

HOW DO ASTROLOGERS READ CHARTS?

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ABSTRACT: This paper is focused on how meaning is drawn from a natal horoscope based on interviews with contemporary western astrologers who work with natal horoscopes. Some authors of astrological texts suggest that the activity of reading a natal horoscope for a client evokes mystery or the divine. Many astrologers think that reading a chart is a ritual. This paper proposes a different approach, that of creativity, and suggests that reading a natal horoscope is a secular creative endeavour. A glossary of astrological terms is included at the end of the paper.

Reading a natal horoscope forms the central core of a contemporary western astrologer's consultation for a client. A horoscope contains planets in signs and houses and each planet has the potential to form a geometrical relationship with every other planet in a unique, non-repeating way. Claudius Ptolemy (ca.90–ca.168) defined the natal horoscope as one that was concerned with 'the destiny and disposition of every human' thus being reflective of life experiences:

When, therefore, a thorough knowledge of the motions of the stars, and of the Sun and Moon, shall have been acquired, and when the situations of the place, the time, and all the configurations actually existing at that place and time, shall also be duly known; and such knowledge be yet further improved by an acquaintance with the natures of the heavenly bodies—not of what they are composed, but of the effective influences they possess [...]—when all these qualifications for prescience may be possessed by any individual, there seems no obstacle to deprive him of the insight, offered at once by nature and his own judgement, into [...] prognostication concerning the destiny and disposition of every human being.¹

¹ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, ed. J. M. Ashmand (Mokelumne Hill, CA: Health Research, 1969), p. 6.

The dilemma for students when reading natal horoscopes is that they approach astrology thinking it is simply a matter of learning the parts—the algorithm of a planet in a sign and a house and its geometrical relationship with other planets—in order to give meaning to the whole. This is unavoidably reinforced initially by those who teach it, for in order to make sense of the whole, a student must first learn the parts. Indeed a perusal of the literature on how to extract meaning from a natal horoscope, from authors such as Derek and Julia Parker, Rob Hand, Alan Oken, and Sue Tompkins, shows that what these authors of astrology books write in order to teach students how to read an astrological chart touches mainly on a methodology which lists the components of the chart—the meanings of the planets, signs, houses, planets through the signs, planets in the houses, aspects, keywords, and so on. Informal discussions with these astrologers reinforces that they know that reading natal horoscopes is more than just reading the parts, yet they struggle to articulate in writing how to extract the meaning of the whole chart. As with acquiring skills such as the ability to throw a clay pot or to play a piece of music, reading a chart requires praxis to complete the learning, a deed not easily written down.

Peter R. Webster explored a similar issue in 1990 with regard to music teaching as opposed to music learning. Webster noted that much of the literature on music education focused on how one could teach music creatively, whereas he advocated shifting the emphasis to teaching creative thinking, considering how the mind works with musical material to produce creative results.² From his research he concluded that creative thinking 'is a dynamic mental process that alternates between divergent (imaginative) and convergent (factual) thinking, moving in stages over time. It is enabled by internal musical skills and outside conditions and results in a final musical product which is new for the creator.'³

This space of the 'new' appears to be one that is experienced by astrologers when reading charts. In talking with practicing astrologers, most agree that when they read a chart for a client at its best something happens in the

² Peter R. Webster, 'Creativity as Creative Thinking', *Music Educators Journal* 76, no. 9 (1990), p. 22.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

consultation space that is unutterable and inarticulate. Darby Costello, an author of astrological texts, astrology teacher and consultant who has been practicing and teaching astrology since the early 1980s, in an interview with me in July 2007, expressed her experience of reading charts as ‘The person hands me the key to their inner landscape and I go into their inner landscape with my particular eye and I say “look at this!”’

Some authors have endeavoured to define what occurs in the consultation space. Sue Tompkins writes that ‘it is the job of the astrologer to look at things from a wider perspective, perhaps from an inner, magical or soul perspective—rather as a priest, shaman or psychotherapist might.’⁴ Demetra George calls it ‘space for the presence of the transcendent.’⁵ Roy Willis and Patrick Curry describe it as an occurrence ‘in which the unknown [...] is invited to speak to the inquiry at hand.’⁶ Geoffrey Cornelius defines it as ‘entering into a dialogue with the divine.’⁷ Stephen Arroyo observes that ‘It’s important to keep focused on the purpose of the consultation when you’re with a client, to guide you through the innumerable combinations of symbols in every chart. Otherwise the chart might start doing a little dance in front of your eyes.’⁸ Liz Greene distinguishes how ‘Much of what we do for a client has nothing to do with the specific configurations we are looking at, but rather, with the fact that the chart, and ultimately God or the gods through the patterns of the chart, affirm the right of the person to be what he or she is.’⁹

⁴ Sue Tompkins, *A Contemporary Astrologer’s Handbook: An In-Depth Guide to Interpreting Your Horoscope* (London: Flare Publications, 2006), p. 10.

⁵ Demetra George, *Astrology and the Authentic Self* (Lake Worth, FL: Ibis Press, 2009), p. 251.

⁶ Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture: Pulling Down the Moon* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 62.

⁷ Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology: Origins in Divination* (London: Arkana Penguin Books, 1994), p. xix. See also, Willis and Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture*, p. 23.

⁸ Stephen Arroyo, *The Practice and Profession of Astrology: Rebuilding Our Lost Connections with the Cosmos* (Reno, NV: CRCS Publications, 1984), p. 21.

⁹ Juliet Sharman-Burke and Liz Greene, *The Astrologer, the Counsellor and the Priest* (London: Centre for Psychological Astrology Press, 1997), p. 177.

This paper, however, considers this indefinable space through a different syntax—the syntax of creativity. In 1955 G. A. Kelly in his work on personal construct psychology, defined two terms: ‘loose construing’ (primary process thinking or to think loosely) and ‘tight’ construing (or secondary-process thinking).¹⁰ He maintained that insight required the skilful alternation between both, thus forming what he called a creativity cycle. Kelly’s work on dreams informed his theory. Loose construing for Kelly meant not anticipating a result. In this space of looseness, new elements could enter the system, as in a dream where objects morph into other objects without loss of logic. In such a state judgements were delayed, and self-consciousness and self-censorship were diminished. People often described themselves in this space as having a changed sense of self, where there was a qualitative alteration to the sense of time and space and where a blurring between self-and-other and self-and-world occurred.

When considering the work of painters in 1963, Rudolph and Margaret Wittkower chronicled one of the hallmarks of the emancipated artist as ‘a need for introspection, and introspection necessitates pauses, often of considerable length. The skilled hand of the craftsman may be made to work at will, but the “gift of inspiration” cannot be forced.’¹¹ They termed this way of working ‘creative idleness’ and offered in evidence the observation of Matteo Bandello (1485–1561), a contemporary of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), who enjoyed the opportunity of observing the latter paint the *Last Supper*:

Leonardo had the habit—I have seen and observed him many a time—of going early in the morning and mounting the scaffold, since the *Last Supper* is rather high off the ground, and staying there without putting down his brush from dawn to dusk, forgetting to eat and drink, painting all the time. Then for two, three, or four days he would not touch it and yet he would stay considering, examining, and judging his own figures.¹²

¹⁰ G. A. Kelly, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (New York: Norton, 1955). I am indebted to Australian acupuncturist Ysha De Donna who directed me in my thinking on ‘loose construing’.

¹¹ Rudolf and Margaret Wittkower, *Born under Saturn. The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 59.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Leonardo himself divulged that 'great minds produce more when working less. For with their intellect they search for conceptions and form those perfect ideas which afterwards they merely express and portray with their hands.'¹³ One could argue that this is an artist's way of 'loose construing'.

In order to understand whether this is reflective of the experiences of astrologers reading natal horoscopes, through questionnaires and interviews I surveyed professional astrologers, astrologers who were attending conferences, those studying astrology within astrological schools, and those who were subscribers to an astrological magazine. My questions included the astrologer's preparation for reading a chart, their methodology of reading a chart, their phenomenology of reading a chart and the astrologer's outcomes, what they sought to achieve when they read a chart. To date I have received over 130 responses. This gave me a general understanding of the situation.

However, I was interested in observing, hearing, and watching these astrologers as they described their process of preparing and reading a horoscope for a client in the consulting room, the phenomenological experience of how they drew meaning from a horoscope. Using some of the themes from the questionnaires, between 2007–2010 I conducted twenty-three semi-structured interviews with astrologers who were all active within the community of western astrologers. The demographics covered the UK, the Netherlands, South Africa, Turkey and the US. All interviewees defined themselves as professional astrologers in some way, as astrological consultants, teachers of astrology, authors of astrological texts, translators of astrological texts, publishers of astrological texts, publishers of astrological software, entrepreneurs, and astrological business consultants. Of the twenty-three interviews, eight were male and fifteen were female, thus forming a one-third two-thirds divide. All but three of those interviewed were happy for me to use their names. Of the three who wished to remain anonymous, one did not want the interview used at all. The interviews were, on average, an hour in length.

All of the astrologers that I interviewed saw clients face-to-face, arranged consultations by telephone or engaged with clients by Skype. As they collated the paperwork for the

¹³ Ibid.

client and encountered the chart for the first time, these astrologers described a method predicated on technique. For example, 'I'll break down the elements and the modalities and I'll look for rulerships, things in their dignity, detriment, all of this. I think that my Faculty¹⁴ training taught me to be very systematic in that way'; or 'if I'm looking at relationships, so I have a list at the top that reminds me to look at certain things with the Lord of the 7th and Venus and the Lot of Marriage and that sort of thing. And it's just a list of items really'; or 'I look at the progressions. I look at the transits. I look at the planetary picture, the natal chart'; or 'I begin a session sometimes with an imbalance of elements or sometimes a planet which is very accentuated or sometimes I even begin with the Ascendant sign itself or a planet in the Ascendant sign'; and so on.¹⁵ However, as the astrologers prepared the work and looked more closely at the horoscope something else occurred.

Rob Hand, an author and translator of astrological texts, and consultant from the US who has been practicing, writing and teaching astrology since 1972, interviewed in April 2010, described his initial response to the chart: 'First of all I look to see if there's anything horrendous that leaps out and grabs you by the throat, like an angular T-Square or a major planet on an angle or something like that.'

This kinaesthetic response to the chart, where information is processed using feelings and physical bodily reactions, a term originally defined by Richard Bandler and John Grinder in their seminal work on Neuro-Linguistic Programming,¹⁶

¹⁴ The Faculty of Astrological Studies was founded in London in 1948 and offers training in astrological education.

¹⁵ See Glossary at the end of this paper for an explanation of astrological terms.

¹⁶ John Grinder and Richard Bandler, *Frogs into Princes: Neuro Linguistic Programming* (Moab, UT: Real People Press, 1979). See also Dorothy Young Brockopp, 'What Is NLP?' *The American Journal of Nursing* 83, no. 7 (1983): pp. 1012–13. 'Kinaesthetic' is defined by Brockopp as one of 'the three modalities that are most often used in this culture to access and process information ... [thus] the kinesthetic person favors messages that reflect feelings or physical action'. See also Diane G. Arnold and Barbara Swaby, 'Neurolinguistic Applications for the Remediation of Reading Problems', *The Reading Teacher* 37, no. 9 (1984): p. 832. Arnold and Swaby applied this term to language. See also Sherrie Barr and Philip Lewin, 'Learning Movement: Integrating Kinaesthetic Sense with Cognitive Skills', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 28, no. 1 (1994):

was echoed by Linea Van Horn, an astrology teacher from the US and professional, full time astrologer since 1998, interviewed in March 2010, who asserted:

I don't get images, I do not hear anything, and it's tempting to say 'This is all mental' but of course it isn't. [...] There is a viscerality about it that just gets down below the deck and that's a crucial part... it's not a neck up interaction. (*laughs*) I mean, I see the patterns coming off the chart. I don't hear anything.

Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum, an author and translator of astrological texts and consultant from the US who, when interviewed in February 2010, also responded to the chart kinaesthetically: 'It's—it's like 'Hah!!' You sit there and—you see whatever it is you see and somehow I don't know whether it's popping out at you or grabbing you but it's something like that.'

Another style of approach to the chart came from Christeen Skinner, a financial astrologer and consultant from the UK who has been practicing, teaching, and writing about astrology since 1981, whom I interviewed in April 2010. Christeen was trained as a musician, played professionally in orchestras and taught music and thus the way she accessed the chart was through a visual-audio modality: 'I see a chart like an orchestra ...[and] I can see myself as a temporary conductor. I know what the transits are, so how is it playing now? Is it going through its classical movement? Is the person doing scales? Where are they?'

Babs Kirby, an author of astrological texts, astrology teacher, and psychotherapist from the UK who has been practicing, writing and teaching astrology since 1985, interviewed in April 2010, experienced a kinaesthetic-emotional response to the initial encounter with the chart: 'I still hand-draw charts [...] and as I draw the chart, it drops into place. [...] When I see aspects and planets in particular signs and houses there's just a felt sense of what that essence will be about. I think it might be happening in my emotions as well'.

For Lindsay Radermacher, an author of astrological texts, astrology teacher and consultant who has been practicing,

p. 93. Barr and Lewin described the kinaesthetic sense in dance as 'a sense of the feel of different movements combined with different qualities'.

writing and teaching astrology since the 1980s, interviewed in April 2010, the initial encounter with the chart was an immensely tactile experience. She spoke of ‘the way that you can feel it (*holds arms in front of her with fingers splayed ‘feeling’ it*) filtering into yourself as you’re writing’. Even though Lindsay used a computer to print out charts and other astrologically-connected technical information, she adamantly maintained that she was ‘a hand and pen person. I just feel as you’re actually drawing and writing, and so on, something is going into you of that person as you write it. [...] Just by drawing Venus or Mercury or something like that.’ She added: ‘There was a sense of settling down to something that was very important, that was the beginning—... well the beginning of the relationship is the hearing of the voice on the end of the phone but it was something about the relationship starting’.

Karen Hamaker-Zondag, on the other hand, an author of astrological texts, astrology teacher, publisher of astrological texts, and Jungian specialist from The Netherlands who has been practicing astrology since 1975, interviewed in May 2010, maintained a purely visual response: ‘That is a difficult question because I look at a lot of things. [...] I look at the elements, I look at the crosses, I look at if there are Yods or unaspected planets or duets. [...] It’s so much you look at, there’s not one special thing I focus on’.

By comparison, Madalyn Hillis-Dineen, an astrological consultant since the 1980s and one of the world’s leading providers of astrological software from the US, interviewed in January 2010, liked to maintain distance and objectivity so that she wouldn’t be subjected to too much sensory input before the client arrived: ‘I interact with the screen. I don’t print out a whole lot of paper and I look at things [...] I don’t like to get too in-depth because I don’t want to do the reading before the reading’.

From this cross-section of responses, what appeared to be happening in this preparatory period was that the astrologers I interviewed were juggling components, gathering data technically and then waiting for a pattern to emerge rather than imposing a structure upon it, the very ‘loose construing’ that Kelly defined. In such a state where there was no expectation of results and conclusions were delayed, new elements of the horoscope became apparent. When they appeared, they did so suddenly and rapidly via a strong primary perceptual modality: audio, visual, or kinaesthetic.

Rob Hand, Linea Van Horn, Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum, Babs Kirby and Lindsay Radermacher variously described an initial kinaesthetic response, depicting the chart as an entity, parts of which could 'leap out and grab you by the throat'. Trained as a musician, Christeen Skinner saw and heard the chart as a musician would an orchestra and thus listened for the chart's musical signatures. Karen Hamaker-Zondag and Madalyn Hillis-Dineen maintained an observational, visual acknowledgment of the chart.

Once the consultation began, the pattern for these astrologers that I interviewed was to start every reading for a new client in the same way, often repeating the birth data given to them by the client, informing them of what the session would involve on a formal level, the shape and length it was to take, explaining a little about the concept of the horoscope, and outlining briefly the symbols of astrology. The astrologers that I interviewed described and recognized that this was the way they made a transition into reading the natal horoscope. This loosely-set format was what Daniel Budd would call 'ritual repetition',¹⁷ a secular ritual that provided structure and enabled the astrologers to step into the space of reading a chart.

However, some astrologers, such as Darby Costello, wrestled with how to coherently express what happened next in the consultation: 'Once I've got past the Sun the images just leap off the page. But they're not images, they're—... I don't know. I really don't know what happens. I just know that once there, the chart starts activating something that can be described.' Faye Cossar, a professional consulting business astrologer from New Zealand who has lived in Amsterdam for many years, whom I interviewed in April 2010, grappled with the phenomenological process in a similar way:

What I notice is it takes me a little while to get into the chart, and then I'm in a 'zone' and off I go. There's that alchemical process in the chart where you *know* you've got it. [...] You know that you're changing something in them in some way.

¹⁷ Daniel Budd, 'Been There, Done That: Virtual Vs. Ritual Repetition', *The Jung Page, Reflections on Psychology, Culture and Life* (2006), http://www.cgjungpage.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=782&Itemid=40.

And how you know that is—(pause)...I don't know. (laughs).
It's very difficult to describe.

Similarly Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum noted: 'It is definitely *not* intellectual. Even though you might have an intellectual foundation in your work, once you start to do a reading you have to let that go in fact'.

Others were able to identify the process on a visual level and likening reading the chart to reading a text. Rod Suskin, an astrology teacher, author of astrological texts, and consultant from South Africa, who has been practicing and teaching astrology for the last 20 years, interviewed in January 2010, made sense of it as 'The symbols of the planets in the wheel [...] will stand out as if they're printed in flashing colours [...] as if they become physical focal points, as if they were in a different colour [...] it's like looking at a piece of text.' Pam Ciampi, an astrology teacher and consultant from the USA who has been practicing and teaching astrology for the last 30 years, paralleled this viewpoint: 'Something will always step forward, absolutely. It might be an aspect, it might be a planet, and all of a sudden it just goes "whi-i-i-ing!" and I think, "O my god I have to really concentrate on that Mars" or whatever... It's very visual.'

Still others described the process as seeing themes, as did Linea Van Horn: 'You see themes emerging, complexes or themes, things that are tied together, things that say the same thing'; or seeing threads, as did Hakan Kirkoglou, an author of astrological texts, astrology teacher and consultant from Turkey, interviewed in January 2010: 'In the first few minutes in every consultation I try to define why they [the client] are with me. [...] And then I make a thread or when we begin to talk with the client the astrological chart itself unfolds and then I can go'.

Such descriptions are reflective of Webster's research on creative thinking, mentioned earlier in this paper, which allows for the interactive movement between divergent (imaginative) and convergent (factual) thinking to create the space for a new dynamic.

Benjamin Dykes, an author of astrological texts, translator of astrological texts, and consultant from the US who has been practicing, writing and teaching astrology since the late 1990s, interviewed in March 2010, described the transition moment—the moment when these astrologers noticed that they had established a transition into reading the natal

horoscope—as ‘a clarifying moment’ or ‘an ‘aha!’ moment’ predicated upon something the client said which put all his preparation work into context and directed him to look more fully at certain parts of the chart. ‘All of a sudden other techniques and things in the chart became relevant once I knew that that Venus was really of interest to her. And so it was a clarifying moment.’

Considering how artists think may provide evidence that is pertinent to understanding the process that these astrologers have been describing. In Amy Ione’s study in the year 2000, ‘An Inquiry into Paul Cézanne: The Role of the Artist in Studies of Perception and Consciousness’ she commented on Robert Solso’s experiments carried out using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).¹⁸ Solso conducted a study between a practicing artist and a novice in a full-body fMRI Notepad. Both were given faces to draw and then the scans were compared. Ione acknowledges that the test had problems. Firstly it was a case study of two and secondly the variation in brain activity from the novice may simply have reflected their individual way of processing facial information. Nevertheless the results showed that whilst the novice seemed to be copying the face, the artist was ‘seeing beyond’ them. Ione’s conclusion was that:

The ‘seeing’ process for everyone takes place in the visual cortex at the back of the brain, which receives nerve signals representing light captured in the retina. At the same time, increased blood flows are evidence of increased brain activity....thanks to photographs of scanned ‘slices’ of different brains, it is possible to see that, when drawing a face, non-artists in the experiment used only the back of the brain, while Mr Ocean [an artist] used mainly the frontal part of his brain....where you find emotion, previous faces, painting experience, intentions and so on...in essence, the control subjects were simply trying to copy what they saw. But [the artist] was creating an abstracted representation of each photograph. He was *thinking* the portraits.¹⁹

It can be argued that years of training taught these

¹⁸ Robert L. Solso, ‘Brain Activities in a Skilled Versus a Novice Artist: An Fmri Study’, *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (2001): pp. 31–34.

¹⁹ Amy Ione, ‘An Inquiry into Paul Cézanne: The Role of the Artist in Studies of Perception and Consciousness’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7, no. 8–9 (2000): pp. 70–71.

astrologers to 'think in charts' just as the artist thought 'in portraits'. Rob Hand called this 'a clear signal':

There are broadly speaking two kinds of charts. Charts that have a really clear signal and charts that do not. What I look for is to see if there is a clear signal. Is there any pattern being repeated? Is there any symbol that is so powerful that you have to deal with it in order to understand the chart?

In summary then, from the initial juggling of components, the gathering of data and waiting for a pattern to emerge of the preparation period, once the client was in the space with these astrologers another factor came into play. What had previously been free and unrestricted took on a clarity of shape and structure. The chart patterns became obvious. The astrologers I interviewed described a process based on technique and pattern-seeking that changed once the client was present. After an optimal moment of feedback from the client, what Ben Dykes calls 'a clarifying moment', the chart took on a sharpness, and by the clients' continual responses that the patterns they were seeing in the chart were meaningful to the client, the astrologer could move into tight construing.

It seems that once this bridge into reading the chart had been constructed, a further phenomenon based on focused attention entered the arena. In his seminal work, *The Psychology of Optimal Experience* written in 1990, psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's pioneering investigation into understanding happiness, creativity, and human fulfilment lead him to recognize that attention shapes the self and is in turn shaped by it:

Attention determines what will or will not appear in consciousness and...is required to make any other mental events—such as remembering, thinking, feeling and making decisions—happen...Attention is like energy in that without it no work can be done and in doing work it is dissipated. We create ourselves by how we invest this energy. Memories, thoughts, and feelings are all shaped by how we use it. And it is an energy under our control, to do with as we please; hence attention is our most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience.²⁰

²⁰ Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1990), p. 33.

Attention played a key role in Csíkszentmihályi's research on the phenomenology of enjoyment, and he defined enjoyment as containing one or more of the following components: Whatever the task at hand, it contained clear goals. This was in contrast to the routines of everyday life where conflicting demands on a person's time, questioning the necessity of one's actions, and critically evaluating the reasons for carrying them out had a tendency make any one purpose diffuse. For the astrologers that I interviewed the goal was the consultation session.

The task provided immediate feedback. Garry Phillipson, an author of astrological texts and a consulting astrologer, interviewed in September 2007, described it this way:

One thing I often notice is that, when you get into territory that really registers with the person, something arises which the Buddhists call *pīti*—'pleasurable interest', where you feel a little bit thrilled, that something is afoot. You're hooked in to what's happening and just want to see where it's going. It usually goes along with gooseflesh, hairs standing up on the back of your neck, a tingly feeling. [...] You may have said things that are accurate but they don't seem to have caught the imagination of the person. Then all of a sudden—zing! It's happening and you have this sense that, whether by design or not you've now hit the mother lode. You're now onto something that needs to be talked about.

There was a balance between challenges and skills; the person felt that their abilities were matched to the opportunities of the task. Faye Cossar expressed it this way: 'I try not to do much preparation at length. I usually listen and then find it in the chart and then see what really the consultation's about. I'm much freer with that now I've got more experience [...] I would have been terrified to do that in the beginning. (*laughs*)'.

By concentrating on the task at hand the person was able to navigate between the clarity of goals and constant feedback. Christeen Skinner observed: 'I love watching the reaction. You can really see somebody just flower, it's just fabulous. It's the best job in the world. Who would want to do anything else?'

There was intense concentration on the present, no fear of failure, self-consciousness disappeared, and what remained was clarity of purpose. Sue Tompkins, an author of astrological texts, astrology teacher and consultant from the

UK, interviewed in April 2010 observed: 'I'm not even concentrating but I have certainly forgotten myself. I don't exist. I'm there with this person'.

There was also a feeling that at least temporarily, the person had become part of a larger entity. Madalyn Hillis-Dineen described this feeling thus: 'I feel *so* connected and as if I *do* understand [...] I've come out of my—like having to struggle for the words like I am with you right now and I go into another zone where it all just moves so freely and comfortably and easily.' She went on to note: 'It's like a moment of grace. Spiritual people talk about that moment of grace, or feeling like one with everything. You feel one with the client but at the same token you have to have those boundaries [...] and you're feeling very much like everything is flowing'.

Paradoxically through self-forgetfulness, the sense of self emerged stronger after the experience was over. Jack Fertig, an astrology teacher, an author of astrological texts, and consultant from the US, who has been practicing and teaching astrology since 1977, interviewed in March 2010, expressed it this way:

I feel enlivened and tired. Have you ever performed on stage? It's that kind of feeling after a show where you feel like energized and exhausted all at once. [...] It's a real good exhausted. Some are better than others, of course, but sometimes I just find myself going, 'Wow! (*breathes out*) That was something! That was really exciting. That was fun. That was—... You know sometimes it's like sky-diving, sometimes it's like giving a speech, sometimes it's like the opening soliloquy of the second act of the *Bacchae*... You come out of the space and come back to the real world feeling exhausted but happy and productive, like, 'Yeah, I've done a good thing here!'

The sense of the duration of time was altered. Clock time no longer marked equal lengths of experienced time, as exemplified by this comment from Karen Hamaker-Zondag: 'You see what time it is but sometimes you don't realize it, that you are so in that whole thing ... that there is something in me that watches the time but it doesn't always come through.' When asked how time passed for her, Darby Costello answered: 'Beautifully. The most beautiful place. No matter how frightened or tormented I am, once I'm there there's nothing else except there. It's another time, it's completely central. [...] Then] I get aware of time again. No

matter how fascinating [the client].’ When I questioned Babs Kirby how she experienced time she responded: ‘(*Long pause*)....Yes, I suppose time actually goes very quickly and yet it feels a long time all at the same time because it feels like a huge amount of intimacy and intensity has happened in a really actually short amount of time that’s felt a very long time’.

The combination of all these elements caused a deep sense of enjoyment so rewarding that a person would expend a great deal of energy simply to feel like this. Lindsay Radermacher interpreted that moment this way: ‘It’s a gestalt. It speaks as a whole. [...] you’ve got clues, ideas you might have and how all that little dance works and then something is said and it changes and you *know*—(*small laugh, pauses*)....I know it’s something mysterious, I know it’s something—(*pause*)...alive.’ This sense of aliveness was echoed by Babs Kirby who also worked as a psychotherapist and who compared seeing psychotherapy clients with seeing astrology clients. With the former there was ‘a shock process, absorption goes on where I get myself into who they are in some way, and that’s happening in a very concentrated way with an astrology client and you’ve only got the one chance’. She noted that this process could happen incredibly quickly or, at times, not at all, but that when it did happen it felt ‘alive’.

Csikszentmihályi named this state of heightened focus and immersion ‘flow’, a term coined during his 1975 research interviews when people described their experiences using the metaphor of a water current carrying them along. Csikszentmihályi’s use of flow or becoming absorbed in an activity was thus unrelated to the older phrase, ‘go with the flow’. Indeed flow as defined by Csikszentmihályi helped to integrate the self because in that state of deep concentration consciousness was unusually well ordered. Thoughts, intentions, feelings, and all the senses were focused on the same goal and the experience was one of harmony. Rob Hand expressed it this way:

When I lecture I’m a different person and in a different way I am also a different person when I do readings. There is actually a shift of consciousness. That’s one of the reasons why there’s no exhaustion because you’re actually operating at a different level than you operate under normal conditions. I have given a number of lectures in which I’ve said things I didn’t know I knew. But I’m not channelling.

It's just that under the intensity of the experience I see more clearly. [...] the intensity of situation causes the mind to function differently.

When the flow episode was over, the participants described the way they felt as more 'together' than before, not only internally but also with respect to other people and to the world in general. Linea Van Horn referred to it in this fashion:

Something has happened that's good and rich. [...] When you have one of these readings where it's really... you meet and you—...it's—it's—it's some alchemical thing that I can't even describe, and when that happens, everybody feels better for it, everybody is enriched and enlivened by it and nobody is drained or exhausted by it.

Moreover, although the flow experience appeared to be effortless, it was far from being so. Csíkszentmihályi put it this way:

It often requires strenuous physical exertion, or highly disciplined mental activity [such as the capacity to manipulate symbolic information.] It does not happen without the application of skilled performance. Any lapse in concentration will erase it. And yet while it lasts consciousness works smoothly, action follows action seamlessly.²¹

As Darby Costello put it: 'Preparation is quite fast and on the surface very casual but inside very, very focused'.

The key element for Csíkszentmihályi was that the activity was an end to itself. Even if initially undertaken for other reasons, such as a business practice, as the activity consumed them it became intrinsically rewarding in and of itself. The question 'Do you like being in that space?' was most often met with a 'yes'. Here it is described by Evelyn Roberts, an astrological entrepreneur living in the UK and the US who has been practicing astrology since the early 1990s, interviewed in March 2010: 'It's a space that doesn't exist anywhere else [...] but when I go into the space of doing a reading it's like something else takes over and [...] it's a very joyful place for me'.

²¹ Ibid., p. 54.

Csikszentmihályi defines such an experience as the *autotelic* experience, derived from two Greek words *auto* meaning self and *telos* meaning goal. When the experience is autotelic the person pays attention to the activity for its own sake, not its consequences. He points out that most enjoyable activities are not natural. They demand an effort that one is initially reluctant to make. However, once the interaction provides feedback to the person's skills, it becomes intrinsically rewarding. When an experience is intrinsically rewarding, life is justified in the present. The flow experience has the potential to make life more rich, intense and meaningful and increase the strength and complexity of the self.

In conclusion, then, reading a chart is more than reading each planetary algorithm as a reductionist exercise. It consists of seeing what the astrologers believe are the alternate possibilities contained within the horoscope. To allow such possibilities to take a more concrete form in a consultation also requires the input of the client and their life experiences. In this way the astrologer assesses for the client how the client is articulating the planetary symbols and the connections they make in the horoscope. The astrologer seeks to understand how the person has made use of the myriad possibilities, so the client's context is important.

However, the process begins before the client arrives. In preparing for a client, drawing up and collating the relevant documents, the astrologers that I interviewed appeared to move into the process of loose construing, gathering data and seeing patterns in ways that allowed them to remain open to the possibilities of the chart. Once the session with the client began, they engaged in a repetition of data, a secular ritual that provided structure and enabled the astrologers to step into the space of reading a chart. Within a relatively short period of time a moment of feedback from the client occurred that changed the phenomenological nature of the consultation. The astrologers then engaged in a pattern-seeking experience which had clear rules and guidelines, required concentration, gained immediate feedback, allowed the self to be put to one side and placed them into a space where time was measured differently. This process offered a sense of self-growth by reflection and, mostly, a feeling of tremendous enjoyment at the end as they emerged from the process. It became an autotelic experience,

a sense of flow that made life more rich, intense and meaningful.

There is a great deal more that this research has to reveal but it is clear from these interviews that the phenomenology of how contemporary western astrologers extract meaning from a horoscope is reflective of the creative concepts of loose construing connected with tight construing, followed by flow, forming an autotelic experience. Other astrologers define this experience as mysterious or divine. Yet in the same way as an artist reaches for a special space within which creativity can occur, so this paper argues that astrology can also be considered a creative act, suggesting that reading a natal horoscope is a secular creative endeavour.

GLOSSARY

Ascendant — the point where the ecliptic, the apparent path of the sun through the sky, cuts the plane of the horizon in the east.

Detriment — A planet in detriment is a planet that is opposite its place of rulership. It suggest that the area of life governed by a planet in this place in the horoscope will be unable to fulfil its function in an establishment manner.

Dignity — A method of understanding a planet's ability to fulfil or otherwise the promise it offers in a natal horoscope.

Elements — The twelve signs can be divided into four groups of three signs each by the element they represent: Fire, Earth, Air and Water. Signs in the same element are believed to share basic psychological and temperamental characteristics.

Houses — Formed by dividing up the ecliptic into twelve segments.

Lord of the 7th — Also known as the planet that rules the 7th house. The 7th house is that one-twelfth sector of the local sky just above the western horizon occupied by planets in the two hours just before they set.

- Lot of Marriage — A lot is formed by projecting the arc between two points from a third point. The Lot of Marriage is one of the lots that pertain to male-female relationships.
- Progressions — Also called secondary progressions, where the movement of the planets over the course of a day represents the movement of the progressed planets over the course of a year.
- Signs — The zodiac is divided up into twelve equal segments or divisions called zodiac signs.
- T-Square — A geometrical relationship between planets in a chart where two planets are separated by 180 degrees and a third planet sits at a point that is 90 degrees from both of them.
- Transits — A chart receives a transit when a planet, in the course of its orbit, reaches a point in the zodiac which was previously occupied by, or geometrically connected to, a point at the time of birth.

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