

“On Visibility”

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“We aim high, trying to love each other and then we take what we can get. We settle for looking out for each other. And even if we don’t all love each other, we mostly all respect each other...T4T is an ideal, I guess, and we fall short of it most of the time. But that’s better than before. All it took was the end of the world to make that happen.”

– Torrey Peters, *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones*

“All it took was the end of the world to make that happen,” writes the author. That “end of the world” was different than any I’ve seen, but maybe you’ve witnessed some small apocalypses of your own.

When I find troubling times, and these are troubling times, I sometimes turn to the spiritual technology of tarot cards for reflection, for insight, and to discern next steps from a personal or collective apocalypse into a post-apocalypse.

If you’re not familiar, tarot cards are split between the minor arcana, more like the cards in a standard deck of playing cards, numbered one through ten with four court cards per suit, and the major arcana, numbered zero through 23 with names like “The Fool,” “The Sun,” and “The Moon.” When I learned about the major arcana, I was taught that they tell a story altogether, called the fool’s journey. The Fool, number zero, sets off on this trek unsure where they’re going and meets each of these spiritual teachers in a row, some with promises of weal and some with warnings of woe, and many with a bit of both.

Late in the journey, the Fool hits a moment of traumatic change and disruption, where their way forward is completely erased, at the Tower - pictured not as a tall, strong fortress, but as one that was once tall and strong and now crumbles in a storm. After this, where there seems to be no way forward, the Fool meets three characters I’ve been thinking about: the Star, the Moon, and the Sun.

The Star, yes, shows those brightly shining in the sky, but also a person on the earth, one foot on solid ground, one in a pool of water, as they pour water from two chalices to nourish the fertile soil. After the Tower crumbles, the Fool suddenly sees through where it once stood, noticing a North Star, a welcome reminder of an earned hope and refined purpose. “All it took was the end of the world to make that happen;” all it took was the fall of that mighty Tower to make that Star visible.

In the calm of the Star's inspiration, the Fool falls asleep, and, in dreams, meets the Moon. In order to continue on this journey, the hope of the Star provides the fuel for the reckoning the Moon expects, ready to illuminate the shadow side of every intention just as the Moon reflects the light of the Sun through the night. The questions the Moon asks the Fool to ask are tough: having lost the Tower, what was once your goal, what do you really want? What illusions are you still hanging on to? And if you dispel those pure fantasies, what will be left for you in the world of reality? I wonder if you have someone who asks you hard questions like these.

Out of that long night, the Fool wakes up and sees clearly, perhaps for the first time, in the light of the Sun. Its rays reach to the soil the Star watered. They're not so different, really - the Sun and the Star. The greater proximity of the Sun grants it a special familiarity, so the Sun is greeted like a good friend. It illuminates not just the path forward, but the vitality of life around the Fool, the great ecosystems of connection and collaboration working in rhythms just like the tandem rise and fall of Sun and Moon. All it took was the end of the world.

Tomorrow is Trans Day of Visibility. Ten years ago, TIME magazine declared the "transgender tipping point" where, from that point forward, trans people comprised such a critical mass of people that we'd see only, or at least mostly, social progress and recognition. The story centered on the actress Laverne Cox, who, gaining critical acclaim and mainstream recognition, was a shining star of visibility and who represented an unstoppable wave. Visibility, this article seemed to argue, would be the key to acceptance and the solution to discrimination.

And to the author's credit, us trans people have gotten nothing if not more visible in the ten years since its publication. At the same time, that has not meant that we've found much comfort across much of this country.

In states across the US, trans people and especially children have, in the past few years, been denied legal protection from discrimination, denied accurate documentation on passports and thus safer passage outside of this country, denied access to healthcare, and denied the right to play with friends after school.

We're not facing invisibility; we're facing a fierce storm and a crumbling tower.

Greater visibility is not my wish-upon-a-star right now. In this time of hypervisibility, of heightened threats to safety, of constant surveillance, I envy Claude Raines in *The Invisible Man*, able to adorn and remove a three-piece suit, hat, sunglasses, and bandages covering his face to render himself visible and invisible at will.

This is not only the case with trans people right now. Earlier this week, Rumeysa Ozturk, a PhD candidate at Tufts originally from Turkey on an F-1 student visa was

arrested by ICE agents while joining friends to break her Ramadan fast. She'd had personal information leaked online, the target of doxxing, and her neighbors in Somerville noticed unmarked cars scoping her out for days prior. She'd co-authored an opinion piece in the Tufts newsletter, participating in democratic processes to take stances and push for an end to war in Palestine. Ozturk has joined an unfortunate wave of immigration related detentions for political opposition. Her visibility, the surveillance of her comings and goings by civilians and government agents alike, has been a weapon used at her expense, a tower crumbling.

I don't guarantee that every crumbling tower will reveal a shining star, a renewing sense of hope and purpose. I don't guarantee that there is some cosmic or spiritual purpose to the suffering of some at the will of others. But I believe in the promise of the Star, the celestial guide-point - the promise that existed before the fall of the Tower, too, whether we paid attention to it or not.

In Torrey Peters' novella from our reading, the end of the world brought an imperfect shining star, one that the characters had attempted to keep "before the contagion," but kept failing at. In the novella, they call it t4t, a pledge to center other trans folks in their lives, their love, their respect.

About the origins of t4t, Trans Studies Quarterly editors Cameron Awkward-Rich and Hil Malatino write that "The term arose in the context of early 2000s Craigslist personals, working to both sequester trans folks from the categories of "m" and "w" and enable some kind of us to find one another for hookups." But it took on a bigger meaning, an ethos of care for and solidarity with other trans folks.

After the end of the world, the still-shining star was this still-unmet promise of t4t, this promise of solidarity. If imperfect, they at least got better after enduring their own apocalypse.

So how will we survive the next apocalypse? I'm sure we've done it before. These are the questions of the Moon - what shall our post-apocalypse look like? What illusions are we still hanging onto? What can we dream into being?

I don't believe the answer is greater visibility of trans people, nor of any marginalized people. That illusion is one I think we must release.

The visible, charismatic leaders of social movements past were visible enough to become martyrs, and we don't need any more martyrs.

What can we dream into being, the Moon asks. I believe it is bigger than coincidence that hypervisibility is affecting multiple communities of marginalized people now. Our

liberation is tied up together, all of us. Our great Universalist promise is that our salvation will come in this life, and we will build it, will glimpse it in small moments.

Here comes the Sun. Just like any other star, just close enough to know it by name, to recognize it from the crowd, to be nurtured in relationship to it. I believe the beautiful way forward will be illuminated by our close relationships, too. I believe this time will ask us to renew commitments to solidarity. As Peters writes, “We aim high, trying to love each other and then we take what we can get. We settle for looking out for each other.”

Solidarity is a great, simple word for a tough, long, messy process. But illuminated by the Sun, we can find that solidarity looks like deep relationship - not just knowing about but opening one another to be changed together. Illuminated by the Sun, we find that solidarity looks like mutual aid and collaboration, knowing we will all need assistance from each other at some point, so we give it, too. Illuminated by the Sun, we find that solidarity looks like mourning a fallen Tower together and building something beautiful in the ruins.

Peters writes that these characters “mostly fail” at this ideal of t4t. I find that after a mistake it can be easiest to rebuild a relationship with a strong and deep foundation. Through deep relationship, we’ll keep one another pointed at our North Stars.

All it took was the end of the world - not celebrity, not awareness, not visibility. Through the foggiest night, let’s build lighthouses of values, displays of solidarity and mutuality to keep one another safe when it’s hardest to see our guiding star. In the light of the Sun, we’ll see that all along, we were made up of our relationships.

Amen and blessed be.