

Astrology is Not Gucci Shoes

by Bill Herbst

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I've earned my livelihood as a full-time professional astrologer for 49 years. Next autumn will mark my 50-year semi-centennial — a half century of doing sessions with clients to make a living. Over that time, I've done more than 13,000 sessions, and I've learned a thing or two about human beings and their hopes, dreams, fears, anxieties, desires, and needs. I'm not sure if what I've learned (or think I've learned) applies to all human beings everywhere throughout history, or only to Americans born in the past century (who have comprised about 95% of my clients, with people from other countries and cultures making up the other 5%). My guess is that it's a mix of the universally human with the more idiosyncratic particularity of people from a certain culture (America) at a specific time (now).

We are all creatures of our times, and Americans live in a consumer culture. What the vast majority of people want from a session with me is an experience that's akin to buying a consumer product, say, a pair of Gucci shoes. You walk into the store, and the shoes are already made and on display. You see a pair you like, the salesman asks your size, then goes into the back room. He comes out with a box containing the shoes, and you try them on. If you like them, you say, *"I'll take these."* He says, *"Great."* You go to the counter, swipe your credit card, he puts the box of shoes in a Gucci-labeled paper bag, hands it to you, and you walk out of the store with your spiffy new shoes.

Easy-peasy Japanesey.

This is what my clients hope will be the experience of having a session with me. So, at the beginning of a telephone session, after the initial verbal handshake greeting (*"Hi. How are you?" "Fine, how are you?" "Fine."*), followed by a couple minutes of small talk while the band is warming up, before we're out on the dance floor. When that's over and it's time to get down to business, I ask my client, *"OK, what's motivating you to have this conversation with me?"* Almost invariably, the client says something like, *"Oh, I just wanted to see what my chart could tell me about my life right now."*

This always flummoxes me. (Well, not really, because I've heard it 5,000 times, but even these days it's still a little aggravating.)

OK, I get it. Obviously, they're hiring me as an astrologer to have a session — clients typically call what I do "readings," but I much prefer the term "sessions" — because they think the chart might have useful information that will help them

to better manage their lives. But that's not what I asked. And their response to my question tells me nothing. From my perspective, it's downright evasive.

Now, I don't want to be harsh about this. It's very possible that clients are simply surprised by the directness of my question and a little taken aback. Perhaps they are unprepared to launch into self-revelations so early in the conversation. Or maybe they simply don't know how and their response is a sidestepping way of saving face.

Talking about one's life is a skill that many people never get the chance to learn. Society doesn't encourage self-revelation in communication. Even with intimates and close friends, all that most people experience is little more than story-telling about external events — this happened, then that happened, and I did such-and-such, this or that. Thoughtful discussion of our inner process, our psychological or spiritual reactions to what's happening in our lives, is as rare as hen's teeth. Some people even assume that it's somehow wrong to do so, as if that's not permitted socially.

And yet, that dimension is precisely what my question is aimed at. I'm asking my clients to come out and show themselves to me, and that's very difficult for most people, especially in a phone conversation with someone they may not know well and probably have never met in person.

All those reasons are possible and need to be factored in. Overall, though, I think that most people respond to my question as they do — evasively — for a different reason.

My experience after 50 years of this tells me that most people think, expect, or hope that I'm going to give them a "psychic reading" — the kind they've seen in movies and on TV, where someone at the circus walks into a tent, and there's an exotic-looking gypsy woman sitting at a table with a crystal ball. The person sits down, the woman gazes into the glass, goes into a trance, and then, as if by magic, starts telling the person profound truths about him or herself. Not just generic information, but quite specific facts that are dead-on relevant to the very thing they'd been grappling with in their lives.

Yeah, well, that's the movies, not real life. I have a couple of longstanding friends who are professional psychics, and I know for a fact that's not how they work. It's not how most astrologers work, either, and it's sure as hell not how I work.

But that assumption seems to me very widespread throughout the public. This includes almost all of the people with whom I do sessions — not just first-timers (who often don't know how I approach my work), but even many of my best, most longstanding clients (with whom I've worked often, sometimes over many years). They start off in every session wanting the experience to be easy and

effortless for them, like buying a pair of Gucci shoes. And somehow, they assume that I will be able to pull off that magic trick for them.

Some of the feedback I get from returning clients after their initial sessions is, in my opinion, mistakenly lavish praise. *"Gee, you nailed it!"* some say, or *"I can hardly believe that what you told me was so accurate and on-point."* You know, stuff like that. (Of course, other clients have one session and never schedule another, so maybe they weren't so pleased...) Anyway, what I think happens for these particular returning clients is that, having had one experience that impressed them, they then assume that their following sessions will be magical as if I can pull rabbits out of hats on auto-pilot. None of that is true, however.

The public has all kinds of mistaken assumptions about astrology — what it is, how it works, what it can and can't tell us. The misinformation runs deep and wide. This is probably true of many disciplines, but it sure as hell is the case with astrology. A fair percentage of these mistaken beliefs and wrong assumptions has been fostered in the public by astrologers, either because they themselves believe the falsehoods or, more likely, because their wish to succeed in the marketplace seduces them to appeal to the lowest common denominator of people's most childish, fantasy-based hopes. I'm referring here to stuff like the belief that charts can plainly reveal one's "strengths and weaknesses," or who one should marry, or (heaven forbid) even such lunacy as one's "lucky lotto number." Behind all that nonsense, though, are many other factors that people don't understand or consider simply because they haven't studied the system.

One almost universal mistake that people make is to assume that charts speak in the same language they do. Wrong. Yes, charts are mandalas that do speak to a well-trained, experienced practitioner, but NOT in the language of human egos. Charts don't care about pain or pleasure, approach or avoidance, liking or not liking, and whether something in the chart is "good or bad." Instead, astrology speaks in the language of archetypal symbols, which is about as far from day-to-day English as one could get. But astrologers aren't merely translators from an esoteric language back to more common parlance. Much of the value of astrology lies in learning to think about our lives differently, to change our inner languages by re-considering our life-experiences from perspectives that aren't taught in school or learned on the playground.

Another thing about astrology the public doesn't understand is the twin problem that charts contain both too much and too little information.

Let me address too much information first. "Interpretation" in an astrological chart usually involves combining symbols. That's not the only method, but it's the most common and basic. It's like a cookbook recipe: Take a cup of Saturn, mix in 4 ounces of Cancer, and bake in the 5th house for an hour. OK, fine. The problem the public doesn't appreciate is that every symbol has many different meanings, all of which are related to the symbol's archetype, but each of which

is distinctly separate, often in ways that are seemingly unrelated, and sometimes to an extent that can be bewildering on the surface.

For instance, how can Neptune symbolize both spiritual idealism and drug addiction? Well, it does because both experiences are about leaving behind the travails of ordinary life, with all its weirdness and suffering, for a less tangible but much more pleasing realm. In the same way, Neptune can indicate profound, all-encompassing truths or bald-faced, delusional lies.

In another example, Saturn symbolizes the father, but it also means structure (whether of the body or society). Saturn's meanings include ambition and failure anxiety and government and the need to develop patience and persistence over time and 40 other things. The same is true with Cancer and the 5th house. No symbol in astrology has a single meaning. So, when we combine the symbols, the possible interpretive meanings multiply. Just that single combination of three symbols in someone's chart — Saturn in Cancer in the 5th house — produces literally thousands of different possible interpretations.

And that is only one of many such three-symbol combinations in every natal chart. Just considering planets, signs, houses, and aspects results in literally millions of possible interpretations within any chart. And there's way more than just those four primary symbolic elements. Astrologers can add hundreds of asteroids and other minor bodies, fixed stars, transits and progressions, a boatload of Arabic Parts, harmonic charts, heliocentric versus geocentric charts, Jyotish/Vedic versus western charts, sidereal versus tropical zodiacs, and many different house systems. The permutations are nearly endless, so much so that the number of possible interpretations becomes incomprehensibly mind-boggling. No astrologer uses everything. Everyone who studies astrology, from students to practicing professionals, cherry-picks the system for what we like, understand, rely on, and trust.

But even after we've limited the system for ourselves, how is an astrologer to pare down the almost infinite number of interpretations that still remain, in effect separating the wheat from the chaff for a given person, and do so within a one-hour or 90-minute interaction? Some people within the astrological community feel that an astrologer can get clues from the chart about which interpretations might be more relevant. To this, I say, "*Balderdash.*" The bottom line is that charts themselves do not contain *any* instructions about how to accurately limit the possibilities. Charts are about the cosmic meanings of a particular instant in the time-space continuum. They don't care about the specific context of an individual human life.

This problem of context brings me to the second issue — too little information.

If I'm looking at an astrological chart, I have no way of knowing solely from the chart itself what the subject is. Is this the natal chart of a person? A man or a woman? Is it the time-space moment for the chartering of a country? Or a

business? Or some event (like 9-11 or a volcanic eruption)? Hell, the chart might be for the first moment of a certain personal transit in someone's life. It could be the chart of a wedding or the moment of someone's death. Unless I have an external identification, like a name printed on the page with the chart, I don't — and can't — know what the chart is about. And that's just for starters.

Let's assume that my client is a 47-year-old woman, and the chart I'm looking at is her natal chart. That information alone provides me with only the most basic beginnings of context — age and gender. I'm going to need a heck of a lot more personal information to be able to interpret the chart effectively, meaning in a way that will let me offer my client the insights she wants and needs from the session. And the only way to get that additional information for the context I need is through my conversation with her.

So, let's go back to the beginning. When, at the start of a phone session, I ask my client what's motivating him or her to have the conversation with me, what I'm asking for is *context*. I'm saying, *"Tell me about your life, about what's happened, about what you're grappling with right now, and about the choices you face or are considering. I will then take that information and use it as a lens, through which I will look at the chart and custom-tailor what I can offer you."*

Here's the skinny — and it's the real point of this fairly lengthy commentary. What you're buying when you schedule a session with me is more than lunch with a friend. It's not ordinary life at all, but rather an opportunity to do Work on Yourself, to stimulate and reveal your self-awareness through our interaction. People know a great deal about their lives, but that inner knowing can get lost or buried under all the ego bullshit of fear, anxiety, doubt, confusion, pain, social pressures, family expectations, etc. Even positive qualities such as hope and optimism can sometimes lead us away from our real knowing, that part of us that truly understands who we are and what our lives are about.

Sessions with me are not consumer products. I'm not like a pair of Gucci shoes. In this metaphor, I'm more akin to a skilled artisan cobbler who will custom make you a pair of shoes, right there, in your presence, but I need your help to do so. The shoes I make are not one-size-fits-all. I don't crank them out in a factory.

A session with me is a co-creation. I bring various tools from your personal astrology, my half-century of experience with charts and sessions, plus whatever else I've learned over my lifetime. You bring your real life — your knowledge and conscious awareness about it. Together, in conversation, we combine as much of that as we can in an hour or 90 minutes to figure out what your life currently means — where you are in your journey now, where you're headed, and what you need to do next in the coming months or years ahead.

I don't mean to imply that what I've written in this commentary is necessarily true for every astrologer. Nor is it necessarily applicable to their work. Most

likely, it's probably not. Astrologers come in many varieties, based on who they are, what they know, and their individual beliefs about life and the universe. Working with any astrologer — but most especially the good ones — is not a cookie-cutter proposition. Not even close. It's an art, not a science.

I've always known that my session work is not for everyone. In fact, I think my work is probably best suited to only a very small percentage of the public. But that's OK. I don't need to work with everyone, just enough clients to stay afloat.

It's funny. Every week I get marketing emails from web designer firms. All these emails contain some version of the same spiel: *"We've looked at your web site, and we feel that, with a few improvements to your code and design, we can help you improve your search rankings and increase traffic to your site."*

I NEVER respond to these emails, but if I did, here's what I'd say: *"You don't understand. You assume that I want more business. **I don't.** I designed my web site less as an advertisement for my professional services than as a limiting gateway to filter out people for whom I would be the wrong astrologer. I'm quite happy with my little home-made web site. The fact that it's not slick and welcoming to everyone is intentional. That's worked for 20 years to help me connect with the right kind of clients, those who can benefit from my particular approach to astrology."*

Baby bear's porridge. So much of life is about that. Not too hot, not too cold. Not too much, and not too little. I've been very fortunate as an astrologer to enjoy that happy medium throughout most of my career.

Even though it's very daunting these days to be in the last chapter of my own life while simultaneously facing what looks more and more like the end of the world as we know it, I'll continue to do my work as long as I'm able, and as long as some people — hopefully the right ones — want to work with me.