was really broken, and so creating that card was an incredible healing experience for me, and that’s when we began to add a few male images in the deck.

**Karen** Sometimes we are asked about why there’s a negative interpretation of “The Emperor” in *Motherpeace*. I say that each of the Major Arcana represents a different year in one’s life, and that the Emperor represents the attitude you have when you’re four years old: “I want to rule the world!” That sense of limitless vitality is appropriate for a four-year-old, but “The Emperor” represents the fact that we haven’t matured beyond that “power over” attitude into having that energy serve the good of wider community.





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**Vicki** It's not like we were trying to be precise in our drawings. We didn't know how to do it; I had to get a book about how to draw the human figure! It was like rock art, that's what we were working with.

**Vicki** Someone wanted to interview me on the subject of Tarot not too long ago and I honestly could not think why she called me until I remembered that *Motherpeace* are considered tarot cards [laughs.] I would love it if there was more overlap between traditional tarot and *Motherpeace* but those are like two different worlds. I won't say that traditional tarotists dislike the *Motherpeace*, exactly; but they just don't "vibe" the deck very well. Many women who come to the *Motherpeace* deck have previously either been afraid of or uninterested in tarot, but *Motherpeace* is their doorway because it is so female-centered.

*How did the women's community help shape this project?*

**Karen** Because of the time and place where we lived, there were lots of people who influenced the work. One notable person was Z. Budapest, who had very strong opinions. That influence from the community was great because there was that way that people can have important influences, even over little things. Sometimes we knew how a card should look, and sometimes we didn't. Take for example, "The World" and "The Fool" cards. Vicki drew "the Fool," and someone looked at it and said, "That's character isn't the Fool, she looks like dshe belongs in the World." So I took the "Fool" character that Vicki had drawn and turned her into "the World" by putting her into the background. Then I made a new Fool character and put her in Vicki's Fool card background. All because of something someone had said. Things like this were happening all the time.

**Vicki** There was something about that time that was very community-based, creative, and intuitive. It was much more free; I'm a very spontaneous person and that attitude was brilliant. The time when we were creating the *Motherpeace* deck was a very special moment, because it took so little money to live we were able to support that freedom in each other and support that in our lives, too.

*What was the response to the deck?*

**Karen** The deck was the right thing at the right time and as a result had tremendous influence. It was an amazing time to be publishing something like this: there was this alternative culture, full of independent bookstores, and women's festivals to share it with the world. I took the deck to the Michigan Women's Music Festival that first year, and then to a few other gatherings, and it only took a couple of years for that first 5,000 to sell. There was such a strong word of mouth that it didn't take that long, and the deck has been going strong ever since.

The creation of *Motherpeace* was so intuitive. I've spent years finding the evidence to document our intuitions. Another thing that I love about *Motherpeace* is how the cards are so fun and easy, and you can play with them at a party. They are so non-threatening and healing, but the healing is a quiet kind of healing. That's a wonderful way to disseminate the knowledge we were bringing through — from indigenous cultures, archaeology, history, art, shamanism and the Western magical traditions.



*It's been thirty years since you worked on Motherpeace; what projects, books, ideas or practices are you working on now that embodies that same spirit of creativity as Motherpeace? Is there anything special you'd like to say to our readers in conclusion?*

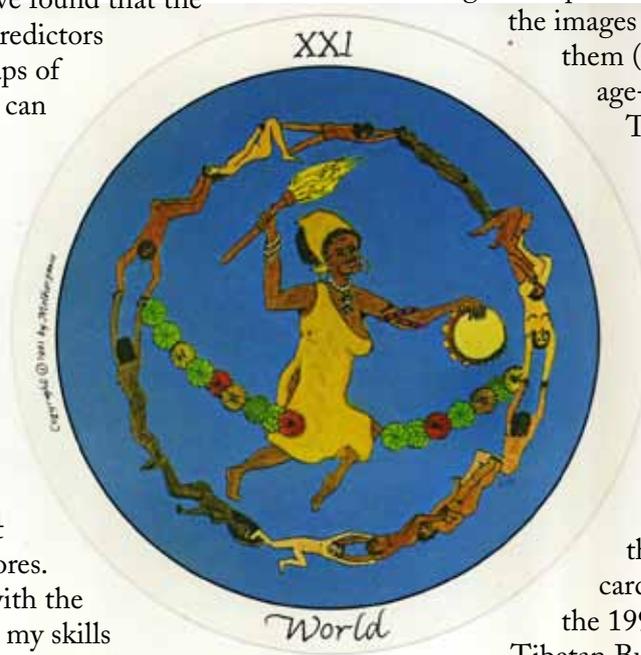
**Karen** The *Motherpeace* deck that Vicki and I co-created thirty years ago has traveled far and deeply into people's lives. It has fostered special relationships with many people I've met and many more I will never know personally. I'm touched by the profound way that *Motherpeace* holds people in sorrow and joy, bringing insight and guidance. I've found that the cards are not so much predictors of the future as road maps of the many directions life can take.

*Motherpeace* is still very much a part of my life. I do readings, teach workshops on how to use the cards, and I've run the *Motherpeace Tarot* publishing business all these years through a network of independent distributors and bookstores. This has provided me with the opportunity to cultivate my skills and passion for many artistic mediums including carving in wood and stone. Even though I've practice a life of simplicity I could not have produced enough carvings to support myself without the sales of the deck.

This past year I returned to painting in a project in which I illustrated a book called *Secret of the Missing Crown*. These recent paintings highlight my unique surrealist perspective; the book is planned for publication this fall and will be available from a link at the "What's New" page of the *Motherpeace* website.

Even though I think Vicki and I are very talented and work hard, the wisdom in the cards is clearly beyond simply our gifts and efforts. I'm grateful for the profound joy of connecting to knowledge greater than what we possessed and that it has provided guidance to others.

**Vicki** There will never be anything quite like the *Motherpeace* project, it was unique — in a class of its own. At this point, I consider *Motherpeace* to be a classic "terma" in the Tibetan treasure tradition. Karen and I reincarnated to do this project — we were born for it. A terma is received as a mind-transmission, and it is articulated in the vernacular of one's time and place for the explicit purpose of expressing some aspect of the Dharma to a particular constituency. The way Karen and I came together as "consorts," the compelling nature of the work, the visionary aspects of my receiving the original inspiration (wisdom), Karen's prowess in getting the images into physical form once we had made them (skillful means) — all of it follows an age-old sacred Dakini tradition outlined in Tibetan Buddhist texts.



All of my work since making the *Motherpeace* cards continues in the tradition of sacred women, Tibetan Buddhism, female shamanism, and bringing matriarchal values and principles to the foreground for healing and regeneration. I ran a school for women healers in the Bay Area for several years in the 1980s, and traveled the world sharing the *Motherpeace* cards and shamanistic teachings during the 1990s. Since 2000, I have been adapting Tibetan Buddhist Dakini practices for my female students who are not Buddhist as well as teaching in a university Masters program in Women's Spirituality. I bring *Motherpeace* as well as artistic and shamanistic methods to all of these venues.

Humanity evolved along explicitly matriarchal lines for millions of years with women and the Goddess at the center of communities and cultures. The patriarchal deviation of the last 5000 years of is an unsustainable aberration. What matters at this time in history is to simplify our lives and hold close those things that matter (seeds, practices, languages, herbal remedies, chants, and the ability to love). It is time to distill out the wisdom of this epoch and bring it through the needle's eye into the next cycle. May all beings know the Dakini and may there be peace on Earth. Blessed be. ☺

*For more information regarding this work, please visit the Motherpeace website at <http://www.motherpeace.com>.*