

# A Life of Dissonance

by Bill Herbst

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I was born in 1949 into a lower-middle (then later middle-middle) class family. I grew up a Midwestern white kid who lived in a 1950s California-ranch-style development of tract homes in a second-tier suburb outside what had been a major American city, but which was crumbling by the time I arrived. My parents participated in “white flight” from that city (St. Louis, Missouri) to the “safe” suburbs — a kind of *de facto* racial segregation. Educated in a school system typical for my times and location (white, protestant, and competent, with a burgeoning tax base that funded rapid expansion of facilities and staff to accommodate the post-World War II Baby Boom. I inaugurated eight brand-new schools over twelve years). Basically, I was the recipient of about as good an education as you could get in middle American public schools of that era.

By mid-childhood, I had already begun to evolve in two eccentric directions, neither of which was typical for my circumstances, and which were in distinct and almost inevitable contradiction to each other. One was gonzo spirituality. My mother was a devout Methodist; my father was an equally staunch atheist. They argued about my religious “upbringing,” and decided to let me choose. I rejected church-based Christianity, but (for reasons too complicated to go into here) dove headlong down the rabbit hole of more esoteric spirituality. By early adolescence, I was studying the Sufi mystic Gurdjieff, along with Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism. These lynchpins were part of what later coalesced in America under the somewhat dubious heading of “New Age Metaphysics.” What I found most compelling was the mystery of Consciousness.

The other road was progressive social/political activism. My parents were *de facto* racists (meaning that they considered blacks both inferior and frightening) and dyed-in-the-wool Republicans. I grew up surrounded by Cold War paranoia, with Commies under every bed. I was twelve during the Cuban Missile Crisis. However, and for reasons that are in some ways obvious to me, but in other ways obscure, I rejected all that and went hard in the opposite direction.

I studied the history of the late 19th- and early 20th-century Labor movements in America, read Marx and Engels, and ended up pretty early on as a committed Lefty who believed in radical social activism. I was reading *Ramparts* and *Mother Jones* magazines before I left high school. This orientation was underpinned by the rational training in math and science I got in school.

By the time astrology came along and kidnapped me in 1970 at the age of 20, I'd been well-prepared. My experience in college as an undergraduate psych major had been disappointing — all Skinner boxes and behaviorism. By my senior year, I'd taken psychedelics 50 times and knew that I'd never graduate. So, I gave up the plan of becoming a psychologist and went with the alternative subculture full bore, ending up buying 300 acres in rural Missouri with 35 of my friends for an idealistic back-to-the-land commune. Like so many of those experimental ventures in the late-60s, early-70s era of Easy Rider America, it worked for awhile and then later fell apart.

I had always pooh-poohed mainstream, sun-sign astrology (and still do) as just another silly way to stereotype people into superficial categories, but it turned out that underneath the pop culture nonsense was an elegant, profound, and extremely technical system that shouldn't have worked but did. For me, getting on the astrology train was like taking a dime out of my pocket and buying a ticket for a rollercoaster ride. I wasn't serious, it was just a dime, no big deal, but once on the ride, I was stuck. Some days on the astrology rollercoaster were exhilarating as I learned the system, like raising your arms overhead and shouting "Wheeee!" Other days, however, I was nauseous from the weirdness, which was like wanting to puke my guts out over the side of the rollercoaster. Either way, however — thrilled or horrified — the rollercoaster ride continued. I couldn't get off until the ride ended, and it just kept going.

I started doing sessions within weeks after learning to erect charts. This was 1970 in the alternative subculture, and many of the hundreds of people I knew were interested in astrology. I wanted to do all my friends' charts (to see if their charts reflected who they were, as mine had for me), and lots of them wanted their charts "interpreted." I'd already had some training as counselor as a psychology undergrad, so doing sessions was a natural fit. At first I did them for nothing. Within a year, though, I was charging ten bucks for four-hour sessions. That was mainly to keep me in supplies — chart forms, colored pens and markers — plus a little money to buy any astrology books I could find.

By 1973, the die was cast. By that time, I'd drawn up about 3,000 charts and done almost a thousand sessions. I sure as hell wasn't going to work in a pizza joint for the rest of my life. So, I decided to become a full-time astrologer in private practice, doing sessions with clients about their lives. I also began teaching astrology at that point, which was a great way to learn the system. Having to explain the system to students forced me to really learn my stuff. For the next five years, I had three levels of classes in continual rotation — beginning, intermediate, and advanced. A couple of my early students actually became astrologers eventually.

Giving up the notion of becoming a licensed psychotherapist had been easy. I'd read R.D. Laing and similar rebels and had already concluded that the institution of psychology was too often just a scam, yet another money-making racket. Astrology would allow me the freedom to explore healing and Consciousness with people (clients) in a way that required no permission from authorities, didn't

use a bogus medical model, and might be even better than psychotherapy. Wow. (In hindsight, I look back on that as youthful exuberance and rebelliousness, but it made sense then...)

Simultaneously, however, my decision to go full-time with astrology as a profession and livelihood terrified me. Was I really going to give up any hope of being culturally acceptable, much less financially secure or respected, and instead wander out into the hinterlands of the New Age, where loads of whack jobs and crazy people lived? The answer was yes, of course I was, since no other road was open to me by then. Even so, I couldn't choose that path without considerable inner turmoil.

My rational side had always been in conflict with my metaphysical side. They fought over faith, belief, and magical thinking, none of which I trusted. And yet, I had been opened to powerful channels of alternative perception (i.e., intuition) for all sorts of reasons, from my screwed-up childhood that left me feeling damaged and unacceptable, to my late-adolescent involvement with psychedelics that had been life-changing and positive. Having let that genie out of the bottle, I wasn't about to try putting it back. Although I found no easy way to reconcile rationality with intuition, I had them both — the high-IQ brain power that was my biggest endowment early on, and the immersion into more esoteric realms that was added along the way. I thought, what the hell? If this is my life, I might as well live it.

Nearly half a century later, I still find myself betwixt and between these two worlds, participating in both, but comfortable in neither. Because of my long career as a working astrologer, I'm probably more accepted within the spiritual community. I am, however, skeptical about much of New Age Metaphysics, especially those parts of it that I regard as low-rent, pop-culture mysticism. While I speak the language and am familiar with the many narratives of that perspective — reincarnation, meditation, various modalities of energy healing, etc. — I'm not a "true believer" in any of them. Social juggernauts such as *The Secret* or *Scientology* appear to me as greedy wolves of business consumerism dressed up in the sheep's' clothing of spirituality — basically, little more than crass marketing. They make me want to run screaming for the exits.

Meanwhile, the world of political concerns aimed at making society better in terms of equality and justice doesn't accept me at all. In that realm, my career as an astrologer disqualifies me from any serious consideration as a social activist or even a thoughtful commentator. Whenever someone from that realm wants to point out the irrationality of the great unwashed masses (typically as a way of explaining why progressive change is so difficult to achieve in America), interest in astrology is frequently invoked as proof of the public's foolish lunacy. If you believe in or study astrology, you must be deluded. And if (god forbid) you actually work as an astrologer, you must be a scammer — a con artist. I've lost track of the number of times individuals I respect in the world of progressive social activism have disappointed me by taking cheap pot shots at astrology and all of us who use it.

That shouldn't rankle me, but it does. Way back in 1975, when 186 well-known scientists — including numerous Nobel Prize winners — came out with a public statement that received wide press in the media, in which they condemned all astrologers as charlatans, I felt duty-bound to point out that none of those scientists had studied astrology at all. They knew nothing about it as a serious discipline and regarded astrology as inherently unworthy of any consideration, assuming instead that it was a mere vestigial artifact from ancient, prehistorical times of crude superstition among "primitive" early humans. A common bias in the institutions of modern society, especially in science, is the belief that literally everyone who lived before was an idiot. Somehow this passes for wisdom rather than arrogance.

Sure, I understood that the sophistication of those scientists didn't go beyond pop culture astrology, which I have railed at forever and still do. They also didn't realize that astrology is not and doesn't pretend to be science. It's a language and an art, concerned primarily with meaning, synchronicity, and the connections that link everything to everything else. That's profoundly different from science. Nevertheless, I didn't like my integrity or my intelligence being smeared by people who were obviously guilty of false superiority and small-minded group think. I didn't care how famous they were. Lots of famous people are jerks.

I tell myself that these kinds of slings and arrows come with the territory of my life and career. Some degree of rejection is inevitable and part of what I signed up for, so that my feeling anger or blame toward others for not understanding or accepting me is a fool's errand. Any pissing and moaning I do about cultural disrespect is an obvious and almost painful indication that I've still got plenty of personal work on myself to do. Maturity isn't given, it's earned.

Lord knows, I continue to struggle with my own childishness. If I'd been more motivated to achieve cultural acceptance and easy social belonging, I would have made very different choices. I take solace, however, in the certainty that I am not alone in feeling like an outsider. Far from it. I've learned over my lifetime how common that experience is, even for many people about whom one would never imagine it to be an issue. Some of us may even insist on not belonging if our personalities are sufficiently iconoclastic or contrarian. (In astrology, that temperamental inclination would quite likely be linked to an emphasized or "afflicted" Uranus, which my chart has in spades).

We want to be independent, and we want to belong. Separate yet together. The ways these contradictory urges take shape in our lives differ from one person to another, and the proportions of individualization versus group conformity in each of us can vary hugely. Some people go along to get along, while others willfully stick out like sore thumbs. I'm pretty sure, though, that both motivations exist in everyone.

And so it goes. We are isolated and alone. Also, we are all One. That paradox resonates at the center of human life.