

IN MEMORIAM BRIAN WILLIAMS



A Year & A Day – Reflections on the Passing of Brian Williams
By Thalassa (written in 2003)

“Dimora adesso con gli angeli.”
(“Now he dwells with the angels.”)

And lo, we had an angel walk among us, and he admonished us to follow our own lazy-ass bliss.

Brian Williams, one of the greatest contributors to the Tarot community, slipped away from this mortal coil just over a year ago (April 15, 2002), leaving a legacy of wisdom and beauty, as well as a Brian-sized hole in our individual and collective lives.

As an artist, a travel guide, an international presence, and as a loved associate, he accomplished much, but it was as a Tarotist that he was able to meld his many gifts and make a lasting contribution that is difficult to match. He was an expert on the Italian Renaissance and its art. Few could rival his actual knowledge, which was not merely drawn from books, but from actually experiencing the art, architecture, and culture from which the Tarot developed. His knowledge of Classical and Renaissance literature also helped inform his knowledge of the Tarot, sine many of its underpinnings derive from these sources. So-called historians and theorists of the Tarot would do well to consult Brian’s works for a clearer, more definitive idea of how the Tarot developed, and what it initially encompassed. Unfortunately, few people can write with the grace, fluidity and lack of pretension that Brian brought to all of his works. In the course of constantly refining his interpretations of the Tarot from its origins, he also flung the images into our jaded modern world with the PoMo (Post-Modern) Tarot. In this work, he wittily spun the art, imagery and cultural touchstones of the past 100 years into a fresh, often hilarious, and just-often-enough scathing reinterpretation of

the deck. The book alone was one of the wittiest guides to modern art and its antecedents. He was a sparkling presence in the online Tarot community as well, enhancing his virtual presence with appearances at Tarot events and wide-ranging visits to a large network of Tarotist friends.

Seldom is someone gifted with artistic, verbal and written talent in equal measures, and seldom is such an embarrassment of riches accompanied by such a refreshing lack of ego. His sweetness and generosity of spirit were perhaps the only things to exceed his gifts. There was no seeming end to his powers of invention, and Tarotists happily assumed there would be many more presentations and reshufflings, collaborations and projects.

Unfortunately, the gods are often jealous of those whom they so profusely endow with their favour, and Brian's health began to fail. When he realized that the bullet could no longer be dodged (he had successfully battled cancer twice before), Brian emulated the great sages of the Classical world and prepared to make a good death. He thereby gave the world another gift: an example of how to face Death realistically, calmly and with grace. It is a skill that has long departed our shallow, fast-paced culture. He arranged as much as possible, working with his family to plan his memorial service and the disposition of his art and Tarot collections. Brian's exquisitely crafted departure illustrated the gifts of elegance, beauty and humour that he had bestowed during his life with generosity bordering on profligacy. His "wake" and his memorial service also provided a mirror and a lens for the Tarot community both to view itself and to be viewed.

In the spirit of living as well as one can for as long as one can, Brian organized a "going away party" a few weeks before his passing so that his friends would have a chance to say goodbye in an atmosphere of good living and bright conversation. An astonishing diversity of guests, drawn from the many worlds he occupied, attended – a reflection of his wide-ranging, polyglot acquaintance. In the center of the bustling, over-crowded soiree, the Tarot people took up residence. Few people outside of the Tarot community knew of his vast contributions and his devoted following, and many of the guests were somewhat bemused by the lively (raucous, actually) crowd that frolicked around Brian from beginning to end. Colorfully dressed and bedecked, the Tarotists flung cards and wisecracks around with equal aplomb, illustrating how working with the ageless wisdom of the Tarot enhances one's ability to weave joy in living and grace in dying on a loom of archetypes.

Brian's memorial service brought people from all corners of his life and from around the world. Several of his friends came from Italy and shared their experiences. This included the diversity of a heartrending reading of a section of Dante's "Paradiso" in the original Italian as well as a fiery, hysterically funny business plan Brian had drawn up for the establishment of the first gay bar in Venice. The generosity of Brian – and his family – extended to the distribution of his ashes and his sketches to all attendees who wished to take them, enabling people to carry away with them physical mementos of his brief but vibrant life. Here, too, one of the largest groups of mourners was the Tarot bunch, who quietly cried, joyously laughed, and – as a means of further communication with him – shuffled his cards throughout the proceedings.

After the memorial, the Tarot crowd adjourned to a local public house to eat, drink and wake the dead – what might be called funeral games. Life and death, joy and sorrow, memory and the blessings of community wove through the proceedings. One of the few known examples of poetry by committee that actually works resulted – the Prayer to Santo Briano (printed below with thanks to Mary Greer and Ken and Alexandra Genetti).

For a long time after his passing, the Tarot online communities and private individuals noted his presence, continuing to draw wisdom – and now comfort – from his legacy. Working with Brian's creations and his memory has helped many in the Tarot to focus even more on his contributions, and to be inspired towards making their own.

Citizen of the world – and, if one factors in Tarot, citizen of several worlds, not all of them physical – Brian Williams showed the Tarot community fresh interpretations of the Tarot images, and with his passing shows it new aspects of itself.

PRAYER TO SANTO BRIANO

Santo Briano, full of Grace,
To bring a blush to the Oracle's face,
Tie us up in leather and lace.

Lying in the lap of Eros,
Surrendering to Thanatos,
You whom the gods hold close,

Guide us in wearing wisdom's glove.
Look down on us from above,
Lead us to the door of love.

Living in a house of trees,
Tempting Mephistopheles,
Possessor of the handsome knees.

Delight in beauty, joy in pain,
Pour your blessings down like rain.
Santo Briano, tie me up again!

(And bless our oracular ejaculations!)