In Praise of the Fool

One languid Sunday afternoon as I lay on my bed, I felt via the electromagnetism of the radio waves, the voice of Nina Simone wash through me and fill the room with yearning:

I wish I knew how it would feel to be free,
I wish I could break all the chains holding me.

I wanted to feel free too! Decades ago back in Berkeley, amidst the study of many things which were part of the spirit of those heady times, I developed a passion for a system of symbols known as the Tarot. The cards begin not with the number one but with a zero above an image titled the Fool. How strange, I thought, to begin before the beginning. In Western Mystery schools, the tarot cards are studied in sequence to gain insight about the journey of human consciousness. The quality of mind necessary to move from intention to completion in any cycle of manifestation is shown in the image of the Fool. And just what quintessential quality does the Fool represent? It is a sense of freedom.

Tarot cards have an ancient yet obscure origin; some say an Egyptian origin, others say mystics met to create the cards in the city of Fez which came to prominence sometime after the burning of the great Library of Alexandria. We do know that they first appear in Europe in the latter 14th century as playing cards. The story enacted in the cards starts with the image of an androgynous youth poised on the edge of a mountain cliff and dressed in the colorful motley of the fool as in folk and court traditions. With a serene expression of equanimity, he gazes upward at a distant height and seems unconcerned that he is about to fall off a cliff. To say the least, he is about to experience something new!

Things are not what they seem. Here on an isolated mountaintop, a place usually reserved for the sage, we find instead a fool on the threshold of possibility, about to incarnate into a new adventure—from the spiritual heights down into the valley of the material world. The card implies that when starting something new, it is wise to be a fool. With a willingness to go forth, he knows nothing but has faith in his own powers of being. Furthermore, the card is assigned the ordinal number zero as a point of origin. The fool is no
negative cipher but possesses all the richness of zero, the freedom of no limitations.

Almost endless are the associations that can be attributed to the image of the Fool. Like any enduring symbol, it has an open-ended quality which accrues new meanings over time. In many spiritual traditions, before the beginning of time, before the Fool can fall into the world, the breath of the spirit must exhale a world into being. So, it seems to me that the Tarot series begins with that foundational metaphor, the breath is the spirit, for the Fool represents that animating energy which gives life. The English word spirit comes from the Latin spiritus meaning breath, breath of a god, (inspiration!) from spirare to breathe. Numerous other examples exist. The Greek pneuma is the vital spirit, soul, or creative force of a person, literally “that which is breathed or blown.” In Hinduism, the Sanskrit word prana means the breath of life, the breath of the universe. In Hebrew and Arabic, the Ruh is the name for the vital principle of spirit as breath. The chi (or qi or kì) thought of in Chinese medicine as the life force whose movement through the body is the basis of health, has its root in the Mandarin word qì, literally “air, breath.”

How exactly does the Tarot Fool fit into all of this? Besides being numbered zero, that is, existing before the beginning as only a spirit could do, the concept of zero also connects with breath of wind. Zero derives from the Italian zefiro from Medieval Latin zephirum or zephyr, the light pleasant west wind, almost nothing. And the source of all of this is the Arabic sifr or zero, cipher, which was a translation of the Sanskrit sunya, meaning emptiness or the void. From this void, all creation arises and returns, the no-thing behind existence yet which mystics claim is “manifested in everything.” Thus nothing gets a symbol, not the round “O” but the oval shaped “0.” As Theseus says in Midsummer’s Night Dream, the human imagination gives “to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name.” In the Tarot, the summation of the Fool’s adventure is found in the concluding card named the World. Here the life force is imaged as the Cosmic Dancer dancing on the airy nothing of the winds up in the blue vault of the heavens. In the wisdom that the cards have to teach us, She inhabits as if in a cartouche, the middle of a green wreath woven into the shape of zero. Freely dancing on air, She is balanced at the center of zero.
And in the magic of words, further study shows that the origin of the word Fool is from the Old French *fol* “fool, foolish,” from Latin *follis* “bellows,” and by extension, a windbag, an “empty-headed person.” A bellows blows air to ignite a fire and has sides that allow it to expand and contract like a human body which takes in a breath to fire our bodies with oxygen and then exhales. Thus the etymology of the word fool connects it to the medieval fool whose “empty headed” jests gives him the freedom to enliven the royal court and to the motif of spirit as the breath of life.

I was there on the day my goddess daughters were born. From my place in the hospital corridor, I waited. Beyond the wall, inside a room, their mother was giving birth. Suddenly, the sound of a cry astonished me, and then another. Nothing could have announced their presence in this world more to me than those first loud exhalations of breath. To hear it felt like an unbreakable bond between us. They had begun their fool’s journey a moment before with their first intake of breath. Much has been said about the rhythm of human breath. Meditation masters teach attention to the movement of our breath is one of the grandest tools we have for coming into the present and for restoring us back to who we really are. Back, they say, to some spark of ourselves before all the layers of socialization strangled us; back, they say, to the freedom to be ourselves.

The Fool shows us the way. Perhaps it’s an ideal more often than the real, but his essence we carry inside ourselves as we move through the adventure of being alive. Buoyant, young at heart, creative, the part of us that still feels free and enjoys life—the very opposite of the character Babbitt who reveals at the end of the novel, “I never did one thing I wanted to do.” Or to the kind of work Thoreau describes which gives a person “no time to be anything but a machine.” Far from the stoic endurance of grim duty or the view of life as a dreary series of lessons to be learned, is the lightness of spirit that is the Fool.

By Shakespeare’s time in the late 16th century, to be a fool could be a job description. One could be the official fool and be paid for it. What an era! Noble households employed fools for the pleasure of their company. Wit was a commodity. It is said that Henry the VIII’s fool, Will Sommers, rarely left the king’s side. Artist Hans Holbein included a portrait of him as part of the court life. The verbal
ingenuity of these learned or “artificial” fools gave them a privileged tongue to tell the truth but tell it at a slant through riddles, song, and rime. Set apart by their special costume made of motley green cloth (it was illegal for an ordinary person to impersonate a fool!), these court jesters with their delight in folly had a rare freedom to be themselves and still keep their heads. They stand with one foot outside the social order, but by evoking laughter, fools can make moral commentary on the life they see about them. Through his folly, the fool exposes folly in others. A second category of fools also existed in wealthy households, the “naturals” or idiot-fools who were mentally handicapped, but revered for their merry antics and moments of innocent wisdom. There was a rare meritocracy in the profession; anyone could be a fool: women, those from the lower classes. All one needed was ability. Thus the Fool moves from archetype to physical embodiment in the domestic fool-for-hire.

Of course, the history of professional fools stretches back thousands of years. There are records of fools in the courts of Egypt as early as 2200 BCE and in places as far ranging as the temple of the of Aztec king Montezuma, to classical Rome where the Emperor Augustus had a fool named Galba. A recent book, Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World, demonstrates the seemingly universal need of people for the fool and his humanizing influence on cultures independent of each other around the globe. The book tells the stories of numerous fools: Birbal the Court Jester to the Indian Mogul emperor Akbar, and Abu Dulawa the Arab jester poet or the Chinese jester Shi who during the reign of King Huiwang (7th century BCE) gave the perfect fool’s cover for verbal license, “I am a jester, my words can give no offense.”

Back to medieval times in England, we find the fool as a rustic clown or buffoon in burlesque folk festivals such as the Feast of Fools celebrated around New Year’s Day. Often held in churches and later in the streets, this sanctioned merry-making and drunken partying temporarily disrupted the usual social hierarchy. In a reversal of power, the lower could command the higher. During this ritualized overthrow of order, an elected Lord of Misrule, a kind of Holy Fool, often a peasant, oversaw the Christmas and New Year’s festivities. This once a year release of the steam of social resentments had a forbear in the wild revelries of the Roman Saturnalia where
slaves and masters switched places. All these festivals mark in one way or another the winter solstice and a return of the growing light, the rebirth of the sun.

Just as laughter erupts from a reversal of expectations, part of the mystique of the fool exists in surprises, reversals summed up in the phrase, “the wisdom of the fool.” Or as poet William Blake advises in the spirited Proverbs of Hell, “If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.” Alas, the custom of the court fool comes to an end by the 18th century. Dicky Pierce, the earl of Suffolk’s fool, died in 1728, the last known household fool in England. An epitaph by Jonathan Swift is engraved on his tombstone. In the Age of Reason, under the oppressive sway of rationality, there seems to be no room for a fool. But despite shifting customs, the traditions of millennia do not die easily. Nothing as deep in the human psyche as the energies of the Fool can be wiped out completely. Witness our still celebrated April Fool’s Day, the movies of Jerry Lewis, Ernest (Scared Stupid!), Jack Black, or my favorite TV character as a child, the lovable beatnik Maynard G. Krebs who also stands outside the social order as he speaks his truth with the classic fool’s caveat, “No offense, good buddy.” Many Americans get the nation’s news from late night TV comedian/fools like Dave or Jay or Jon Stewart. And there is that wise learned fool the Great Gorino, Gore Vidal, who wants to wake us citizens up through his ironic commentary, “We have an empire, but none of our students can find it on a map.” All these are but to name a few.

Still, no one has immortalized the role of the fool more than Shakespeare. There exists no better place than his plays to see the fool in action as companion, trickster, exposers of folly. Most memorable are that great trio of fools, Touchstone in As You Like It, Feste in Twelfth Night and the Fool in King Lear. The addition of gifted comic Robert Armin to the acting troupe may have inspired the Bard to create these roles. (Armin later penned his own book Foole upon Foole.) Shakespeare turns away from the old stage tradition of the rustic clown to introduce the court fool as a new character. Thus Armin dons the costume of the professional fool—a coat of motley. In the eccentric book Shakespeare’s Motley, Englishman Leslie Hobson devotes 300 pages to what the word motley might mean. (Such is the devotion that Shakespeare excites!) Hobson proves how the
plays break new ground by shifting from buffoon’s russet jerkin to the fool’s long coat of motley.

Certainly Shakespeare’s explorations of the Fool and obvious affinity for this character represent the Fool’s highest moments, his literary apotheosis. In 1599, the witty fool Touchstone (played by Armin) first appears on the stage in *As You Like It* as a duplicitous trickster, seducer of shepherdesses and still part clown. After meeting Touchstone in the forest of Arden, the melancholy Jacques envies the fool his freedom: “Invest me in my motley; give me leave / To speak my mind.” The splendid Feste, licensed fool to the household of Lady Olivia, finds himself in the center of the whirling atmosphere created by the mad revels of *Twelfth Night*. Also known as the feast of the Epiphany (twelve nights after Christmas), a fool might feel right at home in such an ambiance as this is another New Year’s celebration like the Feast of Fools or Saturnalia. Critic Harold Bloom observes, “The genius of *Twelfth Night* is Feste, the most charming of all Shakespeare’s fools, and the only sane character in a wild play.” After a quick paced exchange with Feste, Viola remarks, “This fellow is wise enough to play the fool; /And to do that well craves a kind of wit.” Feste, alone on the stage, closes the play with a song reflecting life’s uncertainties; the jester also knows the other side: “For the rain it raineth every day.”

Finally, we come to the incomparable Fool of Lear, a childlike “natural” fool known for his affections of the heart. He pines away for Cordelia and loves Lear and “labors to outjest his heartstruck injuries” as a gentleman puts it to Kent out on the heath. Or perhaps, as Bloom believes, the Fool torments the king into insanity as punishment for his moral lapses as a father: “Thou shouldest not have been old till thou hadst been wise.” Once Lear has collapsed into this state madness (become his own fool?), the Fool disappears back into the ether or whatever world he came from. I think sometimes the Fool just couldn’t take it anymore; he’d had it with Lear’s lethal personality.

If the essence of the fool is his freedom of wit, the two strongest mentalities of any of Shakespeare’s characters are Hamlet and Falstaff. From that most intelligent of writers, his most intelligent characters. Both of them play the fool. Hamlet acts the fool when he puts on an “antic disposition,” to feign madness as a cover for his designs of revenge and murder. Ah, that second scene of the second act, the
conversations with those spies Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, what gems of wit and philosophic depth await the reader, what a dazzle of words, of mocking puns and metaphoric leaps! The young prince takes on the persona of a natural fool with a diseased mind but with the soaring wit of the artificial fool: “I am but mad north-northwest. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.”

One New Year’s Eve with the thought of doing myself some good, I forced myself to sit through a screening of *The Secret*—touting itself as containing, oh, the occult wisdom of the ages known only to a few. What great secret is revealed? Our thoughts make our reality. This is new? Hamlet said some four hundred years ago, “For there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”

Hamlet ponders all through the play about the brevity of life, the nature of human beings, “this quintessence of dust.” Never more so than in that graveyard when he famously holds in his hand the skull of the King’s jester: “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?”

Here we see a detailed portrait of the King’s fool integrated in the family life of a noble household, the jokes, the kisses, the entertaining conviviality, the warmth. Indeed, is there any other character that Hamlet speaks of with such affection?

Many times in both *Henry* plays, Falstaff is called a fool and almost always acts the fool as he is the embodiment of wit. When Sir John vows to “live cleanly as a nobleman should do,” we know this pledge to virtue echoes St. Augustine’s prayer, “Oh God make me good...but not yet.” For the very next time we see him, much to our delight (for who wants a reformed Falstaff?), he is fully himself. Walking down a London street, having just ordered on credit a satin cloak and breeches for himself, Falstaff muses on his powers of invention: “I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men.” He then encounters the Lord Chief Justice, highest law official in the land, who implicates him in the midnight robbery at Gadshill and threatens to put him in
the stocks. Far from being cowed, the fat knight hits him up for a thousand pounds. When the Justice accuses him of being an old, burned out case, Falstaff claims to be young, having just been born this very day at three in the afternoon. The spirit of the fool, devoted to play in any circumstance, is ever young, ever being born again.

Falstaff lives. One of his greatest contributions to the plays is to stop the juggernaut of war, if just for a moment. In the thick of battle, Prince Henry, hot for revenge, calls upon Falstaff to lend him a weapon; the old man pulls from the holster not a pistol but a bottle of wine. Hal hurls it back at the knight: “What! is’t a time to jest and dally now?” Here Falstaff asserts his formidable personality. What better time to be a jester than in the face of danger? The violence that follows from the prince’s concept of honor, the “grinning honor” of the dead have no sway over him. Falstaff wants to live. One can recall another condemning speech about heroics from the most famous warrior who chose to die for glory, Achilles. One can recall the voice of Achilles from Hell:

I’d rather slave on earth for another man—
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
than rule down here over all the breathless dead.

One can never hope to understand all the mysteries of the many sided Fool. Nor does this even seem a desirable goal. The archetype of the Fool is an instinctual energy inside us. And yet to me, it hardly seems real that at one time, living breathing men and women were hired to be fools, treasured as a necessary part of culture. Although I know I carry my Fool inside me, sometimes I can't help but wish he were out walking beside me in all his colorful garb. In my life, I have suffered from anxiety and yearned for freedom. I am not alone in experiencing vacillating moods of despair and happiness. But whether my spirit feels heavy or light, I want my Fool there to give perspective on either extreme. Psychologist Carl Jung advises that “Not for a moment dare we succumb to the illusion that an archetype can be finally explained and disposed of...The most we can do is to dream the myth onwards and give it modern dress.”