Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice

The Tower is Falling: Collapse, Connection, and the Possibility of Reorientation

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Volume 9

Issue 1

Winter 2026

Keywords:

collapse, systemic therapy, masculinity, posthumanism, tarot

Citation Link

Abstract

This paper uses the Tarot arc of the Devil, the Tower, the Star, and the Fool to explore systemic collapse and the logics of masculinised power. Drawing on archetypal imagery, ecological systems theory, posthumanist feminism, and lived experience, it argues that the panmorphic crisis (Simon, 2021) of climate change, technological acceleration, and political instability are not merely failures of implementation. They reflect a deeper failure of imagination. The Tower is falling because it was built on the ideology of the Devil, to deny relationship, vulnerability, and feedback. In its place, the Star offers a different kind of intelligence: attentive, embodied, and quietly relational. Figures such as Trump and Musk are read not as aberrations but as expressions of a system that rewards shamelessness and disconnection. The paper invites readers into an ethic of reorientation, recognising even those we most oppose as part of our systemic kin. The Fool, traditionally male, is reclaimed as a post-binary, post-certainty figure who gestures toward a different way of going on, a journey that is uncertain, attentive, and deeply relational. A shorter version of this paper was originally published in Context 2025 and is developed here with the kind permission of Ged Smith, the Editor of Context.

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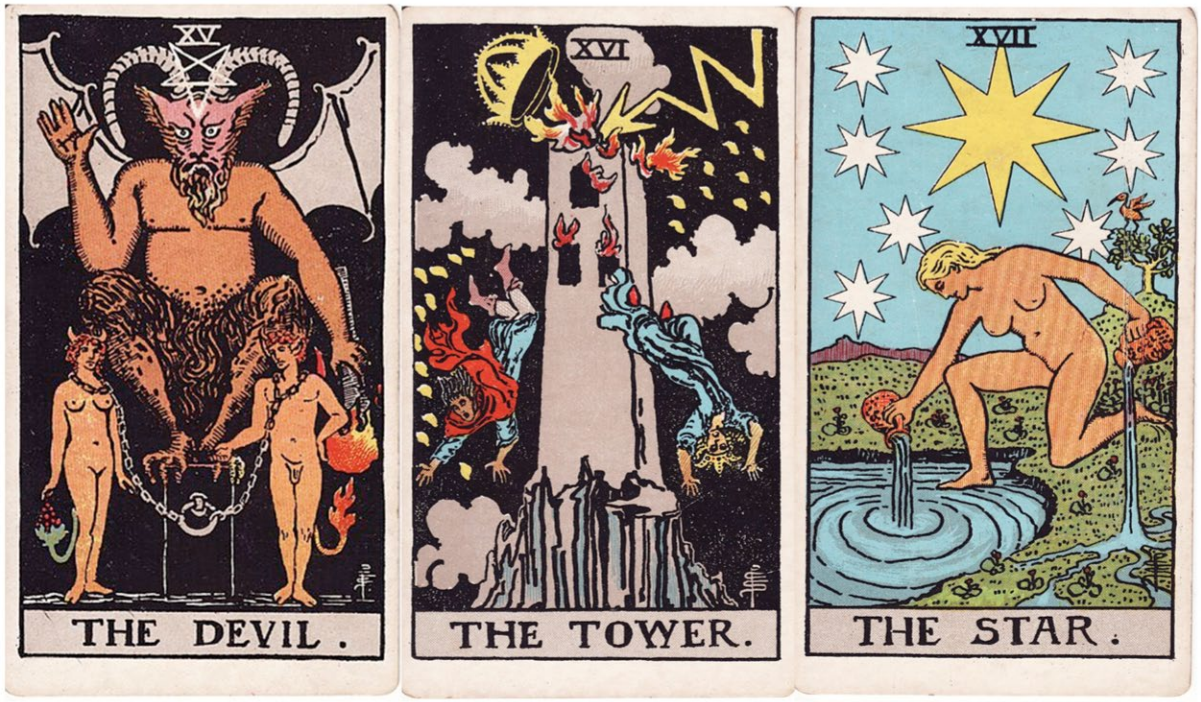
Introduction: The Fool and the Tower

The major arcana cards of the Tarot can be read as a kind of journey, a movement through different archetypal states of mind, relation, and transformation. Known as the Fool's Journey, this sequence begins with openness and curiosity, but moves through illusion, crisis, collapse, and renewal. Although Tarot cards originated as a 15th-century Italian card game, they were later reinterpreted as a symbolic system for personal and cultural transformation. The sequence of the Major Arcana reflects not just individual development but a collective process; a kind of initiatory structure through which the psyche (and society) moves. The cards are archetypal images, evoking states of being that recur across time and

culture. Jung understood archetypes as not simply symbols, but as living patterns of the collective unconscious, what he called "primordial images" that emerge in times of transition, crisis, and renewal (Jung, 1959).

Despite dabbling with 'readings' in my youth, I do not use the Tarot for divination, but as a way of attending to pattern. Each card names a movement in relational life, an archetype of becoming. As with systemic therapy, the Tarot resists linear causality, offering metaphors that shift perspective rather than dictate action. In the sequence of the Devil, Tower, and Star, I find a map of collapse and reorientation that mirrors patterns increasingly visible in the world around us. This essay walks, with the Fool, through the ruins of masculinised certainty toward the possibility of a relational reorientation grounded in attentiveness, interconnection, and care.



The Fool's Journey within the major arcana offers a metaphor for psychological and cultural transformation. The sequence begins with the Fool, innocent and unformed, stepping into the unknown, and the journey unfolds as a movement through archetypal lessons, from the Magician's agency to the High Priestess's intuition, the Empress's creativity to the Emperor's authority, and onward through love, strength, loss, and awakening, emergence and transformation. Each card marks a phase of becoming, a confrontation with aspects of the self and the world.

By the time the Fool has met the Devil, they have become bound by illusions of control and self-importance. The Tower breaks that illusion. And what follows, if we allow it, is not immediate repair, but the Star, representing presence, care, and a slow return to soul. The Journey does not end there, but in this moment, these three cards offer a way to think about collapse, power, and the fragile beginnings of something else. In this essay, I draw on the Devil, the Tower, the Star, and the Fool, not as mystical figures, but as images that can illuminate where we are, how we got here, and what might still be possible.

In the Major Arcana, the Devil precedes the Tower. The Devil card has evolved over centuries, reflecting shifting cultural fears and fantasies. In early decks, such as the 15th-century Visconti-Sforza, the Devil appeared as a horned, bat-winged creature, part human, part beast, binding two smaller figures. Later versions emphasised these bonds, showing chained humans with horns and tails, suggesting not evil as essence, but entrapment through mimicry and illusion. This Devil does not punish; he seduces. The card warns of the allure of false sovereignty, of power that replicates itself by persuading us we are free while holding us in chains.

In this way, the Devil is less an external force than a pattern of disconnection internalised, a collective hallucination of control. He arrives when systems lose their capacity for self-awareness and begin to consume their own image. This Devil is not the embodiment of evil from Christian mythology, but a figure of bondage - to illusion, to power, to control. The card represents addiction to domination, the inflation of self-importance, and the refusal of vulnerability. In this sense, the Devil is the card of masculinity as it has been culturally constructed: performative, defended, disconnected from feeling, and sustained by hubris. It is the fantasy that the (male) ego can be sovereign, that power can protect us from shame, that control can substitute for care. The Devil appears when systems mistake performance for presence and authority for wisdom.

We are living through a time of accelerating collapse. Institutions, ecologies, economies, and shared realities are fracturing (Simon, 2021). These failures are not isolated crises, but symptoms of systems built on domination, control, and denial - what William Blake called “Single Vision,” the flattening of perception that refuses relationship, mystery, and depth.

The Tower card effectively symbolises this collapse with its rigid, phallic structure struck by lightning, its crown torn off, bodies falling. This is not a gentle undoing. The Tower stands as the reckoning of systems that imagined themselves beyond feedback. Beyond metaphor, the Tower is built on masculinised logics of extraction, militarism, technocracy, and the fantasy of limitless growth and profit.

This paper is written from within the collapse, tracing how the fall of the political, psychological, and technological Tower can be understood not as an accident but as a structural consequence. Drawing on systemic theory, posthumanist philosophy, archetypal imagery, and ecological ethics, I reflect upon what happens when the world, nature, insists on being heard.

While the idea of collapse is inherent in this writing, the purpose of this paper is to construct a meditation on transformation, to consider what might become possible when certainty falls away. I reflect on how we might inhabit this liminal space and see it as a threshold rather than a space to be feared. I also reflect upon political and economic power, and the deeper forces that shape who is heard, who is believed, and which ways of knowing are legitimised. Power here is not only coercive. It is also epistemic, symbolic, and relational. It is what builds the Tower and what is most threatened by its fall.

I write as a cisgender, heterosexual man who rejects many of the masculinities that dominate our political, technological, and cultural landscapes. I do not stand outside or above these dynamics, but as someone shaped by them and still struggling with them. I believe the forms of masculinity that reward control, disconnection, and denial are not only harmful but also structurally unsustainable.

Male Power and the Architecture of Collapse

I approach the concept of power with some caution. Gregory Bateson (1972) resisted its use in describing human relationships, arguing that it isolates agency and obscures the recursive, patterned nature of interaction. Thinking of power, he suggested, reduces complex relational ecologies to binaries of dominance and control. Yet we live in a world where systems reward shamelessness and punish care, where even the ethic of empathy is recast as weakness or "Woke." In such a context, we still need to name the patterns that enact harm, even if the concept of power remains an inadequate map of the terrain. Here, I use it not as endorsement, but as an indicative symptom of systems that have forgotten how to listen.

The Tower is not falling because it is weak, but because it is rigid. It is constructed through forms of masculinity that confuse strength with domination and view vulnerability as failure. This is not accidental. The cultural figures who rise, especially politicians, tech billionaires, and media moguls, often enact the same patterns of performance of certainty, resistance to feedback, and an obsessive need to control. The inflated ego casts a long shadow, and trauma rarely stays contained, instead it seeps into systems, shaping them in ways we rarely name.

It is important to note that I am not interested in pathologising individual men, or even groups like the so-called "tech bros" (though it is tempting to point the finger). The problem runs deeper than narcissism, though that plays a part. The truth is that most men are wounded by the very patriarchal structures they are presumed to benefit from. These systems teach that to be unsure is to be weak, that to feel is to fail. From infancy, many boys are taught that disconnection is a form of safety. By the time they hold power, they have learned to suppress uncertainty, deny vulnerability, and treat dominance as proof of worth.

So, we end up with institutions shaped around the fantasy of the man who never doubts, never falters, never feels. Someone who is rewarded precisely for remaining unreachable, performing a version of masculinity that equates control with competence and distance with strength. In systems such as this, it is often those least restrained by empathy or ethical hesitation who ascend. Ruthlessness is not an aberration; it becomes a function. These hurt people are not only hurting others, they are shaping entire populations and ecosystems. Trauma does not stay contained. We are shaped not only by our own wounds, but by the systems that replicate harm across generations, institutions, and borders. In these systems, fragility is masked as strength, and the refusal to feel becomes not just a personal loss, but a public danger.

This is both a psychological and a structural issue. It underpins militarised policing (Foucault, 1995), shareholder capitalism (Piketty, 2014), political strongmen (Snyder, 2017), technocratic governance (Zuboff, 2019), and elite forms of class power that evade feedback entirely - through inherited wealth, control of media, or the shielding structures of global finance. It is visible in how we reward those who speak over others, who double down when they are wrong, who never say "I don't know," who are never uncertain.

The Tower stands on these foundations. And it has begun to fall, not because it is being attacked, but because the world can no longer support the lies it was built on.

This collapse is not a glitch in the system. It is the system reaching the end of what it can deny. When climate tipping points are crossed, when democratic processes are hollowed out, when AI is released

into the world with little reflection and enormous bravado, we are not seeing a sudden failure, we are witnessing the unfolding of the inevitable consequences of masculinised systems that were never built to listen, to reflect, or to feel.

These systems treat feedback as threat and uncertainty as weakness. But the world does not care for fantasies of control. The world is not just a backdrop for our actions, but a system of relationships that responds. Bateson (1972) believed that the major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think, and nature has its own patterns, its own demands. What falls is not just policy or infrastructure. What falls is a way of being - of refusing vulnerability, of performing control, of silencing contradiction. And reading a newspaper or watching the news, it is evident that it is falling hard.

The irony is that many of those most invested in these systems are themselves afraid. They fear irrelevance, exposure, or being seen as ordinary. Power becomes a disguise, and the Tower a costume. When it collapses, the fear is not just of structural loss, but of personal revelation. Who am I, if not the one in charge? Who am I, if I am not *exceptional*?

Into this vacuum of relational collapse, a new 'power' is rising. Artificial Intelligence (AI). From this perspective, AI is not just as a tool, but a projection of the same fantasy. Intelligence without empathy. Speed without reflection. Prediction without wisdom. It has arrived wrapped in the language of progress but carries within it the same logic that built the Tower; disembodied certainty, extractive ambition, and the refusal to be in relation.

AI does not stand apart from the collapse. It deepens it. Shoshana Zuboff (2019) describes this as surveillance capitalism, where prediction becomes profit, and the human subject is rendered as data to be mined. It should be noted that this is not incidental, rather it is a technological embodiment of the same masculine fantasy that has governed empire, industry, and colonisation. AI may be the latest addition to the Tower, built not of steel or stone but of code.

The Star of (feminine) hope

If the Tower represents collapse, the Tarot also offers another image: the Star. A woman, kneeling by water, pouring with care. She does not seek control. She does not resist gravity. She attends. The Star does not promise resolution. She signals a reorientation.

The Star card, like all images in the Tarot, has a history that resists fixed interpretation. In early Italian and French decks, the Star sometimes depicted astrologers or figures gazing skyward, connecting it with wonder, observation, and celestial navigation rather than prediction. The familiar image of a naked woman pouring water emerged later, symbolising harmony between the material and immaterial, the seen and unseen. This evolution speaks to the card's refusal of certainty. The Star gestures towards reorientation, a gentle invitation to dwell within uncertainty, to tend to what is broken without the need to fix. As such, the Star does not resolve the collapse of the Tower but attends to what might emerge from its ruins.

Here, we can begin to trace a different epistemology. Sylvia Wynter (2003), writing at the intersections of colonial history, race, gender, and embodiment, argues that the dominant Western figure of the human (white, male, rational, disembodied) must be unmade. Bateson's discomfort with the language

of power echoes Wynter's call. Both reject epistemologies grounded in separation, control, and the illusion of mastery. This figure of "Man" is the Tower. And its undoing, Wynter argues, is not a loss but a beginning. In the fall of this image, we may reimagine the human as entangled, affective, ecological; alive to, and within, relationship rather than above it.

The Star pours water into this possibility.

The Tarot does not isolate the Tower. It follows the Devil and precedes the Star. Like systemic thinking, the Tarot does not forecast outcomes but names patterns, dynamics, and turning points. Each card reflects a shift in the relational field; a movement from illusion to awareness, from control to contact. This sequence mirrors our own: from bondage and fantasy, through collapse, to the tentative emergence of reorientation. The Devil names the fantasy of control, separation, and the inflated ego. The Tower shows what happens when that fantasy collides with the limits of the world. The Star offers not recovery, but an invitation to reimagine how we see, feel, and relate.

The Tower is not just a metaphor. It is a material and psychological structure, built to defend against uncertainty, vulnerability, and the discomfort of connection. It is raised from the fantasy of autonomy: the ego, the empire, the machine. It is colonial, technocratic, extractive, and phallic. Beneath its rigidity lies fear. The fear of being exposed, of being touched, of not being in control.

The men who rise within these structures, Trump, Musk, Putin, and others, are not outliers. They are symptoms of a world that rewards overcompensation and punishes humility. Their power is not born of wisdom but of the performance of invulnerability, of shamelessness, of disconnection from feedback. This is fragility masked as strength. And when it scales through institutions, it becomes something far more dangerous.

What collapses, then, is not just power. It is power without soul. Power without humility. Power stripped of love. As I have written elsewhere, we have created a world where everything is about power and money. But this is not inevitable. Erich Fromm (1976) warned that a society driven by having rather than being cannot endure. The tools meant to extend our capacity for living have become instruments of control and dependence. We have mistaken dominance for freedom, and it is killing us.

But after the Tower comes the Star. She does not dominate, but kneels, and pours the water of life. She attends. She *cares*. What returns in her image is not the feminine as gender, but the sacred feminine as relational intelligence. As ecological sanity.

In this light, systemic therapy itself can be seen as a feminised and marginalised form of knowing. It resists domination. It attends to context. It values pattern over hierarchy, humility over certainty, and listening over intervention. Rather than being deficits, these are forms of intelligence and ways of knowing that masculinised systems have refused. And, I argue, they may be precisely what we now need.

Sylvia Wynter helps us to reframe this arc. Her critique of the figure of 'Man' is a direct challenge to the Devil's illusion and the Tower's architecture. In the collapse of this figure, she sees the beginning of something else: a redefinition of what it means to be human, grounded in relation rather than separation.

And perhaps, in this moment of rupture, we might also glimpse the Fool, not wishing to rebuild the

Tower, but instead willing to listen. Sitting in the rubble, reflecting, attending and caring, the Fool knows that what lies ahead is no longer the hope of certainty, but the hope of relationship and feeling.

There is a cost to feeling. This is perhaps what the Tower, at its core, seeks to avoid. Feeling risks exposure. It reminds us we are not in control of outcomes, of others, or even ourselves. In masculinised systems, this is treated as weakness. But from a systemic perspective, feeling is feedback, it is information. It is the nervous system of relational life.

Feminist theorists like Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, and Rosi Braidotti echo this call. They challenge the masculinised metaphysics of separation, between mind and body, human and nonhuman, self and world, that have shaped Western science, politics, and subjectivity. Barad (2007) argues for an "ethics of entanglement," where beings do not pre-exist their relations but are intra-actively co-constituted. Haraway (2016) invites us to "stay with the trouble", to compost old certainties and dwell in complexity. Braidotti (2013) urges a move beyond individualism toward a posthuman subjectivity grounded in situatedness, materiality, and care. All speak, in different ways, to the undoing of the Tower and the quiet reorientation offered by the Star. Despite real concerns, AI is not inherently doomed to replicate the Tower, despite currently replicating the logic of the Tower. It also contains a seed of possibility, if, and only if, it is shaped by radically different values. If shaped by relational ethics, entangled with care, accountability, and humility, AI could also become part of the Star's offering.

The Devil, in this sense, is not evil. He is numb. He is defended. He does not hear, does not yield, does not mourn. The imperial, technocratic, and algorithmic systems we have built in his image are numb too. They do not allow time to grieve, to attend, or to change course. The Tower is what happens when those systems collide with the world, and the Star is what happens when we remember how to feel again, to appreciate that there is grace in small acts, a conversation that softens, a practice that holds, a noticing that changes nothing and yet shifts everything. In these, the Star is already at work.

To feel is to return to pattern. It is to notice difference. Gregory Bateson (1978) understood this. He wrote of *the pattern that connects*, a sacred ecology of interaction, feedback, and context. But to live this pattern is not just to think differently. It is to be changed, to become less defended, more porous. Less a sovereign self, more a relational body.

In the field of systemic therapy, we are often asked to justify this softness. To demonstrate our outcomes, prove our value, align with dominant models. But systemic work was never meant to dominate. It listens, traces, notices, interrupts. It learns from the system, not overpowers it. And in that, it offers a kind of quiet refusal - an ethic of attending rather than asserting.

There are those who will read these words and say this is too poetic, too abstract, too political. Others may ask: where do I still build Towers? Where am I afraid to feel? These are not rhetorical questions. They are the work. But what could be more political than the question of how we relate? Of how we recognise each other? Of how we notice what we are doing, and what it is doing to us?

If we are to imagine what lies beyond the Tower, it will not be found in blueprints or manifestos. It will be found in acts of humility. In systems that can hear themselves. In leadership that is willing to listen. In masculinities that are no longer afraid of softness. In technologies that are accountable to life, not profit. And in therapeutic practices that restore meaning to the word "care." We do not need to abolish power, but we do need to remember it differently. Not as dominance or immunity, but as presence. As accountability. As the courage to stay in relation when certainty fails. This is not the

power of the Tower. It is the strength of those who kneel beside what has fallen, and attend. What we are living through is not a metaphor. It is a consequence. And it will not be resolved by better algorithms, louder voices, or stronger men. The Tower is not a mistake. It is a warning. The Star does not repair the Tower. She simply kneels beside its ruins, pours water, and waits with love and attention.

Conclusion: The Collapse of Power, the Possibility of Connection

What the Star offers is not only a different epistemology, but a different ontology. To pour water, to kneel, and to attend, are acts of participation in an immanent, interconnected world.

Where first-order systemic thinking aims to observe and fix systems from the outside, second-order thinking recognises that we are always already within them; entangled in the very dynamics we seek to understand. Second-order systemic thinking offers a way of being within the world. It reminds us that we are never outside the systems we speak of. Our thinking, our actions, our failures and hopes are all part of the feedback loops that shape reality. Gregory Bateson's work was, at heart, an ontology of immanence: there is no transcendent observer, no place of neutrality. To participate in a living system is to affect and be affected, to be accountable for the difference we make. In this light, the Star's presence is not symbolic alone, it is ontological. Her act of pouring water is a form of epistemic humility, a care for pattern, a recognition that knowledge worth having emerges not from mastery, but from relation.

In this light, the Star is not simply a symbol of care, but of immanence. Of being within, not above, the systems that sustain or destroy. Bateson's warning that the major problems in the world arise from the difference between how nature works and how people think is also a spiritual insight, reminding us of his consideration of what is sacred. It calls for a humility that is not self-effacing but situated - an ethic of entanglement that recognises we are shaped by what we shape and wounded by what we wound.

To live from this awareness is to resist the Tower's fantasy of abstraction and control. It is to become a connected human, one who listens for pattern, attends to feedback, and acts in relation. This is not utopia. It is a discipline and practice. It may ask us to relinquish authority, to welcome uncertainty, and to walk, like the Fool, without guarantees.

And so the Fool continues their journey. They may smile, cry, pause, or stumble, walking not because they know where they are going, but because there is nowhere left to stand still.

The Fool has a long and varied history, one that underscores its significance as both beginning and end. In early Italian decks, the Fool was depicted as a wandering beggar or wild man, and later, the Fool retained this outsider status, becoming a figure of openness standing on the precipice, holding a white rose of freedom and a small bundle representing latent potential. This evolution from marginalised trickster to symbol of unconditioned possibility mirrors our use of the Fool as relational invitation. The Fool does not lead the story and yet appears at both its beginning and its end, signalling not authority, but the humility of someone walking without a map. Traditionally depicted as male, the Fool is not defined by gender. The archetype resists containment. It gestures toward openness, uncertainty, and movement. To speak of the Fool as 'they' is not merely a linguistic decision, but a way of inhabiting the kind of thinking this essay calls for. The Fool is not the answer. They are the

invitation. They are us. We are all the Fool.

Even those men we fear or detest, who perform cruelty as strength and mock care as weakness, are not other. They are our kin. They come from the same broken soil, shaped by the same myths. To hate and blame them is to recreate the Tower in another form. This is not to excuse harm, but to resist disconnection. Becoming more connected means recognising traces of ourselves even in those we would rather cast out. There is no clean break between the world we grieve and the world we long for. The Fool knows this. And still, they walk. Even when we feel we cannot, we take the next step.

Not alone.

Together**.**

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Citation

Palmer, Hugh (2025). The Tower is Falling: Collapse, Connection, and the Possibility of Reorientation. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice,* 9(1), 9-18. https://doi.org/10.28963/9.1.2