

# Preparing for an Astrological Session

## *(Part One of Two)*

by Bill Herbst

*This essay was written in 2004. It was commissioned by The Mountain Astrologer and published that year in TMA. Today's repost is an edited revision of the original article. This is a long essay, so I'll post it in two installments — the first half this week and the second half next week.*

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When I was kidnapped by astrology five decades ago, I watched my plans for a career as a licensed psychotherapist go right down the drain. One of the reasons I didn't struggle too much against that radical change in direction was the complete freedom that astrology gave me. As an astrologer, I didn't have to slog through three or four more years of postgraduate school, jumping through the hoops of academic credentialing in the institution of psychology. I didn't have to worry about "standards and practices" or being monitored by proctors. I was free to pursue with my clients whatever subversive subjects and creative techniques I found compelling, with no bureaucratic sanctions or artificial limits. I have always valued that freedom immensely.

In the ongoing debate about credentialing as a means to make astrology more accessible to the public, more respectable in the culture, and more lucrative for its practitioners, I still lean toward the "less is more" side of that argument. I continue to feel that astrology is more art than science, more craft than product, and that its astonishing breadth — in embracing the diverse facets and paradoxical nature of the human condition — makes it unsuited to institutionalization. To my somewhat eccentric sensibilities, sacrificing the beautiful mysteries of astrology by imposing formulaic constraints would be far worse than the messiness and occasional misunderstandings we endure by leaving it untamed.

Over the years, however, I've grown more sympathetic to the other side of that debate. By maintaining our staunchly Uranian iconoclasm, our stance as lone wolves, astrologers miss out on sharing that could be invaluable to our practice.

Specifically, many of us — from beginning students through professional astrologers — never get to see how our colleagues approach their work. Yes, we can read books on astrological theory, technique, and delineation; we can take classes on various levels of astrology; and we can attend lectures or conventions to hear other astrologers speak. All these are worthwhile pursuits. Few of us, however, observe other astrological professionals actually plying their trade. We don't really know

how they conduct their sessions with clients, nor do we know how they prepare for those sessions.

What if we could sit behind one of those one-way, see-through mirrors on TV cop shows and watch another astrologer performing in a session? Or be inside that astrologer's head during his or her preparation for the session, witnessing the thoughts and feelings that arise as the various layers of astrological data are constructed, compiled, and collated?

Alas, I'm unable to offer a one-way, see-through mirror into my head. Much of what happens inside me — before, during, and after sessions — remains opaque even to me. Despite my having logged 13,000 sessions, much of the work itself is still subtly evanescent and fleeting, like watching fireflies on a hot July night. How can anyone map the sublime interior landscape of creativity, especially when it involves another human energy field, as consultations do? I can, however, share my external process of preparing for a session with each new client and offer some insights into how my particular preparation helps me later in the session.

The caveat here is that my ways will almost certainly not be the same as yours. It's a plain fact that individual astrologers run the gamut of beliefs, attitudes, motivations, and goals for their session work. Descending into the morally ambiguous swamp of presuming to tell others about themselves through our particular understanding of astrology is daunting enough on its own — without adding the hubris of dogmatically assuming that other astrologers should do it the same way.

So, this is not a "how-to" primer. Rather, it's a mirror from my subjectivity to yours. If my process of preparing for a session contains some gold nuggets you can use, by all means take them to the bank. But even if my process holds nothing of value to you, it may provide a solid wall to push off against in clarifying for yourself how and why you prepare for a session as you do. There is no "best" way to approach this work, whether we call it sessions, readings, or consultations. There is only the best way for each of us at a given stage of our development.

I truly wish the astrological community had an anecdotal database of many working astrologers' experience and choices in preparing for sessions; this seemingly mundane task is every bit as important as the top-heavy emphasis on theory and technique in the astrological literature. At this point in history, we need less teaching and more sharing. New theories and techniques will always be available. Our experience, however, is precious and will be lost if it is not shared.

### **First Things First**

Scheduling a session with a new client is the first step in preparation. Whether you're an astrological student agreeing for the first time ever to talk about another person's life or a professional making your living with day-to-day sessions, scheduling is unavoidable. Like the vast majority of professional astrologers,

I do my own scheduling. It's a big and ongoing part of my job, although an unglamorous one, and I want it to go as smoothly as possible. My one rule with this is: *Scheduling is not the session.*

For me, scheduling is a purely secretarial function. Beyond agreeing on a date and time for the session, I need to obtain a correctly spelled name, confirmed birth data (an accurate rather than a guessed birth time is critical), and relevant contact information. I work exclusively by phone now, and I'm frankly amazed at the number of clients who request a phone session but neglect to specify a phone number for me to call. A general human truism is that when people want something, they tend to focus only on what *they* want, not what *you* need.

One might reasonably ask: "*Don't you also need to find out in advance from your clients what they want to discuss in the session?*" Not really. "*But won't that affect your preparation?*" Mostly, no. Clients are motivated to have sessions for a number of reasons, many of which are circumstantial. Some pressure between our external and internal lives acts as an itch we want to scratch. The list of usual suspects includes work (jobs, careers), money (in all its guises), moving (relocation), and relationships (lovers, marriage, family and children, friends and co-workers). Beneath these obvious burrs under our saddles lie less tangible issues: spirituality, life purpose, health, creativity, etc.

Whatever the issues or problems may be, everything starts with and ultimately returns to understanding oneself and where one is on the life path. That's always the bottom line of every session and the center of my preparation: the client's natal chart and major transits. Anything else is secondary, such as other people's charts, composites, relocations, or short-term transits. I'll add those kinds of tools only if and when I need them. And then I typically do that on the fly, during the session itself.

Thus, when scheduling, I actively limit how much my clients tell me about their situations for two reasons: First, I don't want to burn up any more time than necessary doing secretarial work. I earn my living working with clients, but I don't get paid for secretarial time. During the consultation itself, the very first questions I'll ask are: "*Why are you having this session? What's motivating you to work with me?*" The answers to those questions are correctly part of the session.

Second, I want to enter my technical preparation "clean," so to speak, without being subtly seduced by the biases and preconceived notions of my client's self-perceptions. I don't believe in exalted notions of "pure objectivity" in astrology or any other interactive human endeavor, but I do strive to maintain a modicum of balance and detachment when forming my initial astrological opinions about a client's life. To be truly helpful, I need to stand outside my clients' dramas.

## **Involvement or Detachment**

In astrological counseling, at least as *I* practice it, the delicate dance between professional detachment and authentic intimacy with the client is extremely critical. In many ways, my work is more akin to that of a classical Japanese geisha than a traditional psychotherapist. I understand why Western psychology cautions its practitioners against such pitfalls as projection or transference, but the stiffness of those prohibitions is best suited to a clinical setting. Astrology transcends those narrow, well-defined boundaries.

In fact, I don't think of myself as doing "therapy" at all. Although I consider many of its orientations relevant, I don't like the doctor-patient model. I much prefer to operate professionally from the assumption of equality. Everyone I know (including myself) is damaged in various ways. Healing is a natural and necessary part of creative growth, whether spiritual or mundane. For me, the issue is how we approach each other's consciousness.

I wear many different hats in my work with clients — Astrologer, Pragmatist, Coach, Counselor, Confidant, Cheerleader, Minister, Metaphysician, Sidekick, Scout, Drill Sergeant, Strategist, etc. — no single role stands alone. The client's needs and the rhythm and flow of conversation in the session show me which roles to play and how to combine them to best advantage.

I suppose that some astrologers see themselves mainly as straightforward providers of information. They just interpret the chart for their clients, and that's that. For me, this work requires emotional intimacy. Astrology reaches inside people and touches on very personal matters — so my favorite role metaphor continues to be "Psychological Geisha." In order to reflect back to my clients the deeper truths about their lives in a way that connects with their own inner knowing, I need to gain their trust very quickly, so that they'll open their hearts to me. As odd as it seems, inspiring that trust turns out to be a very tricky and somewhat manipulative business. The only way I know to do it well and yet stay *clean* (for both my client and myself) is to operate from that geisha place of artistic skill, sensitivity, and universal love, with its wonderful contradiction of simultaneous involvement and detachment.

## **Technical Preparation**

After scheduling, the next step is the technical preparation of the astrological tools; in my case, this means the client's natal chart and major transits.

I should probably mention that I don't use any symbolic progression systems. I tried them out early on in my study of astrology, but I stopped using them after the first ten years or so. Secondaries and other progression techniques just don't resonate for me personally in the strong way that transits do.

I understand the theoretical basis of equating various Earth rhythms — day-for-a-year and all that — but I've always felt more drawn to the direct reality of transits. I like that they're real bodies moving through real time. By admitting this, I mean no offense to other astrologers who use secondary progressions, solar arcs, or even primary directions. To each his own. No one uses all the techniques of astrology, especially for one session that will last less than two hours.

Various astrologer friends have questioned me about my choice not to use progressions, suggesting (either subtly or bluntly) that I'm missing out on important information about my client. To this I answer that the great problem with astrology is not too little, but rather too much information. Especially now, with computers, we are inundated with data in astrology. That's one of many issues that keeps otherwise promising students from moving into session work: the fear that they might miss something important, or the feeling that they must somehow know *everything* about a chart to do a good session. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Sessions are like meals. Just as we cannot eat all of a restaurant's menu offerings at a single sitting, we can't possibly discuss the breadth and depth of a client's life in an hour or 90 minutes. We have to be selective in our choices of what to cook and serve up, like great chefs going to the market each morning to buy only the freshest ingredients. Preparing for an astrology session, we certainly need to see an overview of meaning, but the limitations of time alone require us to highlight and focus on what is most relevant and important. Using only the techniques we like and trust give us more than enough to go on.

Sometimes my friends who love progressions and question my choice not to use the techniques by offering up the old argument that transits tend to show more external, event-oriented changes in life while progressions reveal more about the psychology of inner growth. I've never found that argument even remotely convincing, neither theoretically nor pragmatically. All moving cycles can manifest on any level — tangible or intangible, circumstantial or psychological, practical or spiritual. That's one of the most fascinating and compelling parts of experiential astrology. You're living your life, undergoing a certain major transit (or progression) that you're experiencing in thought, feeling, and attitude (which is really saying that it's coming *out* of you) and then — whammo-slammo! — there's the manifestation in real life, coming right *at* you from the external environment. At times that is way cool, while at other times it's downright terrifying. I mean, who's pulling the strings in all this?

People who are skeptical of astrology or wish to debunk what they see as crude superstition are fond of talking about "projection," "selective perception," or "self-fulfilling prophecies." Those of us who have studied astrology and embrace it as a way of deciphering some of life's mysteries know all too well that the grand piano being moved up to the high-rise window, which broke free of its cables and dropped ten floors to the concrete below, just so happening to crush you into jelly as you

innocently walked by on the sidewalk, had nothing at all to do with self-fulfilling prophecies. Nonetheless, there it was, right in your chart. (I'm speaking metaphorically, of course, since there's no precise transit for death from a falling piano. Of course, now that I've written this, someone will come up with a chart configuration for it.)

### **Fast Food or Home-Cooked**

When I began doing sessions way back in the stone age (1970), technical preparation was done entirely by hand, using ephemerides, tables of houses, logarithm tables, scratch pads for calculations, colored pens, and printed chart forms. Back then, it took me a little more than an hour to create the final products: the natal chart and four years of major transits (last year, the current year, and two years ahead).

Now, we all use computers with sophisticated astrology software. Strangely enough, though, it still takes me about the same amount of time to produce the finished tools as I want to see them. Why is that? Don't computers and astrology software make calculations faster?

Sure, I can crank out a fairly customized natal chart in about 20 seconds, as quickly as I can open the app, input the birth data, and hit the Return key. The chart appears onscreen instantly, with all my specific display preferences (house system, aspect orbs, chart format, colors, etc.) just as they should be. Lists of transits can be cranked out nearly as fast.

Then why does the process still take me an hour?

### **Allocating Awareness**

As astrologers, our sessions divide our attention into two different but connected directions. We have astrological tools, with all their symbolic information, and we have a client — a living, breathing human being. The tools are like blueprints of the life machinery. They show us how the machine is put together and, by revealing function, they imply purpose, which is altogether elegant and astonishing. What our tools cannot show us, however, is actual consciousness. Charts describe the path toward awakening and maturity, but they can't tell us how well that path has been walked. For that, we need the person, the human being who is living the actual life — not metaphorically, not symbolically, but in reality — through all the beautiful and terrifying experiences of animals in bodies.

We can get a ton of insight from astrology, but it isn't and never will be life itself. In the words of an old phrase, *the map is not the territory*. Astrological maps show endless possibilities for personhood, but the actual human being shows what truly is. The work in sessions necessarily flows back and forth between the possible and the actual. As astrologers, we interpret the tools and read the maps, but we need to respect the reality of our clients' lives. Charts are cool, life is hot, and consciousness

is the miraculous result. Nothing is more helpful in a consultation than a client who is conscious.

For students (and for many clients), the tools may present a more compelling focus than the actual life. That is to say, students tend to be obsessed with about basic astrological delineation, the nuts and bolts of interpreting simple combinations: planets in signs, houses, or aspects. Then too, it's one thing to look at a chart and know the meaning of the symbolism, but it's quite another to put that understanding into words, particularly in a professional setting (a session) where one is expected to be spontaneous and authoritative, as well as accurate and wise.

Most clients want to know not only what certain events (personal transits and such) *mean* in astrology, but *what to do about them* to make life easier. In fact, charts don't contain that information. They don't care whether a given transit or period of time will be easy or difficult for us. Charts don't care about our egos and what they want. And yet, astrologers are expected to know that.

### **Salad-Bar Astrology**

Especially for astrologers who are just starting out, consultations with clients are often little more than verbal recitations of "cookbook-style" textbook interpretations. This is the "salad" approach to astrology: Take various raw ingredients, chop them up into bite-sized pieces, and toss them together in a large bowl. To this end, less-experienced astrologers may spend some of their preparation time searching through their favorite astrological textbooks or online sources to find and reread the interpretive sections relevant to their client's natal chart or moving cycles.

I never do that, for a number of reasons. If I haven't mastered basic delineation and still need to refer to textbooks after 53 years of full-time astrology, I'm in the wrong game and should quit. Beyond that, 13,000 sessions with clients have given me an experiential database that I much prefer to theoretical interpretations or the published opinions of other astrologers. But the last and most important reason is that my sessions are not about that kind of traditional textbook delineation.

In any language as rich as astrology, experience brings an ability to synthesize more symbolic relationships. We start out by learning the meanings of individual symbols within different levels of structure (planets, signs, houses); then we move to simple relationships, the basic grammar of the language — one planet with one sign, or two planets with one aspect, etc. The literature of introductory astrology tends to remain focused on these primary but somewhat simplistic relationships, if only because of the limitations of formulaic writing. It's very difficult to write with clarity and eloquence about the process of seeing the overall meanings of 20 or 30 interconnected symbolic factors, but that's where maturity takes us as working astrologers. I have no doubt that my many peers who are astrological professionals can attest to this.

All the astrologers I respect have become over their careers much more sophisticated at understanding charts than when they began. Though I have no illusions about ever “mastering” astrology — the terrain of this language is simply too vast for anyone to fully comprehend — I continue to grow in my ability to stand back and let charts speak to me, rather than dig at them to extract preconceived meanings.

### **Astrology or Intuition**

One result of this growth is that some of my clients, especially those who have a basic knowledge of astrology, assume that I am “psychic,” because what I say in sessions doesn’t reflect the simple grammar of cookbook-style interpretations. I don’t speak in astro-jargon, and I tend not to refer to specific positions (such as, “*Your Venus is in Taurus, and that means ...*”). Even when I do focus internally on a particular symbolic relationship — a dominant natal aspect or significant transit, for instance — I’m considering many other factors in the chart at the same time: overall planetary pattern, other complementary or contradictory aspects, or the longer flow of transit patterns over several years. So what emerges, verbally, is not textbook astrology.

The astrology of my session work is integrated into larger themes: life purpose, spiritual mission, and many of the distinctly human paradoxes that shape our lives — security versus freedom, individuality versus belonging, love versus power, etc. Thus, my conversation in sessions rarely *sounds* astrological, which causes some clients to assume that I’m plugging into their lives from some source of knowing beyond the chart. And I certainly do use every form of sensitivity and intelligence at my command. All those colors emerge through the prism of astrology, however. I’m still interpreting the chart, but I’m doing so in a manner quite different from some of my clients’ expectations.

Long ago, I gave up structuring my sessions in terms of my astrological tools. Some astrologers offer “natal readings” first, followed by “progressed readings” later. Others specialize in relocation work or relationship analysis. I’ve visited the web sites of many astrologers that list a whole gaggle of specific services, like a menu for different kinds of sessions. That’s fine, of course — it’s a free country (well, it used to be), and we each tailor our work to fit our own temperament, style, and goals. But, personally, I don’t break my work down into different services, based on what astrological techniques I’ll be using. I’m not selling the tools. What I’m selling is a conversation about my clients’ lives that’s probably quite different from any conversation they’re likely to have in their regular lives.

*End Part One*

*Next week in Part Two, I’ll get down to the nitty-gritty and show some of the actual tools I create and use for every session.*