

## Why I Became an Astrologer, by Rob Brezny

<http://www.freewillastrology.com/writings/started.html>

### How I Got Started in the Horoscope-Writing Business

The place: the restroom of a Roy Rogers restaurant in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The moment: Once upon a time. The main character: a tall, skinny, young white guy with shoulder-length hair.

The guy was me, Rob Brezny. Using my fingers as a comb, I was doing my best to marshal my hair into a more beautiful mess than its current bedraggled state. My girlfriend Babushka was supposed to meet me at the salad bar in a few minutes, and I wanted to resemble an attractive wild man, not a scruffy one.

Nearing completion in my primitive attempts at cosmetic improvement, I happened to glance at the wall below the towel dispenser. There I spied a tantalizing mess of graffiti. "I got Santa Cruzified and Californicated," it read, "and it felt like paradise."

A jolt of kundalini zipped through me. I was used to surfing waves of synchronicity; collecting meaningful coincidences was my hobby. But this scrawl on the wall was a freaky tidal wave of synchronicity. Babushka was coming to Roy Rogers today in order to discuss with me the prospect of jumping on a Greyhound bus together sometime in the next couple of weeks and heading out to the place we'd heard was a bohemian utopia: Santa Cruz, California.

I strained to see some smaller print beneath the message on the wall. "You know you'll never become the artist you were meant to be," it warned, "until you come live in Santa Cruz."

Goose bumps rose on my arms. Shivers raced up and down the back of my neck. Whatever strange angel had scrawled those words seemed to have lifted them directly from the back of my subconscious mind. The idea expressed there matched my hope and fear precisely. It had become increasingly clear to me that my aspirations to be a poet and musician with an inspirational effect on my community were

doomed to chronic frustration as long as I resided in the Deep South, even in a university town like Chapel Hill. Here I would never be any more than a weirdo, a cross between a village idiot and a marginally entertaining monstrosity.

In that moment, my fate gelled.

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By the first day of spring, Babushka and I had arrived in Santa Cruz with \$90 in our pockets. We were gleefully homeless, sleeping in the park by day and spending the hours from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. hanging out in all-night restaurants. When we weren't striking up conversations with the steady stream of colorful crazy folks, I dreamed and schemed about how I would build my new artistic career here in the promised land.

Within a few months I not only had a tiny studio apartment in a basement beneath a garage adjoining an old woman's house. I was well on my way to harvesting the rewards I'd journeyed to Santa Cruz to claim.

Barely three weeks after I stumbled off the cross-country Greyhound bus, I performed at the Good Fruit Company cafe. My songs "Blasphemy Blues" and "Reptile Rodeo Man," along with my long rant-poem "Microwave Beehive Star," impressed a reviewer for a local entertainment rag, who described my contribution as a "mouth-watering, id-tickling, ass-kicking communiqué from the collective unconscious itself."

With a burst of pent-up energy, I did a rash of poetry readings and performance art spectacles in a variety of cafes, as well as many street shows. I photocopied and sold 212 copies of my first homemade chapbook, *Crazy Science*, and practiced the art of enlightened demagoguery in a semi-regular late-night show, "Babbling Ambiance," on local radio station KZSC.

Best of all, I cobbled together my first Santa Cruz band, Kamikaze Angel Slander. When we played our first gig at a friend's party, our set consisted of five songs I had written in North Carolina, covers of two David Bowie tunes, and four epics my band-mates and I had whipped up, including "The Prisoner Is in Control."

There was only one factor darkening my growing exhilaration: grubby poverty. None of the music or spectacles I was creating earned me more than the cash I plowed into making them happen. And I resented life's apparent insistence that I was supposed to take time out from my projects to draw a steady wage. My enrollment at the University of California at Santa Cruz helped. For a few sporadic quarters I was able to garner government loans and grants in return for attending once-a-week poetry and creative writing classes. Monthly allotments of food stamps also aided the cause.

Despite assistance from the welfare state, though, I was still compelled to degrade myself with actual part-time jobs. Among my humiliations were stints washing dishes at restaurants and posing as a model for artists and putting in time as a farm laborer in apple orchards. Even then I barely made my rent, let alone trying to finance the accessories that up-and-coming rock stars need, like a car and good musical equipment.

I lived in a moldy basement with nothing but a temperamental space heater to warm my fingers as I composed rebellious anthems on my dinky electric piano with three broken keys. On occasions, I was forced to resort to a trick I'd learned from a homeless friend, which was to hang out in cafeteria-style restaurants and scavenge the food that diners left behind. My wardrobe? Both my street clothes and stage costumes were garnered entirely from a warehouse called the Bargain Barn, which charged a reasonable one dollar per five pounds of recycled garments.

Given my hardship, I was very receptive when I chanced across an opportunity to make money through creative writing.

My rickety bike had recently been stolen. In my search for a used replacement, I turned to the classified ads of the Good Times, Santa Cruz's largest weekly newspaper. As I scanned the "Misc for Sale" section, my eye tripped across an intriguing invitation one column over.

"Good Times is looking for an astrology columnist. Submit sample column for the week of January 26. Address to Editor, GT, 1100 Pacific Avenue, Santa Cruz 95060."

I was at first confused. Good Times already had an astrology column, didn't it? I leafed through the paper to find it, but it was gone. Had the author quit? Not that I'd be sorry to see him go. My impression

of his writing, from the few times I had read it, was that it covered the whole range between mawkish New Age clichés and unfunny silliness.

Of course I had always despised all astrology columns; his was actually more entertaining than most. Though I was a student of astrology, not a teacher, I had high standards about how the ancient art form should be used. And I considered newspaper horoscopes to be an abomination. Without exception, they were poorly written and dull. They encouraged people to be superstitious and made the dead-wrong implication that astrology preaches predetermination and annuls free will. It was bad enough that their blather fed gullible readers inane advice that pandered to the least interesting forms of egotism. Worst of all, they were based in only the most tenuous way on real astrological understanding.

Any reputable practitioner would have told you, for instance, that in order to assess the cosmic energies with authenticity, you'd have to meditate on the movements and relationships of all the heavenly bodies, not just the sun. But newspaper horoscopes based their ersatz "predictions" solely on the sun's position. They made the absurd proposition that the lives of millions of people who share any particular "sun sign" are all headed in the same direction.

In full awareness of all these truths, I struggled to drum up a rationalization for pursuing the gig. The prospect of actually being paid to write something—anything—was thrilling. Even more exciting was the fantasy of receiving a regular paycheck. This was a weekly column, not a one-shot deal.

Besides that, it couldn't possibly violate my integrity more than the other jobs I had already slaved away at.

"It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it," was my opening gambit in the campaign to convince myself that the pros of penning the astrology column outweighed the cons.

My next strategy was figuring out how I could write the column in ways that would not feel fraudulent.

That's when I hatched my plan to become a poet in disguise.

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Both in and out of academia, I had for some time been composing stuff that loosely qualified as poetry. From the declamatory rants I foisted on audiences between rock songs to the slightly more disciplined stanzas I produced for my creative writing classes, I worked hard at the craft and wanted it to become as necessary to me as food.

True, I couldn't help but notice that the culture at large regarded poetry as a stuffy irrelevancy; people I considered huge talents, like John Berryman, W.S. Merwyn, and Galway Kinnell, were not getting rich selling their lyrical creations.

To a degree, I sympathized with the hoi polloi's underwhelming appreciation of the art form I loved. The majority of poets were humorless academics who seemed to have studied at the feet of a single constipated celibate. It was shocking how little kundalini—how little entertainment—burst from the caste that I thought should be in charge of mining the frontiers of the imagination. I was perfectly willing for poetry to be demanding, complex, subtle, and even maddeningly mysterious. The whole point was to dynamite the ruts cut by ordinary waking consciousness, to sabotage cliché and common sense, to reinvent the language. But why did so much of this noble effort have to be uniformly listless, pretentious, and inaccessible?

And then there was my secret agenda. I was peeved that so few of "the antennae of the race" had enough courage to blow their own minds with psychedelics. How could you explode the consensual trance unless you poked your head over onto the other side of the veil now and then? Allen Ginsberg, at least, had the balls to go where shamans go. Berryman seemed to have accomplished the same feat with the help of alcohol.

As for myself, I had been drawn to and in contact with the other side of the veil long before resorting to psychedelic technology. I regularly remembered and treasured my dreams throughout childhood, and when I was 13 years old I also began to record them. This ongoing immersion in the realm of the dreamtime imbued me early on with the understanding that there were other realities besides the narrow little niche that most everyone habitually inhabited. My psychedelic experiments only confirmed and extended that certainty.

As I gained confidence in the suspicion that my formal education had concealed from me nine-tenths of reality, I tuned in to the paper trail documenting the existence of the missing part. It had been mapped by shamans and alchemists and magicians for millennia: So my readings of Jung and Campbell and Graves and Eliade revealed. Their work in turn magnetized me to the literature of Western occultism, whose rich material was written not by academics but by experimenters who actually traveled to the place in question.

The myriad reports were not in complete agreement, but many of their descriptions overlapped. The consensus was that the other side of the veil is not a single territory, but teems with a variety of realms, some relatively hellish and some heavenly. Its names are many: dreamtime, fourth dimension, underworld, astral plane, collective unconscious, afterdeath state, eternity, bardo, and Hades—to name a few.

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There was another issue on which all the explorers agreed: Events in those "invisible" realms are the root cause of everything that happens here. Shamans visit the spirit world to cure their sick patients because the origins of illness lie there. For Qabalists, the visible Earth is a tiny outcropping at the end of a long chain of creation that originates at a point that is both inconceivably far away and yet right here right now. Even modern psychotherapists believe in a materialistic version of the ancient idea: that how we behave today is shaped by events that happened in a distant time and place.

As I researched the testimonials about the treasure land, I registered the fact that dreams and drugs were not the only points of entry. Meditation could give access, as could specialized forms of drumming and chanting and singing and dancing. The tantric tradition taught that certain kinds of sexual communion can lead there. As does, of course, physical death.

I wanted to try all those other doors except the last one. Pot, hashish, and LSD were very good to me (never a single bad trip), but their revelations were too hard to hold onto. As I came down from a psychedelic high, I could barely translate the truths about the fourth dimension into a usable form back in normal waking awareness. At least in my work with dreams I had seen a steady growth of both my unconscious mind's ability to generate meaningful stories and my conscious mind's skill at interpreting them. But my progress was sketchy in the work of retrieving booty from the exotic places where drugs took me.

The problem was that unlike the other techniques on the list, psychedelics bypassed my willpower. Their chemical battering ram simply smashed through the doors of perception. No adroitness or craft was involved on my part. One of my meditation teachers referred to drug use, no matter how responsible, as "storming the kingdom of heaven through violence."

Gradually, then, I ended my relationship with the illegal magic. Instead I affirmed my desire to build mastery through hard work. Dream interpretation, meditation, and tantric exploration became the cornerstones of my practice. In time, I learned to slip into the suburbs of the mysterium via song and dance as well.

I must confess, though, that my plans did not immediately bear the fruit I hoped they would. Even my most ecstatic lucid dreams and illuminated meditations did not bring me to dwell on the other side of the veil with the same heart-melting vividness once provided by psychedelics. Even my deepest tantric lovemaking and music-induced trances failed to provide the same boost.

But then into my life came a consolation: the 19th-century artist and visionary William Blake. My encounter with his work alerted me to fact that there is yet another name for the fourth dimension—a name that also describes a common, everyday human faculty that most of us take for granted.

Here's the special message Blake seemed to have written just for me in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*:

This world of Imagination is the world of Eternity; it is the divine bosom into which we shall go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite and Eternal, whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation, is Finite and Temporal. There exists in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature. All Things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the divine body of the Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, the Human Imagination.

I exulted in this discovery. Blake became a secret weapon I could use in my covert struggle against the poets who refused to be antennae of the race, against the poets who regarded the visible world as the only one that deserved to have poetry written about it.

Now it's true that some of these poets, whom I called "materialists," inspired me. William Carlos Williams, for instance, taught me much about the art of capturing concrete beauty.

I loved this Williams poem:

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens

Williams was the best of the materialist poets. His work helped me hone my perceptions and employ more vigorous language. But my pal William Blake gave me the doctrinal foundation with which I could rebel against Williams and rise to a higher calling. Blake suggested that the worlds you dream up in your imagination might be more real than a red wheelbarrow.

Might be was the key qualifier. Even then, at an unripe age, I was cautious about the indiscriminate use of this liberating proposition. I had read the Russian occultists Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, and they had made me aware that the out-of-control imagination in service to the ego is the function by which most people lie to themselves constantly, thereby creating hell on earth. Obviously, this was not the kind of imagination Blake meant, and I vowed to keep that clear.

More real than a red wheelbarrow. Blake showed me there was another way to access the Fourth Dimension: working as a creative artist, striving to discipline and supercharge the engine of the imagination. That was an extremely pleasurable realization. I saw that my passion for playing with music and language and images might dovetail perfectly with my longing to hang around the Elysian Fields.

Furthermore, if it were true, as Blake and the shamans said, that every event on earth originates in the spirit world, then the skilled imaginer was potentially God's co-creator—not just describing conditions here below but creating them. I wanted to be like that. I wanted to fly away into the fourth dimension, reconnoiter the source of the messed-up conditions on the material plane, and give them a healer's tweak. Better yet, I fantasized myself being so at home and masterful in the dreamtime that I could rummage around there looking for attractive but embryonic archetypes to capture and bring down to earth for ripening.

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All these thoughts became fodder as I tried to imagine a way I could write an astrology column without violating my integrity. I wanted the gig badly. One way or another I was going to get it. But I would feel so much better about myself if I could refute my conscience's accusations of "Fraud! Panderer!" with highfalutin bullshit about William Blake and the shamanic tradition.

"More Real Than a Red Wheelbarrow." Why not call my "horoscope" column that? Why not do whatever my imagination wanted to do and disguise it all under the rubric of an astrological oracle? There was certainly no International Committee on Standards for Horoscope Columns that I would have to answer to. For that matter, as long as I shaped my horoscopes like love letters to my readers, it was unlikely they'd complain about the Blake-ian, shamanic stuff I'd wrap it in.

Before spying the help wanted ad in the Good Times, I'd hated astrology columns because I knew they had no basis in astrological data and could not possibly be an accurate interpretation of so many readers' lives at the same time. Driven by what had become an unstoppable intent, I now argued from a different angle. What happens to people, I told myself, tends to be what they believe will happen to them; the world runs on the fuel of self-fulfilling prophecies. Therefore, couldn't it be said that my oracles would be accurate by definition, since anyone who regarded them seriously would subconsciously head in the directions I named? As long as I diligently maintained an optimistic and uplifting tone, no one could fault me for manipulating people in such a way.

My initial column took me an agonizing 43 hours to compose. It had some good moments:

What you have at your command, Scorpio,

is a magic we'll discreetly not call black.  
Let's say, instead, that it's a vivid, flagrant  
grey. At your best you'll be a charming  
enfant terrible playing with boring  
equilibriums, a necessary troublemaker  
bringing a messy vigor to all the overly  
cautious game plans. If you can manage  
to inject some mercy into your bad-ass  
attitude, no one will get stung and everyone  
will be thoroughly entertained.

Still, the first offering and many after it fell short of my lofty formulations. My work was sufficiently yeasty, though, to win the favor of the Good Times' boss. Or maybe he saw I was adept in the arts of spelling and grammar, and looked forward to an easy editing job. For all I know, I was the only applicant for the job. It's not as if the financial rewards alone would have drawn a crowd. As I discovered during my new editor's congratulatory handshake, the pay was \$15 a week—so low that I could keep some of my food stamp allotment.

I regarded it as a fortune, though, considering that I was getting paid to be a poet in disguise. My secret long-term agenda, after all, was to build an imagination strong enough to gain regular access to the fourth dimension without the aid of psychedelics. What could be better training for that than a weekly assignment to spew out 12 oracular riffs and shape them into terse word-bombs?