

East Bay: Eyes on the future Is it in the cards, stars or grounds? Psychics' predictions rely on variety of traditions

Sudhin S. Thanawala, Singeli Agnew, Matt Villano Friday, **December 30, 2005**

As one year ends and another begins, many people reflect on the past and ponder the future. In San Francisco and throughout the Bay Area, many people believe in a variety of traditions to help them divine the future. Here is a brief sampler of some of those ways.

Pandit Parashar examined the student's birth chart on the monitor of his home computer in Hayward.

On Feb. 13, the student came under the influence of Rahu -- the northern node of the moon, an important element in Indian astrology -- Parashar said. On Nov. 19, Saturn exerted its influence.

Parashar looked at the placement of those planets on the student's birth chart -- a picture of the sky at the time and the place he was born.

His voice ringing with certainty, the astrologer announced his conclusion and answered the question that had brought the student's family to Parashar that day: "This person will move away from family for education purposes."

Parashar is among hundreds of Indian astrologers around the United States to whom people turn for advice about the future. The questions vary but always require prediction. Will I be successful in this profession? Is this the right time to buy a house? Is the person I'm about to marry the right one?

For those who believe, the emphasis on forecasting is the main difference between Indian astrology and Western astrology. (Indian astrologers are also called Vedic astrologers because they trace their understanding of the cosmos to the Vedas, the oldest works of Indian literature that Hindus believe have existed since creation.)

Believing that the planets and their orientation at the time and place of birth reflect a person's karmas, or past actions, Vedic astrologers say they can identify the person's character as well as hardships and joys he or she will encounter in life.

To overcome obstacles, the astrologer can recommend gems or mantras, among other remedies. Parashar said he can also recommend people wear or avoid a certain color, eat or avoid a certain food, and reorient their homes according to the principles of vastu shastra, a concept similar to Feng Shui.

"If you know what's coming ahead, then you can take steps to change," said Vilas Thuse, who has a degree in mechanical engineering and consults as an astrologer part-time from his home or office in Pleasanton.

Thuse, who has been practicing Vedic astrology since 1993, said he helped solve marital problems and predicted advances in a friend's career.

"I'm definitely a convert," said Vijay Kaushik, a client of Parashar's who lives in Martinez. "I used to be a huge non-believer."

Kaushik said his thinking began to change after Parashar identified events in his past. "They were things nobody

would know," Kaushik said.

When Kaushik was considering leaving a good job to open a computer consulting company, Parashar advised him to wait six months and gave him particular days on which to start.

Kaushik has been in business for 10 years and said he still consults Parashar, who charges \$100 for a reading, which he says he can complete in 15 minutes.

Still, Vedic astrology has no shortage of skeptics, who maintain it is not a science. They argue that Vedic astrologers fail to account for all planetary bodies - Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, for example, are excluded - in their calculations. More importantly, they say Vedic astrology is completely inaccurate.

Chakrapani Ullal, a board member of the American College of Vedic Astrology, strongly disagreed.

"People who are ignorant about this particular field of knowledge, they talk like that," he said from his home in Los Angeles. Ullal, who flies around the world to see clients and charges \$250 for a birth chart reading, has been consulted by such stars as fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi. Almost all of Ullal's clients are Westerners.

With little in the way of grants or funding, Ullal said the only problem with Vedic astrology is a lack of learning opportunities. The result is unqualified astrologers.

"Astrology is correct," he said. "But the astrologer may not be competent."

Vedic astrologers admit there is a margin of error in their predictions, but say that it is small. Parashar estimated that 90 percent of his predictions are true. As an example, he said that the student whose family wanted to know where he would go to school had received admission from an out-of-state college.

"This may not be a perfect science, but I can tell you that it is a very good planning tool, a good guide," Thuse said.

Astrologers and their followers agreed there is also an element of faith without which astrology cannot work.

"I don't like to make anybody a believer," Parashar said. "That is not my job. You have to believe something is going to help you, and then it will."

Soothing spirits in S.F.

Behind the counter at La Sirena Botanica, proprietor Mary Ehm wraps two white candles in tissue paper. Waiting nervously, a young man wipes sweat off his neck with a handkerchief.

"Don't worry dear," Ehm said. "Everything is going to be just fine." She charges him 80 cents for the slim candles and sends him on his way.

After he leaves Ehm shakes her head. "He's in here almost every day," she said. "He has a girl-phobia, poor dear."

La Sirena Botanica, at 1509 Church St. in San Francisco, is a supply-store for matters of the spirit. Shoppers will find the traditional botanica offerings: orisha candles, dried herbs and coconut shells for their Santeria, Vodun or Lucumi rituals. But they will also find Buddha statues, portraits of the Hindu god Ganesh, Jewish menorahs, oil paintings of Catholic saints, delicate porcelain boxes for children's baby teeth, Indian textiles and incense.

And they will also find Ehm, often clad in a baseball hat and cuffed jeans, comfortably dispensing her particular

blend of mysticism and practical advice.

For \$40, Ehm will give customers a Tarot card reading in the back room. But even without paying for a reading, they're likely to get words of encouragement, romantic advice, and confident recommendations for rituals and remedies to aid all sorts of routine spiritual problems.

Ehm, 56, is a Santeria priestess who speaks nine languages and reads a well-worn deck of German Tarot cards. Santeria is an Afro-Cuban religion that blends Catholic imagery and worships a pantheon of saints, or orishas.

She was raised as a Catholic, by a closeted Jewish mother, in a Muslim neighborhood in Beirut. She also spent a year studying at a Buddhist monastery in California when she was in her early 50s. That diverse past, Ehm said, helps her relate to people.

"Every different tradition -- it leads us to the same path," Ehm said. She said she wanted her store to be a place where everyone would be comfortable, regardless of what they believe.

People come to solve universal problems, Ehm said.

She helps clients pick altar candles for their troubles -- Oshun, for those with love problems; Elegua, to remove obstacles to success -- and then customizes the candle by sprinkling perfumes, oils, gold dust and ground herbs into the glass votive. Names of Greek gods roll off her tongue along with the Yoruban saints as she explains the invocations or fingers her Tarot cards.

The phone in the store rings often. Clients call Ehm to tell her how the remedies worked and ask her what to do next. She responds with maternal annoyance and warm, cliched reassurance.

"Rome was not built in one day but one day it was accomplished," said Ehm to one client, recommending persistence. "You can't carry an elephant; you have to let them go," she said, telling a client she must learn to forgive her mother.

She agrees that what she does is a lot like therapy.

But Ehm remembers seeing her neighbors make divinations from the coffee grounds and tea leaves in her Beirut neighborhood. That sort of knowing was just part of my childhood, she said.

"Since I was a little girl I could sense things," she said.

Her father, an Armenian, sold Persian rugs in Beirut. When she was 9 the family moved their business from Lebanon to Brazil. Six years later the family moved back to Europe, and Ehm went to an English boarding school in Cyprus.

"I used to get angry when we moved," Ehm said. "But if I look back now I say what a blessing -- I look at everyone like we are one," she said.

In 1975, Ehm moved to the United States with her Greek husband, whom she has since divorced. She ran cleaning businesses for 25 years, until she bought the Noe Valley botanica in 1999.

Although her only son did not understand her career change and still asks Ehm when she's going to get a real job, Ehm said she was ready to just sit around burning candles. It was simply a more relaxed work atmosphere, she said.

But after running the shop for a couple of years, she became deeply interested in Santeria and last year was

initiated as a Santeria priestess by her padrino, or godfather, Eduardo Jimenez, a Santeria priest from Cuba. Jimenez, who now lives in Miami, comes several times a year to perform rituals at the store and do traditional Santeria cowry-shell readings for clients.

The store's location is symbolic, said Kurt Ulmer, who helps Ehm manage the shop. It's on the border between the Mission -- where Latino-run botanicas are common -- and the yuppified heights of Noe Valley. Ehm likes to think of the store as a bridge between cultures.

The store attracts Latinos with traditional Santeria needs, neo-pagans in their 20s, and Jungian intellectuals who wander in from the nearby California Institute of Integral Studies, Ulmer said.

Many clients who venture inside aren't familiar with Santeria. Ehm is good at connecting the beliefs with traditions they might know so they don't see Santeria as something spooky, but just part of a rich tapestry of spiritual traditions, Ulmer said.

Ulmer, 43, was exposed to Vodun, a more French-influenced form of Santeria, in Haiti in the 1980s, and then met Ehm last year. Now Ulmer, who lives in Marin, creates custom products for its shelves.

Ulmer, who has studied psychology and astrology, thinks of Santeria as a celebration of life. "It's not a transcendental religion," Ulmer said. It's very sensual and practical, he said, as opposed to trying to transcend the here and now.

Ehm spread her Tarot cards out on a table in a small room filled with white candles, goblets of water and white carnations. One of the four cats that laze around the shop jumped up on the table and Ehm shoved it away from the cards.

Her divinations yield intimate advice. Clients are told to live in the moment, give more love to their wives, take time for themselves.

Mike, a client from San Francisco, said Ehm had completely turned his life around.

He goes in secret, and didn't want to use his last name for fear that his family would disapprove of Santeria.

"She makes you feel warm and loving," he said. "She's the real thing."

"But if you're going to win the lottery," Ehm said, "I don't know."

Reading grounds in Burlingame

The coming year will be a very good one for Lorraine Kaufeldt.

More than anything, the Burlingame real estate agent is going to sell a boatload of houses. Oh, and that new office she and her colleagues just organized is really going to take off. Her personal life should bring considerable happiness, too -- good times with her husband, new friends and at least one vacation she'll never forget.

Kaufeldt knows this because her psychic told her so. Iraq-born Artemis "Artie" Caneri Donikian, predicts the future by peering into coffee grounds, a tradition that dates to 15th century China. Today, while many Bay Area psychics rely solely on Tarot cards, Donikian keeps the practice of reading grounds alive and well.

"The general saying in our family was that 'a cup of good coffee uplifts your soul and clarifies your mind,' " Donikian says. "It also provides a good way to predict what will happen next."

The fortune-telling process is nothing if not complicated. Donikian invites her clients to her modest Burlingame home for a demitasse cup of unfiltered coffee. They drink. When the customers are done, she turns the cup upside down, lets the grounds harden on the inside, and reads fortunes from the patterns that result.

Readings usually take about 30 minutes. If customers come with questions, Donikian will search the grounds for answers. If customers bring with them a general curiosity, Donikian tries to address the future in a few basic areas: work, health, children, marriage and finances. One thing she never addresses: death.

"People ask me, 'How long will my uncle live?' but all I know is whether people are sick or not," she says. "Some people think that because I can see, I must be God. But I'm not God at all."

What, then, enables Donikian to interpret fortunes? The psychic claims her abilities revolve around the life energy that every person possesses. When people drink the coffee, they transfer their energy to the grounds. Because Donikian understands this energy, she says it is easy for her to predict the future from what the grounds reveal.

Donikian says that in certain instances, she also receives insight from spirits, who speak to her without warning. She cannot see these spirits; she can only hear them. She claims the ability has been in her family for generations, starting with her grandmother, Esther, and trickling down to her.

"I was born with this gift," she explains. "I didn't ask for it."

Skeptics might allege that there are no such things as spirits, and that no one can read into the future. Donikian's clients feel otherwise. One client, a student working toward her Ph.D., marveled when an uninformed Donikian predicted that the student would become a professor.

Kaufeldt, the broker, remembers that before she became a Realtor, she visited Donikian for a reading, and the psychic was insistent that she give the profession a try. Until that moment, Kaufeldt had never even thought about real estate as a profession. Ten years later, Kaufeldt says, she can't think of ever doing anything else.

"Even if you're not a believer, when you come to Artie with unanswered questions, she'll give you the confidence and clarity to move on," says Kaufeldt, who along with another Donikian client, Rebecca Graffigna, holds "Artie parties" where friends come and have their fortunes read. "Call it psychic or whatever, but it works."

When customers come to Donikian for readings, she holds the session in an enclosed patio at the back of her house. Patrons go for their readings one at a time. Once the grounds are dry, Donikian slowly turns each cup in her hands to find patterns. The outline of a blossoming tree indicates success and enrichment. The image of a car warns that customers should be careful driving and be fully focused behind the wheel.

Other shapes inspire different interpretations. An attacking bull foreshadows divorce or separation in the family. A man with a bump on his forehead indicates the patron soon will suffer from migraines. A fish means that good tidings are on the way. A horse denotes that it's time to live life in the fast lane.

"There are so many different interpretations," Donikian says, explaining how she knows what to make of what she sees in the cups. "You can do 100 readings and never see the same shapes twice."

Telling fortunes from coffee grounds was derived from tea-leaf reading, or tasseography, which began in China in the 1400s. Originally the Chinese took omens from the shapes seen on the inside of used bells. Since the handleless teacups they used looked like small bells upside-down, tea cups gradually replaced bells in this ritual.

Gradually, the tradition spread across the East, into Armenia, Turkey and countries of the Middle East. Donikian learned the ritual from her mother, who was Armenian. When she came to the United States in 1985, the psychic brought it here. Although one can use any beans, Donikian still uses fine-ground coffee that she buys from local

Middle Eastern stores.

The coffee makes the acidic java from Peet's taste like water. If her customers don't care for it, she says they can drink a few sips and pour out the rest. In the end, Donikian says, the coffee is just a tool; all that really matters are the grounds and the energy that touches them before they settle into their revealing patterns and shapes.

"It's all about the energy," she says. "One sip is enough to pass that along."

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