

**The Astrological “I”:**  
**Putting the Self Back in Astrology**

*by April Elliott Kent*

*I walk into my local metaphysical bookstore. A string of bells tied to the door tinkles, and I'm hit by a cloud of patchouli. Making my way past the incense burners, small cedar boxes, Tarot decks, and candles, I come to the astrology section — one of the best collections in town. Here are real astrology books, not just the rows of annual guides for each zodiac sign that make up the astrology section of the chain bookstores.*

*For a moment, I feel the excitement, the sense of boundless possibilities that I used to feel as a teenager sitting cross-legged in the metaphysical aisle of my local bookstore and devouring books by Linda Goodman, John Townley, Robert Hand, Grant Lewi. I was new to astrology then, and there was so much to learn, and in those dark, pre-Internet days, there were fewer resources for a suburban kid like me who wanted to learn astrology. Books were pretty much all there was, and I couldn't get enough of them.*

*But back in the present, I browse the shelves with the eye of a practiced astrologer, and my excitement ebbs. Same old titles; I own a great many of them. I don't need another book about Mercury retrograde, relationships, or solar returns. Wait, here's something new ... I pick it up, leaf through it — but it's only the same old keywords in a new cover, and I know before I turn each page exactly what I'll find. I return the book to the shelf. I browse halfheartedly for another ten minutes or so before drifting away, empty-handed, to another part of the store.*

Astrology is a complicated subject and a rich language, and it took me years to exhaust my local bookstore's collection of astrology books. Eventually, though (a few years into my professional practice), I found that what I needed from astrology books had changed. As I prepared for readings, struggling to locate the real-life person beneath the blizzard of charts and symbols blanketing my desk, I increasingly turned to my bookshelf — not seeking technical guidance, but inspiration.

Then, I discovered *The Mountain Astrologer* and Dana Gerhardt's articles and, soon after, the books of Steven Forrest. These writers inspired and challenged me to help my clients see The Big Picture, to craft astrological narratives that might encourage them to see their lives in a new light. I loved the emotionally rich, even poetic approaches of these astrologers and was hungry for more, but I found little of the same at my local bookstore.

Finally, about five years ago, I simply stopped buying astrology books. I would stand in the astrology aisle, gazing forlornly at the same old titles, and thumb through a new one, only to find it wanted to take me someplace I didn't really care to go: the 13th century, lost Mayan civilizations, India. And I'd leave the store empty-handed and disappointed.

That is where I still am today, actually. I find most astrology writing, in books, in magazines, and on the Web, pretty disappointing. I browse the shelves of my local metaphysical bookstore, or crack open my latest issue of *TMA*, and there is hardly anything I want to read. There *should* be, damn it: I buy books by the bushel, and I love astrology! If there are no astrology books that someone like me is interested in buying, you can bet that's part of the reason most astrology books never make it past a first printing.

### **Disembodied Heads and Typing Hands**

Part of the problem is that astrology books don't resemble my life or the lives of anyone I know. I'm a professional astrologer, but I have a whole other "civilian" life, too. I know a lot of other astrologers, and they're smart, funny, and have plenty to talk about besides their latest Saturn transit. But when was the last time you read a genuinely funny astrology book or article? Other than Michael Lutin, Carolyn Casey, and Kim Rogers-Gallagher, few astrologers seem inclined to crack a smile in print — and yet I get hilarious e-mails from fellow astrologers. The astrologers I know have sex lives — actual sex lives! — and relationships, and kids, pets, houses, friends, and hobbies. They're interesting people. And astrology happens to them every day in the course of their lives.

Reading the average astrology book or article, you would imagine that the writer was no more than a disembodied head and a pair of typing hands, processing the cosmos into twelve neat little chapters. You would think that astrology is completely separate from everyday life, instead of a living, breathing description of it. "Venus in the third house means you will fall in love with your car," the cookbook oracle intones, and who are we to argue? Then, transiting Venus does enter your 3rd house, and your car excites no particular warmth in you — but maybe you help your neighbor paint her house. I'd like to hear that story (and, needless to say, the one about your car) and all the sensuous Venus details. What did you talk about while you painted the house? How did it feel, working side by side? How did the paint smell? What color did you use? Did the eaves have termite damage? Venus is opposing Pluto, you know, so perhaps that will show up as voracious insects — or does it? Please ... tell me *your* experience of Venus in the 3rd house, and don't leave anything out!

The largest audience for astrology books *is* probably people who are just learning the language. I guess they need to learn their alphabet and keywords, just like I did, and there's no harm in periodically repackaging that stuff for a new audience. Of course, there's plenty of room on the shelves for scholarly books about the more technical aspects of astrology (although I hope astrology can sidestep a fatal flaw of most scholarly writing: Its language seems designed to exclude regular people from the conversation). But there should be just a little bit of room for people like me and my astrologer friends who don't need another book about synastry — for the legions of *TMA* readers who turn straight to Dana Gerhardt's column the minute the latest issue arrives in their mailbox, because she dares to use first-person pronouns and talk about astrology in the context of her own

life, a life we recognize because it's like our own. We want astrology books, too — books that help us to explore our real lives and experiences, astrologically.

Besides, astrology writing that is created in an echo chamber of hypotheses and tradition may be damaging to astrology itself. How can we re-imagine astrology, keep it fresh, and ensure its ongoing relevance, without including our real-life observations? When we maintain an artificial separation between astrology and our daily lives, astrology suffers. And when we astrologers use astrological knowledge to maintain a separation between us and our readers, our writing suffers — and so, quite possibly, does our astrological research.

To produce the kinds of meaningful texts that will help us to better understand astrology, we must engage in meaningful research. One kind of research takes us, along with Robert Hand or Project Hindsight, into the astrology of antiquity. There, we are invited to uncover lost treasures of our astrological past. Another kind of research takes us into numbers and statistics, the realm of the famous Gauquelins. But what about those of us who slept through high school math, failed our lower-division college history class (and were doomed to repeat it), and deftly sidestepped statistics courses?

Interviews with clients constitute a viable research alternative, but the sad truth is that few practicing astrologers see very many clients in a week, a month, a year, or even a career. The time we spend with our clients is so short — normally, just an hour or two — and we are expected to do most of the talking. There simply isn't enough time to go into much depth, especially about ephemera like minor, fleeting aspects.

So, I propose that we use something readily at hand to do astrological research: our own lives.

### **Putting the Astrologer Back in Astrology**

My life as an astrology writer began soon after I went into practice, when I began mailing a quarterly newsletter to my client list. My initial motive was to build my business by reminding my clients, on a regular basis, that I existed. Then, to fill space, I began to include a short, chatty, seasonal essay in each newsletter, using my own life to demonstrate various astrological principles. I did this *not* because I thought my life was particularly interesting, mind you, but because it's the life I know best.

I published the newsletter for seven years before launching my Web site, Big Sky Astrology, in 1999. Web publishing was a revelation: It's cheap, free from editorial constraints, and invites immediate feedback from readers. I began to publish regular essays drawn heavily from my own life experiences — putting the astrologer back in astrology — and the result is a Web site that's essentially an online journal with astrological terminology.

I have found, when writing regularly and candidly about my day-to-day life and applying astrological principles to what I experience “in the field,” that astrology has become much more alive for me and for my readers. Visitors to my Web site tell me, “I’ve learned more astrology from reading your stories of adopting your cats and renovating your house than from any astrology book.” Certainly, I know *I’ve* learned more about astrology from telling these stories and from learning to see my everyday life with an astrological eye.

This approach is not for everybody, as a recent e-mail from a disappointed reader attests: “I’m tired of hearing about your life. I want more generic information I can apply to my own chart.” I pointed out to her that such information abounds, both in print and on the Web. In fact, that’s about all that *is* out there. But her comment, while vaguely insulting, was interesting, because the truth is that generic, formulaic astrological information is no more likely to apply to her chart — or her life — than the personal experiences I write about. After all, isn’t one of the chief complaints against astrology that it is too general to apply to unique individuals? At best, generic, cookbook-style interpretations provide a framework for stimulating creative interpretation of individual chart factors. But honest, astrologically sound, and well-written accounts of an astrologer’s unique experiences with astrology can provide the same kind of stimulus — and are fun to read as well.

For example, I recently had transiting Mars square my natal Mercury. Not a big-deal aspect that you’d give a lot of thought, since it only lasts for a couple of days, but it does mean something. A random Google search for “Mars square Mercury” pulled up this entry from astrologer Bob Marks’s Web site: [1]

*With the stressful aspects (conjunction, square, and opposition) watch your mouth! This is a good combination if you have to have an important debate and present your point of view forcefully. The problem is that Mars doesn't care if the discussion is important or not. You could easily find yourself getting involved in minor disputes that quickly escalate into major conflicts.*

And here’s an entry from my weblog, written the day of my Mars–Mercury square:

*Mars entered Scorpio last week and is currently squaring my natal Mercury ... and of course, I started the day by charging into an argument on a message board, one where I almost never post comments. Now I feel pissed off and misunderstood. Ugh ... when will I learn to check the transits before I start popping off?*

Bob Marks’s delineation was right on the money, but there are also good reasons for writing “field observations” about my own Mars–Mercury experience. Beyond an anecdotal validation of astrological theory, my account gives a true-life example of the transit in action. My little anecdote invites the reader to imagine what this transit would look like in her own life. The imagination is now primed, ready to recognize the living language of astrology and to help our clients imagine possible Mars–Mercury land mines of their own.

## **Ethnography: Revitalizing Astrological Writing**

My goal as an astrology writer was, from the beginning, simply to write the kind of articles that I'd like to read. Then, in my final semester as a Communication major, I had the good fortune to study ethnography, and I gained a new perspective on my astrology writing. *Ethnography* is a qualitative research technique often used in anthropology and gaining increasing popularity in communication research. Literally translated as the writing (*-graphy*) of culture (*ethno-*), ethnography is nothing more complicated than immersing yourself in the day-to-day life of a culture and writing your impressions about it.

Auto-ethnographers, like Carolyn Ellis of the University of South Florida, take the process one step further, including themselves (*auto-*) and their reactions in their writing. The auto-ethnographer doesn't simply observe a culture but participates fully in it, and her writing reflects not only what she sees, but also her thoughts and feelings about what she sees. While many ethnographers (and astrologers) feel they can better capture reality by maintaining a distance from their subjects, auto-ethnographers feel they can only capture reality by eliminating that distance. I realized immediately that the way I had been writing about astrology all along was auto-ethnographic — and that this form of writing could actually be used as a tool for research.

### **How It Works**

In a nutshell, ethnography is a method of social inquiry that describes what happens in a given environment. It relies on a mixture of close-up observation of that environment, writing rich descriptions of it, and reflecting on your own contribution to that environment. For example, the graduate teaching assistant for my ethnography class wrote her thesis about revisiting the clinic where she had an abortion and interacting with the protesters who were gathered there. Her unique perspective brought something personal and emotionally riveting to the subject matter that couldn't be captured in statistics about abortion.

According to Carolyn Ellis, one of the most valuable contributions of ethnography as a research technique is that it gives voice to groups and subjects (like astrology) that tend to be left out of academic inquiry. [2] In academe, as in mainstream society, those in the minority — racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians, the economically underprivileged — have had to fight to be heard. This is not necessarily a function of active suppression as much as inherent bias: People tend to write about what they know, and academics (until relatively recently) tended to be privileged white males. Tools like ethnography provide groups outside the mainstream with a legitimate avenue to talk honestly about their experiences. This promotes understanding, helps to prevent fear born of ignorance, and points out where there is room for social or political change.

I had a first-hand taste of this phenomenon when I returned to college at age 37. As a nontraditional university undergraduate, I found I was a mysterious oddity to faculty, administration, and especially my younger classmates. Most of the time, I felt completely invisible on campus and didn't know where to turn for help with my particular challenges. I wrote my ethnography term paper about my experiences, in an effort to "give voice" to other nontraditional students.

Likewise, as astrologers, we are mysterious oddities to the mainstream and often isolated from one another. Writing ethnographically can help us to share our astrological experiences and observations in a compelling way and help those in the culture at large better understand our work.

### **The Power of Stories**

In ethnography, as in astrology, we make close examinations of individual stories; from these stories, we offer an interpretation of how the world works, emotionally, and what it *means* to be human.

Auto-ethnographic writing often takes a narrative form, because stories (narratives) are how we make sense of our world. Astrology can be interpreted as one long string of stories: the story of what happens when Saturn returns to its natal placement, the story of your Pluto transit, the story of a solar return, and what happened in your chart when you met the love of your life. The essays on my Web site that elicit the greatest amount and intensity of feedback are invariably those that tell a very personal story as honestly as possible. These stories seem to engage the reader in a way that many modern astrology texts do not.

Now, there is a significant difference between telling a story with astrology and simply doing that annoying thing that astrologers do, whenever we happen to meet: rattle off a list of our current astrological "symptoms" with a knowing and world-weary look, at which point our conversational hostage responds with a groan of sympathy and a competing list of his or her tales of planetary woe. To tell an effective story involves not only detail and introspection but also context. The ability to find the universal element in your individual story — the *ethno-* or shared culture — makes a tale emotionally involving for readers, an act of communication instead of mere self-indulgence.

### **Toward an Ethnographic Astrology**

The key to approaching astrology with an ethnographic eye (as I see it) rests on a few things:

- Ethnographic astrology writing must be grounded in solid astrological tradition. A mastery of astrological symbols, language, and precepts must be the starting point for inquiry.
- As much as possible, we must write in detail and with scrupulous honesty about what happens and how it feels. This sounds easy, but it is surprisingly difficult and takes real courage. As astrologers, we are accustomed to assuming a mantle of otherworldliness, of being above earthly concerns and

feelings — of playing the guru. It's not easy to surrender that role and present yourself as a regular person! But if you're honest, you can't fail to be interesting.

- Finally, we must fall in love with astrology all over again and marvel at its appearance in the smallest and most trivial moments. Most of our daily lives are made up of moments like these — fleeting and irritating Mars transits, rather than interminable and ponderous Pluto transits.

We can never present an interpretation of astrology that will be completely meaningful for all of the people all of the time. The ancients couldn't do it; neither can Vedic astrologers. But by writing about our own experiences as honestly and richly as possible, we can at least attempt to present an accurate account of one person's astrological experience. Perhaps it's just my Leo Sun paddling furiously against the Aquarian current of quantitative, scientific thought, but I think there is real value in these individual accounts. Each of us is a unique prism that, when it catches the astrological light just so, sends out sparks of brilliance.

As astrologers, we are in a unique position to observe life with unparalleled perspective. By engaging in an ethnographic approach to astrology, we are invited to *participate* in the astrological journey with our readers and clients instead of simply observing it, to embrace our own humanity instead of standing apart as omniscient interpreters of texts. Perhaps the greatest contribution we can make to astrology is simply to write about it — honestly, with enthusiasm, and from our individual experiences.

Author's Note: The title of this article is shamelessly adapted from Carolyn Ellis's book, *The Ethnographic I*.

## References

1. Bob Marks, "Mars Aspects. Part 1 – Lesson 5.6," retrieved from Web site on December 24, 2004: <http://www.bobmarksastrologer.com/aspectsmars.htm>
2. Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, AltaMira Press, 2004, p. 30.

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