

Preparing for an Astrological Session

(Part Two of Two)

by Bill Herbst

This is the concluding half — Part Two — of the edited version of an article I wrote in 2004 for The Mountain Astrologer.

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Means or Ends

Astrology has always been a means to an end for me, more than an end in itself. I'm a counselor first. When I was young, my own inner life was so disturbed that trying to run my machinery was damn near impossible. As I explored my own interior contradictions and logged various successes and failures of adaptation and socialization, I became increasingly curious about other people's inner realities. I wondered whether they were forced to deal with great inward difficulties, and, if so, how they did that. I wanted to talk to people about the inner psychological landscape of being human, even though no one I knew actually did talk about that. I wanted to learn if others' private experience of themselves was as conflicted as mine. If so, what could we learn from each other that might be helpful in our respective struggles to live well? And, if not, then what did other people experience as "self"?

Psychology was an obvious pursuit. But even in therapy, Western psychology didn't seem very concerned with what interested me. The institution of psychology of my college years in the late 1960s was all about behaviorism — rats, mazes, and Skinner boxes. That wasn't compelling for me in the least. I was trying to save my life, and undergraduate psychology wasn't helping at all. Then, astrology came along — out of the blue and very aggressively — and suddenly I had an unexpected and quite extraordinary vehicle to see into others. No, astrology wasn't perfect, of course, but it was head and shoulders better than anything else I'd ever found.

Many people around me in the burgeoning alternative subculture of the 1960s were interested in astrology, but most of them didn't want to study the system; they just wanted to hear what their own chart could reveal about them. So, drawing up the charts of everyone I knew became a bulwark of my astrological study, and very early on, I began do "chart interpretations." Soon after, I started teaching classes. I was always only one or two steps ahead of my early students, but teaching turned out to be a great way to learn the system.

Sessions — what most people called "chart readings" (although I never did and still don't) — were a natural fit for me. First with friends, but increasingly over time with strangers, those encounters that compared people's real lives as they knew them with the symbolic information from their charts allowed me to pursue my personal motivation of exploring other people's inner reality to compare and contrast theirs

with my own, and sessions did so within the established social structure of counseling.

Initially, the astrology sessions I did were free. Soon, though, I started charging a small amount for sessions. Three years later, I realized that I wasn't cut out for a career as a musician, and I sure as hell wasn't going to wait tables for the rest of my life. So — despite considerable trepidation — I became a full-time astrologer in private practice.

All that happened five decades ago. In looking back, I've often described the beginning of my little career as being akin to taking out 50 cents and buying a ticket for a ride on a rollercoaster. At the time, it was no big deal, just half a dollar. But once the ride started, I couldn't get off. Even now, more than half a century later, the ride isn't over. Some days I'm thrilled, shouting "Wheeeee!" with outstretched arms. Other days my stomach is in my throat or I'm puking my guts out over the side. All I know for certain is that I can't get off until the ride is over. And it's not over yet.

Oddly enough (or perhaps not oddly at all), my motivations have remained fairly constant to this day. I still want to know how others experience themselves, especially now that my peers and I have had half a century to hone our self-awareness on life's often slippery slopes. Along the way, my professional skill and sophistication have grown immensely.

I want to connect with my clients at the level of their highest, most insightful self-awareness, the sum total of what they've learned about themselves thus far. As a result, I always approach every session from wherever my client is in his or her life. The astrological tools are helpful in assessing this. The natal chart shows me the core concerns of my client's journey — the challenges that will be faced and the inward resources available, as well as the conflicts and intentions. The long perspective of major transits flowing through time tells me about the various segments within that evolving life — beginnings and endings, phases involving years grouped together into chapters, where one or more planetary influences may dominate the tone (coldly Saturnian realism and obstacles, electric Uranian change and upheaval, mystical Neptunian fantasy and re-visioning, or darkly Plutonian purging and cleansing). These periods shift, morphing from one to another as the tone of the life changes.

That panorama tells a story, allowing me to see where my client's evolution has been in years past, where it's headed in the future, and, most of all, where it is right now. Natal charts are not static to me. The shifting patterns of moving cycles highlight the layers of the innate blueprint, lighting it up in unique ways during a given period of life. Yes, the seemingly fixed natal chart guides the interpretation of specific transits and their grouped patterns, but those patterns also reflect back into the natal chart, refining my vision of it by revealing which areas are ripe for discussion. Clients share with me their situational challenges and emotional concerns. Astrology tells me the context and the meaning.

Preparing the Tools

I spend more than an hour preparing for every session, because I want my tools to reveal all the astrological insights discussed above in a way that is graphically clear and will take as little thought as possible on my part. My goal is to organize the symbolic information to visually reveal the natural hierarchy of importance — in effect, separating the wheat from the chaff. (Astrology has a shocking amount of chaff.)

Even with the array of choices available in current astrological software to customize charts and data output, the results achieved directly from the software are not even close to what I want to see. So, I convert the natal chart and transit lists into graphic files and then transform them using more standard graphics software. Although I do this on the computer with created templates to speed the process, it's still manual grunt work, and it takes a while.

In the original published 2004 version of this article, I used the Dalai Lama's chart to illustrate certain technical and graphic elements of my preparation for sessions with clients. Given the recent brouhaha and looming scandal surrounding the Dalai Lama, however, I've decided to use my own chart instead.

Figure 1 is my natal chart output directly from my professional astrology software (Io for the Mac). The software allows me to customize it to a considerable extent, but not as much as I'd like. *Figure 2* is the revised result after 20 minutes of graphics work using other software. The difference is obviously in the aspects.

Bill Herbst
Natal Chart
Wednesday, November 16, 1949
11:35:00 AM CST
Deaconess Hospital, St. Louis Missouri
Tropical Koch True Node

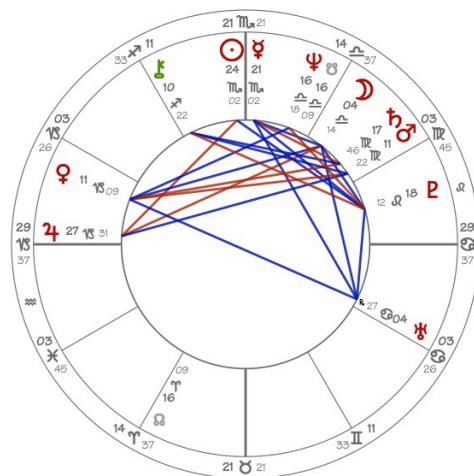


Figure 1

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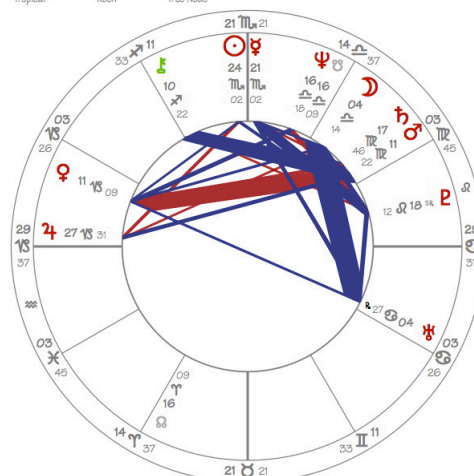


Figure 2

Aspects are very important to me, as are aspect patterns. They're critical to my process of establishing the hierarchy of meaning in any natal chart. I want the interplanetary aspects to be visually "weighted," according to various criteria — the inherent importance of the aspect, orb, whether it's applying or separating, which planets are involved, and their placements in signs and houses. This allows

As I wrote in my introductory paragraphs, I don't expect anyone to adopt my methods. We each make our own tools, according to our respective temperaments and motivations. I am sure that some astrologers conduct brilliant sessions with none of this kind of preparation at all — not even charts — just sitting in front of an ephemeris. For me, however, these tools work. They allow me to see easily and without distraction what I want to see in a chart, while permitting me to reserve almost all my conscious attention, thought, and sensitivity for the hard work of interacting with my client.

The Inner Process of Preparation

When I prepare the tools, I'm not actively thinking about the meanings that are gradually revealed as the graphics take shape. My awareness is focused entirely on the mechanical tasks of creating these graphics. In terms of focus, I'm primarily just a draftsman during that process. Meanwhile, however, semiconscious parts of my mind are "drinking in" the information, letting it begin to simmer on the back burner, so to speak.

I don't try to figure out in advance any specifics of what I might say in the session. That will take care of itself, once my client arrives and our conversation starts. After 50 years of sessions, I don't suffer stage fright. I do, however, gradually build a skeletal structure for the topics I'll want to include in the consultation.

Every session is a command performance. I try to alter my presentation to reflect the tone of the client's life. Some sessions are more sympathetic and gentle; others are more forceful. I speak quietly to some clients and more loudly to others. I'm literal with some, poetic with others. As the astrological tools are fleshed out onscreen, I get a sense of the probable tone of my performance.

These notions are not cast in stone, of course. During preparation, I'm not rehearsing or memorizing a script. Instead, I'm gaining an understanding of my character's role in the upcoming interaction with my client. As with any live, improvisational performance in a two-person drama, both players' expectations will be altered spontaneously onstage, whether that stage is in person and face to face or via long-distance telephone.

Clients vary in the degree of awareness about their own (and my) performance. Some people are highly conscious of creating a social persona; others radiate their outward personalities naturally, without a thought. In any case, part of my job is to connect with that persona, engage it, and then find a way — through the social dance of conversation, emotional exchange, body language, and all the subtle ways human force fields interact — to move beyond my client's mask, to gain the client's trust and reach inside, into the heart of the person.

In a first session, I have about 15 minutes or so to make that heart connection. When it occurs (as it, thankfully, does most often), the session takes off and soars into the heavens, justifying the hour I have spent getting ready. This is the point of effective preparation.

Conclusion

An astrological session is energetically demanding work — no amount of preparation diminishes that, of course. And quite often, what we have to convey as astrologers is difficult. After all, life is hard more often than it is soft for most human beings.

Achieving a state of mutual clarity and receptivity is no simple task, especially between strangers meeting under the pressure of limited time. When a heart connection is made, however, a client can take in even the most challenging content. Interaction then becomes easier, even if the information isn't. The ordinary hide-and-seek game that the ego plays to keep us confused or cut off from ourselves can be penetrated by trust or peeled away by skill — revealing a deeper place inside, closer to the source. That's where the amazing insights astrology provides become most relevant, when they are connected to that deeper sense of knowing.

Good preparation gives astrologers access to much of what we'll need, but it can also free us to be more truly available to our clients. What I hope for in every session is to make that human connection, where meaning flows between astrologer and client like we had known each other forever, as if by magic.

The goal of my preparation for a session is to make the magic more likely.

End Part Two