Learning and Teaching Tarot: A Socratic Method

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Based on an actual event, a real person, and a real life interaction. The purpose of this transcript is to demonstrate how one might introduce tarot for the first time to a tarot beginner and how one might begin to learn how to read tarot, for the first time.

She—we'll call her Beth—has never touched a deck of tarot cards before or had a reading done. She knows two things about tarot: one, psychics use it, and two, there is a Death card. She really doesn't want to get the Death card.

I tell her that every card can hold multiple meanings and really, it's about the symbolism on the card and which symbols you connect with during a reading and how that triggers your intuition, what the symbols mean to you, whether you view it as a form of communication between you and your higher consciousness or with a spirit realm from beyond.

Often when the Death card comes up, it's about the end of one milestone in our greater life paths and the beginning of a new. It's about difficult transitions. It can come up when someone has graduated from high school and about to embark on a new stage of life. It can come up after one serious relationship in our lives has ended and now we need to figure out a new lifestyle for ourselves. It can also come up when we're about to start a new exciting yet uncertain career track.

Beth nods. She decides she wants a tarot reading on the spot, but also wants to learn tarot. So I tell her we can do both. She'll read the cards for herself and I'll be by her side every step of the way. She likes this idea. We're sitting at a bar after closing. The bar-back is wiping down the tables, doing one final round of dishes. Beth is a bar tender. She thinks maybe if she learns how to read tarot cards, then on slow nights, she can incorporate that into her bartending and read for patrons.

I start by sifting through the deck to pull out Key I: The Magician and Key II: The High Priestess. I show her both cards.





Me: Study the imagery on both cards.

Beth: One is a man and one is a woman.

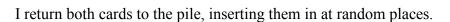
Me: You can look beyond that. Try to see the card as energy, like a vibration that the card is giving off. Which card feels more like you? Which card resonates more with your personal energy? Study both and tell me which one of the two you connect more with.

After a moment, she points at The High Priestess. The deck we're using has no card titles.

Beth: That one. She reminds me of a priestess. She looks really serene and, like, you know, how I would hope my higher self might look like.

I smile.

Me: The tarot deck has 78 cards in it. It's subdivided into two parts, the Majors and the Minors. There are 22 Majors and 56 Minors. The card you just picked is referred to as the Second Key from the Majors, and it's The High Priestess card, so I'm impressed that you intuited the card as having a priestess energy.



Me: If we think of the 78 cards in tarot as a compendium, 78 keys that represent the collective whole of all energies that make up existence, and a bit like keys on a piano keyboard, with which we combine in different patterns and orders to create music, then that one card you just picked, The High Priestess, represents your personal energy in this world. It is you. And we're going to find you in the tarot deck during our reading and look at the cards around you. That will tell us what the most critical energies are around you right now and read those cards to ascertain what you need to know at this time.

Beth seems to be in awe of the process.

Beth: Wow. This shit is deep.

I wipe down the bar top, then slide the tarot deck across the table toward Beth. Instinctively she seems to take a step back.

Beth: What do I do with it?

Me: You shuffle it, silly.

She picks up the deck, holding it with trepidation, the way non-mothers hold newborn babies.

Beth: How do I shuffle?

I hold out an open palm, gesturing for her to hand the deck to me. I do the overhand shuffle.

Me: I shuffle like this, and the only reason for my way is because that's the way I learned it.

I then demonstrate the riffle and do a dovetail shuffle of the cards.

Me: Some readers will do it this way.

Beth: Oh! Like in poker.

Me: Yes. You can do it either way you want. What feels right to you?

More confident now, Beth takes the cards from me and does the dovetail shuffle.

Beth: How many times should I shuffle?

Me: Don't ask me. Ask yourself. Connect inward. Feel bigger than you physically are. Feel something tingle near the top of your head. With your inner voice, ask for guidance. Then with your inner ear, listen.

Beth nods. She is focused and deep in concentration. After she shuffles, she cuts the deck. I am pleasantly surprised.

Me: Lots of traditional readers will cut the deck before they start reading. Where did you learn that?

Beth shrugs.

Beth: I don't know. I didn't learn it anywhere. Just felt like doing it.

I smile.

She returns the cards into a single pile and slides the deck back to me. I don't touch it, but rather, nod to indicate that she should take up the cards.



Me: You're going to be cutting the deck again, like what you just did, though a bit different. I'll walk you through it. Here, I use my left hand, again for no other reason but that's how I learned it. Which hand would you like to cut with? Which hands just intuitively wants to reach for the cards?

Beth: My left. Which is weird, I'm usually right-handed.

Me: Okay, then with your left hand, cut the deck from right to left, but leave a space in between the two new card piles, wide enough for yet another card pile to fit. Does that make sense?





I use my fingers to point to various positions on the bar top to show her how the deck is to be cut. Beth nods and understands. She cuts.

Me: Great. Perfect. Now back to that first pile on the right.

I point to the original card pile, the right-most one.

Me: Cut that pile, about half, and move half of it over to the immediate left, that space you created in between the first two piles.







Beth does it perfectly. I point to the third pile from the right, from that first cut.

Me: From this third pile, cut again, about half, and move the cut portion over to the left of this third pile. Now you will have four piles.

Beth follows the instruction and cuts the fourth pile.









Me: The specific way you cut the cards represents one theoretical and theological model for how the universe was created. It's a representation of creation, which I call opening of the four worlds. Now, why four worlds? Here we have four card piles that represent I, H, V, H, which also spells out the name of the Judeo-Christian God. The four piles also represent the four directions and four seasons that together, represent natural existence. The four piles also represent, from right to left, Fire, Water, Air, and Earth. We're going right to left to follow Kabbalistic traditions.

Beth: The Kabbalah. That's like what Madonna is into, right?

I laugh.

Me: Um, maybe, I don't know. Anyway, these four card piles, Fire, Water, Air, and Earth, also signify the four quadrants of human life.

I point to each card pile as I explain its significance.

Me: Fire is for the physical plane, which corresponds with your career track, professional life, but also health and your physical body. Water is for the emotional plane, which corresponds with your love life, family, and the domestic sphere. Air is the social or intellectual plane, which corresponds with how you interact with the world around you, the people around you, community relations, friends, but also your contribution to the world, what you're meant to achieve for a greater good. Earth is for the material plane, money matters, personal finances, your assets, liabilities, and property. It's about security issues, though some people will also read this card pile as relating to physical health.

I turn over the Fire pile and hand it to her, face up.

Me: Now, remember The High Priestess card we selected to represent you? Do you remember what it looks like?

Beth: Yeah, I think so.

She takes the card pile from me.

Me: Start looking through this card pile, for Fire, and search for The High Priestess card.

Beth is intuitive.

Beth: Nah, I don't think so. This was the career pile, right? Yeah. I kind of have a specific question in mind...

Me: Don't tell me the question just yet. Focus on finding The High Priestess, the card that signifies you.

Beth finds The High Priestess in the second pile, for Water. She is beaming.









Beth: I knew it! My question is about love and relationships, and here it is! Holy shit. That's crazy! Holy shit. Do the cards always do that?

Me: Whether or not they always align with your expectations is one thing, but I would say yes, they always produce a result that is synchronistically insightful.

Beth: Holy shit. Wow. What the fuck.

I gather up the other three card piles, the ones without The High Priestess, Beth's signifier, and leave the Water pile on the table.

Me: Gather up that quarter card pile, shuffle, and focus on any specific question you might have about love and relationships.

Beth does so, this time with an overhand shuffle instead of the dovetail riffle. I had not given any instruction on how to shuffle. She is now doing what feels instinctive to her.

Me: Okay, now pull three cards and turn them face up in front of you.

Beth: How do I flip the cards over? Is there a specific way, like you know, bottoms up or just flip over side to side?

Me: Do what you want to do, but do it consistently. Whichever way you flip, flip all the cards in the same exact way.

Beth: And earlier we went right to left, like because of the Kabbalah. Do I go right to left again?

Me: What feels right to you? Relying on your own intuition, what do you feel pulled to do?

Beth: To be honest, the right to left doesn't resonate with me. I feel better going left to right. That kind of makes more sense to me. Is it okay for me to go left to right?

I nod.

Me: Yes, absolutely. In fact, that's how I do it.

Beth flips each card over from the side and sets them down left to right. She pulls, in order, Key VI: The Lovers, the Knight of Cups, and Key XVIII: The Moon.







Before I've said a word, she points at the Knight of Cups. On my tarot deck, I've penned in the astrological correspondences for each card. In the bottom corner of the Knight of Cups are the astrological glyphs for Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces. Beth points at the glyph for Scorpio.

Beth: Oh my god, that's the horoscope sign for Scorpio!

Me: Yes, very good. It is!

Beth: My boyfriend is a Scorpio! And this card, it looks like a knight in shining armor, right? And he's...holding a wine glass? That makes sense. My boyfriend loves to drink.

She is sheepish.

Beth: But that's probably not what the card means, right? It doesn't mean my boyfriend is a lush?

I laugh.

Me: What's your favorite color?

Beth: Blue.

Me: Interesting. And you happen to be wearing a blue shirt today. Was that a coincidence?

Beth: Yeah, I guess so.

Me: Is it safe to say your whole identity, who you are, Beth, as a whole person, can be defined by your favorite color blue?

Beth smiles and nods with understanding.

Beth: I see. I get it. So seeing the wine glass in the knight card could mean my boyfriend and his drinking habits but that's not all it means. It means much more than that. It's, like, maybe just a sign, or an omen so I can recognize the card as him.

Now it's my turn to smile.







Me: That center card you're referring to is called the Knight of Cups. The first card you put down is called The Lovers card. That final third card is The Moon. Remember when I said there are 22 Major and 56 Minor cards in the tarot deck?

Beth: Yeah.

Me: For your three cards, you pulled 2 Majors out of 22 and 1 Minor out of 56.

Beth: Is this a probability thing? Man, I failed high school math...

Me: My point is it's a bit unique, or at least notable that two out of the three cards you pulled are from the Majors.

Beth: Does that mean something special?

Me: I would like to think so. You don't have to be a mathematician.

Beth: Yeah. I just want to learn tarot. Why am I learning math?

Me: Because all of life is mathematics. Numerology is the metaphysical branch of the mathematics we consider in divination, but it's not so much about having to incorporate math into a tarot reading. It's more about incorporating all bodies of knowledge you have availed to you so you can spot patterns. Pattern spotting is one of the most important facets of tarot reading. You've got to be able to spot patterns and, one step further, interpret those patterns. So for example, here, we have a pattern of cards that is statistically significant, so I'll take note and start thinking about the intuitive interpretation for that significance.

I point back at the Scorpio glyph on the Knight of Cups Beth spotted earlier.







Me: Remember how you immediately pointed out Scorpio in the Knight of Cups? That's pattern-spotting. Knowledge of astrology enables you to spot patterns and facets of divination that you wouldn't be able to detect if you didn't know astrology.

Beth: I don't know astrology, either. So basically, you need to be super-smart to read tarot.

Me: Nope. Not at all. But you do need to be super-observant. And you need to get people.

Beth: Oh, I get people. I'm a bar tender. I'm super-observant.

Me: Then you'll be the perfect tarot reader! It's not about having to know numerology or astrology or even the Kabbalah to be a good tarot reader. I was just showing you how a

comprehensive education and study will enhance the depths a reading can go. It makes pattern-spotting easier. But let's forget all of that and just read the cards.

I point back at The Lovers card.







Me: What does that card mean to you?

She glances at the card and gives up a bit too quick.

Beth: I don't know. I have no idea.

Me: Don't say you don't know. That is not allowed during our time together. Look at the card again. What do you see? Tell me what you see.

She sighs, looks back at the card, and sharpens her focus.

Beth: I see a man and a woman. They're both naked. That's interesting. Didn't know there was nudity in tarot. Reminds me of Adam and Eve. There are trees. They're in the Garden of Eden. There's a snake behind the woman... the snake looks really ominous. Like it means temptation.

I nod to encourage her.

Me: Great, great. And when you think of Adam and Eve, what do you think of?

Beth: Sin.

Me: That's interesting.

Beth: Is that the wrong interpretation?

Me: Oh, no, no! Not at all! Keep going. Follow your intuition, your inner voice and inner sight for as far as it will take you. You said sin. Why sin? Envision a gently winding pathway in your mind's eye.

I point to the space between my two eyebrows.

Me: Right here. Imagine a path coming out from here, out into the horizon line, and that path is the pictorial representation of your thought. Follow the path, in a meditative state of sorts, and just keep talking, keep blurting out your immediate impressions as you follow that path, envisioning signs or symbols that might pop up on the winding path along your way, and any whispers or sounds you might hear with your inner ear.

Beth shakes her head.

Beth: I don't want to. I know where it's going. I totally get what this card is about. It's like bam, in my face, reminding me of things that happened in the past, things I've done. How, you know, he and I got together in the first place. I even hear a voice, you know, like the angel pictured at the top of this card, like an angel reminding me, telling me stuff.

She blinks hard, like she's trying to hold back tears. I try to be gentle as I continue.

Me: This card represents the past. It's about what has already happened, but things triggered in the past that affect the present and even the future.

Beth: Wow. Tarot is scary as fuck.

Me: This card is about a root cause that sets into motion these next two cards. In tarot, it's one of the Majors, like I said, the Sixth Key in the Majors, and it's called The Lovers card.

Beth shakes her head, disbelieving.

Beth: Of course that's what it's called. The Lovers. In the love and relationships card pile. And my question is about love and relationships.

Beth points to the center card, the Knight of Cups.







Beth: And this is my boyfriend, right?

Me: This card is called the Knight of Cups. What do you see?

Beth: I see a knight in shining armor. And he's a lush. He's holding a wine glass. It's interesting. We're both bartenders. We both work in the industry.







Me: When you gaze at this card image, what emotions do you feel?

Beth: I guess I feel happy. He's a knight in shining armor, right? But, okay, and this is going to sound weird, because I'm not sure there is a basis for my feeling in the card symbols, you know? But I also feel like this guy can't take care of me.

Me: Are we talking about your boyfriend or the knight in the card?

Beth: The knight in the card. Both. I don't know. Oh wait, sorry, you said saying "I don't know" isn't allowed.

She sighs, taking a moment to breathe.

Beth: The knight in the card. When I look at him, he's attractive, you get that really positive first impression, but I don't know if he's realistic or practical. He's kind of galloping on his horse, just gazing at the cup in his hand, kind of reminding me of naval-gazing, you know, like someone so self-absorbed with themselves and with their own little quests that they can't actually take care of you. And I swear I'm not talking about my boyfriend. I mean that's the vibe I get from this card. The... Knight of Cups, you said?

Me: Yes, it's the Knight of Cups.

Beth: So is that what the Knight of Cups means? How far off base am I?

Me: You're only off base in tarot when you start thinking about card meanings as right or wrong. You've got to think about it as strong or weak connections. As a thought comes to mind about the card you're looking at, how do you feel about the connection between the thought, the divination at hand, and the card image? Is it a strong connection or is it a weak connection? When the connection feels strong, be encouraged and keep going. Remember how I mentioned that winding path and following that path in your mind's eye, all the while listening and being observant of signs and symbols that come up? That's what you do when you feel the connection as strong. When the connection is weak, reevaluate, recalibrate. Try to seek out the avenue where the connection feels strong.

Beth: I have to trust my own intuition.

Me: You have to develop a stronger intuition for the patterns you spot, not just in the tarot cards on the table, but in life. Tarot reading is a metaphor, a representation of life, but when it's just pretty cards across the table, it's a bit easier to spot the patterns. The better you get at spotting the patterns in the cards on the table, the better you get at spotting patterns in everyday life, in real time. So in that way, learning to read tarot will help you develop a stronger intuition overall.

I point back down at the cards.

Me: Back to the cards.







Beth: I want to move on to the third card. It's like a lobster or a crawfish coming out of the water. There's that winding path, kind of like the one you were just talking about that I should picture in my mind. That's kind of neat.

Me: In tarot, this card is from the Majors. It is the Eighteenth Key. It's called The Moon.

Beth: The moon is like mystery, right? I feel like the moon has this mysterious vibe about it. It's bright, but that brightness is actually just a reflection of the sun, not really the moon itself. You can't actually see the moon.

I'm excited and I want her to know I'm thrilled, but also I'm trying to temper myself and not give too much emotion away. I don't want to acknowledge or encourage any interpretation over the other. I want her to arrive at her own inductions.

Me: So when you think of the moon as a symbol, it symbolizes mystery to you.

Beth: Yeah, and what you see isn't actually what you're getting. What's visible isn't actually the reality of what it is.

Me: You do realize you're integrating your knowledge of natural sciences into your tarot reading, right?

Beth: Am I?

Me: Sure you are. You're using your scientific knowledge of the moon to interpret the tarot meaning of The Moon card.

Beth: Wow. I guess I am.

Me: So this card represents mystery to you, and what's visible isn't what's real. There's something else subsisting that you can't see.

Beth: Right.

Me: Now, thinking about that symbolism, how does it relate to your reading?

She pauses to reflect for a moment.

Beth: Should I think about it as me, Beth, knowing what I know about my life? Or should I try to be objective and pretend this is a reading for a complete stranger?

Me: This is going to be a tricky answer. It has to be a little bit of both. Because when you read for someone, anyone, you'll be connecting with their personal energy and what you intuit and feel from that energy will be used as the lens through which you read the cards. So, for example, if you were doing a reading for me and these are the three cards you pull, you're going to use what you feel of my energy as a lens, a filter through which you interpret the three cards. Since I'm a different person from you, what comes out the other end, after the filter, what you see through the lens, will be different from how it would be if the same three cards are read for you, because you are a different lens, a different filter.

Beth: That makes sense.

Me: So yes, you'll be reading these three cards through the filter that you intuit as the personal energies that represent you, the filter represented by the High Priestess card we picked out for you earlier. But if you operate too much on what you obviously know about yourself, then there's the risk of personal bias coming into play. You've got to read the energy, not read what you think you know, because what you think you know might not be right. It might be bias. So to eliminate bias, read energy.







Beth: Even though I want to simply say the future for this relationship is uncertain...

I interrupt her.

Me: Why do you say it's uncertain?

Beth: Is that wrong?

Me: Remember, no wrong or right. I'm asking you why. Why do you induce that the card means the future is uncertain? There is no wrong or right but you always need to know why. Where are you getting your information from?

Beth: My intuition.

Me: Push yourself harder. Deconstruct your intuition. Why is that what you intuit?

Beth: So to me, the moon is like a mystery, and since it's a mystery, I don't know what will happen, so there's uncertainty. Also, the lobster has just started coming out of the water about to start on that long path up into the mountains, and I don't know if the lobster will make the journey alive, since, you know, I don't know how long lobsters can survive out of the water.

She giggles. I smile and nod.

Me: Perfect. Perfect. Do you see what I mean by pushing yourself to deconstruct your intuition and to know why?

Beth: Yeah. I definitely get it.

Me: Sorry I interrupted you. It was just a teachable moment I didn't want to pass up on. Okay, let's continue. You said The Moon card mean uncertainty. Continue with that train of thought.

Beth: Like the winding path in the card right? Follow the path and tell you what I see and hear.

Me: Right.

She closes her eyes, opens them again, and gazes down at The Moon card.







Beth: I want to say there's uncertainty, but that's not really the case. What I think I see that's bright and illuminated isn't actually what's there. I'm seeing something else, a reflection of something else, even though that something else that I see is what I want this relationship to be. Since it's not actually that, and there's something dark, lurking, that I don't see, chances are, this isn't the right direction to go in. I don't think this relationship with the Knight of Cups will last for much longer.







Me: Return to the first card, The Lovers. Notice the two figures?

Beth: Yeah. Adam and Eve, right?

Me: Now look at the last card, The Moon...

Now it's her turn to interrupt me. She gasps.

Beth: Oh my god! There's also two! Two dogs! This is pattern-spotting, right?

Me: Right. Since there is a noticeable pattern, a parallel between the first and the last card, we've got to look at that parallel and interpret it. So study the two figures in the first card, then study the two figures in the last. Now this is kind of like a game of spot the differences between the two pictures, but more on a psychic level than a literal spot the differences. Does that make sense?

Beth: Yeah. Makes perfect sense. Both of them have mountains in the background. That's interesting. But the one in The Lovers card is really tall, like an impasse, and is almost phallic. The mountains in The Moon card are lower, and with the two towers on either side, almost look inviting, like you can get over this, like you can do this.

Me: Great, great. Keep going.

Beth: Based on the positioning, I want to say the woman in the Lovers card is literally the woman in the relationship, and so the man in the card is the man. Then, in The Moon card, since the woman is on the left, the left dog is the woman, and since the man is on the right, the right dog is the man. It's kind of like some sort of transformation, but it also feels like it comes back full circle, almost like karma, what goes around comes around? How the relationship started may be how the relationship ends.







Me: You said the left dog is like the proverbial Eve from the first card and the right dog is the proverbial Adam. After the transformation into the dogs, what do you see? What do you see about the future?

Beth: Well... we always say Eve was the one at fault, right. That's how the story goes. And I get it. I see that the snake is wrapped around her tree, not Adam's. But when we get to the last card, between the two dogs, when I look at those two dogs... what I notice is the right dog has red eyes. I guess I can't see the eye color for the left dog, but the red eyes really freak me out.

Me: Why does it freak you out?

Beth: I guess to me, it represents something sinister.

Me: Now what else do you see in The Moon card? What else about the card stands out to you?

Beth: The lobster. Is it a lobster or a crawfish?

Me: You tell me.

Beth: Okay. It's a lobster since it's pretty big compared to the size of the dogs.

Me: And what does the lobster symbolize?

She pauses.

Beth: I don't know. I don't know much about animal symbolism.

Me: Remember our rule?

Beth: Oh! Right! Sorry. Okay. Um...

Me: I'm not asking you what society thinks the lobster is symbolic of or its cultural significance and I'm certainly not asking you to read my mind and tell me what I think the lobster symbolizes to me. I'm asking you what the lobster symbolizes to you. As a symbol conveying a thought, what does it say to you?

Beth: Okay. Lobster...what's it saying to me...

She pauses.







Beth: I'm sorry. This is taking me a while. I'm drawing a blank.

Me: Take your time. Don't let me be the one who rushes you. But maybe you're overthinking it. When I say lobster, what do you immediately think of? Just rattle off the words that come to your mind.

Beth: Food.

Me: Okay, food. What else? Keep going from there.

Beth: A hard shell. Self-protective, defensive, not letting people in. Emotionally unavailable.

Me: Wow, awesome. Keep going.

Beth: Thought it was food, which means would be nourishing, but it's not. It's emotionally unavailable.

Me: Why is the lobster coming out of the water?

Beth: It's a kamikaze lobster. It knows it's about to die anyway, and maybe the lobster has always wanted to see what's beyond the mountains, so as its final act, the lobster decides to leave the water and start this crazy journey that it knows it will die on, but it was good while it lasted. The moon in the sky has a face, so it's like a moon spirit, or an angel, kind of like the angel in The Lovers card, so actually, I'm not sad. I feel all right. It's like Spirit is watching down on me and saying everything is going to be okay.

She looks up at me for confirmation.

Me: How strongly do you feel the connection?

Beth: Very strong. This is it. This is exactly what it means. I really feel like I connected. I really feel someone watching over me, and like, through these cards, saying everything is going to be okay, even though everything is not okay.

We let the feelings between us simmer and float a while longer.

Me: Congratulations. Your first tarot reading.

Beth: That was crazy. Is it always that accurate?

Me: I would say it's always insightful.

Beth: Is the connection always that strong? I mean, does it always resonate this powerfully with people you read for?

Me: It depends. Some of us look in the mirror every single day, so we know exactly what we look like and can spot all the subtle changes in our face. But what if you never look in a mirror, never take the time to look at yourself, and then one day, many, many years later after never having looked at your own reflection, and maybe a lot about how you look has changed without you ever realizing, and then you look in the mirror? Do you think you can recognize your own face? Sure, some of it will resonate and you'll know intuitively that's you, but you might also be resistant. Maybe you don't like what you see and you don't want that to be you, so you reject and deny. That happens, too.

Beth hugs me.

Beth: Thank you. Thank you for teaching me tarot. I feel like in the short time we had together, I learned so much more than just tarot.

Me: That's because tarot is a reflection of life.



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BENEBELL WEN or Bell, as she is often called, is a practitioner of various metaphysical arts. She studies tarot, feng shui, the I Ching, numerology, and both Chinese and Hellenisic astrology. Wen is the author of *Holistic Tarot: An Integrative Approach to Using Tarot for Personal Growth* (North Atlantic Books, 2015). When not lecturing, teaching, or writing on metaphysics, Wen practices law in California and New York. She currently works in venture capital. Wen is of Taiwanese descent and lives in Northern California with her husband, James, a financial analyst, and the spirit of their beloved cat, Prince Marshall Rimbaud the Great.

