

The man between sky and symbols: a conversation with Rod Suskin

Tore Lomsdalen

ROD SUSKIN HAS studied astrology since 1974 at the age of eleven. After graduating with a BA in Psychology at Wits (1983), he later began practising as a full-time astrologer in 1989. Rod was initiated as a Swazi Sangoma (African traditional healer and diviner) in 1982 at the age of 19, and has furthered his study of African healing and spiritual traditions under the guidance of Xhosa healers.

Rod is the author of *Soul Talks* (DoubleStorey 2004), *Cycles of Life* (Llewellyn, 2005), *Soul Life* (DoubleStorey 2006), and *Synastry: the Astrology of Relationships* (Llewellyn 2008). He is the author of two earlier self-published books, *A Meditator's Manual* (1990) and *Understanding Reincarnation* (1991), a wide variety of articles for most major South African journals, magazines and newspapers, two meditation CDs, as well as a series of computer programmes for astrologers. He has had a weekly talk radio show on a major local station since 1997 and has presented a monthly astrology slot on national TV for nine years.

Rod teaches a three-year online diploma course in professional astrology and is currently studying for the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

Rod's website is www.rodsuskin.com and can be found on twitter [@rodsuskin](https://twitter.com/rodsuskin)

In a break at the annual Sophia Centre conference in Bath in 2010, Rod and I sat down in the Queen Square Park next to the amazing obelisk in the nice afternoon sunshine. Bath is a city in which astrological, cosmological and sacred geographical symbols seem to have played an integral part in the planning and layout programme of John Wood the Elder in the 18th century. It is a perfect setting for the yearly conference of the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, Sky and Symbol, and our talk.

Tore: The Sky and Symbol conference must be quite a background for our talk, I guess. I understand you do cover more than astrology?

Rod: Absolutely. I mean my path to astrology has been interesting, because although I started with astrology when I was very young, even before that, as a very young child, I was doing tarot cards when I was 9 years old, and when I was very small I used to have out-of-body experiences, and when I was [in my] out of body experiences this rabbi used to sit with me and show me symbols... I can't remember exactly what they were because it was so early in my life, and I would

guess I always thought I was being taught the tarot cards in a way that was appropriate for a child because as a child I knew once I bought those tarot cards the way that you learn about them is that you put them under your pillow at night and you dream about them. So I think all these things were starting at a very young age and I think this whole idea of dreams and a symbolic language seemed all very normal to me at a very young age, so I think astrology might have come naturally because of that. But I was lucky, I was exposed to it when I was very young and immediately had an interest in it and it seemed to fit in with my whole world at the time.

Tore: But you started to study astrology systematically as well?

Rod: Well, I had to teach myself when I was a youngster, about twelve years old, and I did study systematically in my twenties a little bit with the Faculty of Astrological Studies in London. But I never followed that all the way through, because having started so young on my own, so by the time I was in my twenties I knew quite a lot. It was difficult for me and I felt that I was going backwards if I wanted to study in a formal way.

Tore: What is your astrology? What is astrology to you?

Rod: Well, it evolved.... I think I identify most closely with the idea that astrology is a language, so that does make it a symbolic language, and it is a language that kind of describes... it's a way that you can understand what is the source of life or consciousness, or ourselves even, because I always relate it strongly to the idea that the reason that astrology works is that ourselves and the planets have the same source. Maybe if our ancestors had learned to read the fall of leaves they would have been able to tell the same things that astrologers tell, because trees have the same source, everything has the same source. That was to me this way of trying to understand the source and getting to the source. Because I've been born into a Jewish family and although I'd rejected that by the age of around twelve or thirteen, I was still fascinated by the mystical side of it. It seemed to be trying to say the same thing, the cabbalistic idea of emanating from the source, and I knew immediately that's what astrology is. It's just describing and used the religious language that says the same God that made us made the planets and that's the language. I didn't buy into that way, but it was still the same idea. I had that it was somehow a route into understanding how everything is one thing, and for me it was emphasised in my encounter with African spirituality. When I was 19 I was initiated into African shamanism, it's not done by choice, it certainly wasn't my choice. I did try to resist it to a certain extent and they taught me that the divining tools that I used must be those that my



ancestors used. In other words I must use European divining tools even though I was being given an African tradition, so I would use tarot cards which they completely understood the same as throwing bones, which African did, throw bones and read the fall of bones and stones and special pieces of things that they find, so that the fall of cards seemed the same, but I always thought that astrology was different from that, and then I would meet shamans from remote rural areas who had never heard of astrology and then asking them.

Tore: In Africa?

Rod: Yes, in Africa and then ask me how do I search... it's called searching for inside... searching for an answer, and there's no astrology in African culture that we know of, and I would say... well I read the stars, and that would seem completely normal to them, even [though] it's not in their culture and it was new to them, they completely understood what I meant. I eventually learnt that the underlying philosophy in African culture is that spirit is in everything, so in the same way to them the fall of bones, even though that's highly ritualised, can show a truth, such as looking at the sky can show a truth. I would find myself in situations where I was in a rural area, I had no computer or anything and people would point at the sky and ask me what I had to say.

Tore: Oh yeah?

Rod: Really scary, being dragged outside in the middle of the night... this woman's sick pointed at the sky and he says – help her!

Tore: Wow.

Rod: So of course what I would do was ask her birth date and know the outer planets from then, I know the Sun, I could estimate Mercury and Venus and I could start working from there...

Tore: So you had the ephemeris in your head?

Rod: I had, I had to learn it. At the time I used to be able to do a Robert Zoller kind of method of working out the position of the Moon at any date by memorising a table of eleven columns or something. My memory is too full of rubbish now, but I used to be able to do that with other planets. However, I would improvise on that, when I was still really doing astrology. But all this just really brought home to me that astrology is an intermediary, it's a language, it's a symbol, it's a causal thing, it's not the planets themselves that we're really talking about, so it seemed to fit with African culture for me.

Tore: But it seems to me as if you are searching for the source of the universe, of the world, how do you see that, is that for you a God, is it an entity?

Rod: I would have to say that it's an intelligence, maybe it's a consciousness, maybe it's that, it's a consciousness. Later in my life I was very drawn to the Vedic or Hindu style ideas that, you know, it's all one consciousness and everything is just a manifestation of this one consciousness. It's the materialness of everything that makes us confused. I was drawn to that because I've always just felt that same idea. I've never minded how in consciousness as long as I'm trying to understand this one thing of everything to break this illusion that everything is separate.

Tore: So how do you think the world came into existence? Was there a big bang?

Rod: For me the big bang is a good metaphor. I don't think there was a big bang, but it's a good metaphor for you know,

from an infinitely small point expanding into infinity is a way that even science is trying to grasp this idea. For me I've always asked the question, the well known question, if the universe is expanding, then what is it expanding into? That must be the universe then, so I never saw it as this bang that makes the universe come into existence, it appealed to me better that it's something in the mind of an intelligence, not a being, but it's like the universe is a concept, and to me I accept that a human being can never understand what that greatness is, that great, whether it's a consciousness or... it appealed to me that everything is a cell, because every cell in the body contains the DNA for everything. It's the same idea that we are all cells, that the universe as a being is a good metaphor, but we'll never grasp what that being is any more than any one cell in your body can grasp the whole body, but that child's cell chart must be perfect and as damned as best as it can, otherwise it might affect the whole body, so it gave me a sense that we are significant but we're still just little cells that get replaced.

Tore: I looked at your website and I see “but I have no room for the new age fluff and the pure abuse of astrology that's practiced today”.

Rod: What I really mean is that frequently people who have absolutely no training of any kind, not even self-training, carelessly use astrological terminology or concepts to justify things when it's not actually based on astrological ideas, so people will too easily say “Oh that's my Neptune or Saturn did that”, and actually if you know astrology and you know it formally, you can't just say that. You have to justify that. I think that astrology has become too amateur, it's like if medicine were given to the amateur world then any odd person can say “Oh no, it's because that my heart rhythm is not correct” and no one's measured it and they don't know that the heart causes that, but everyone says oh, ok. That's what seems to happen with astrology, that people can casually use astrology and other people in that same new age world will accept that and there's no foundation in anything or in astrology.

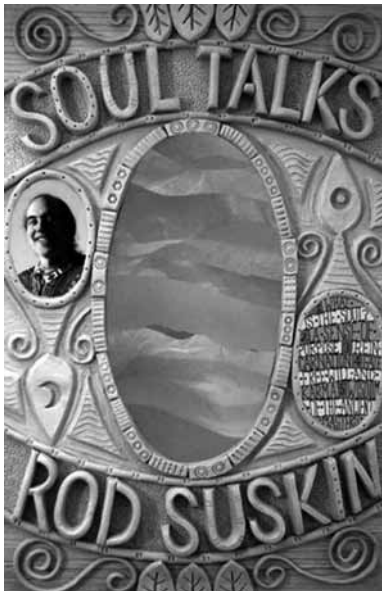
Tore: But astrology got a new boost during the new age, didn't it?

Rod: It did get a new boost and that's great, and I'm all for modern astrology. I think it's contributed a lot to astrology, but I still think you must be disciplined in how you learn it, that you must have a strong foundation because I think that the new age has ended and unintentionally abused many modern and traditional systems and has just become too casual.

Tore: You are into spiritual astrology, is that correct?

Rod: Yes, but that I mean in quite a traditional way, more than any modern way. I mean spiritual, and that's in fact the lecture I'm doing here tomorrow night, so spiritual to try and draw from traditional astrology how we can give people spiritual advice, because I can see from Vedic culture and ancient Western culture that the purpose of astrology was to talk to people about their souls, and to the Vedic culture about their karma, to the Western culture as well. The idea was to reveal God's intention for you so that you could relax and accept that, relax and accept your destiny. So using traditional tools like how were the nodes properly used, Jupiter, the 9th house, all these things were probably built into astrology to reveal the soul and that kind of spirituality, but still to put it in one.

Tore: Do you think that astrology carries the truth?



Rod: I don't think it carries the truth, I think it gives people tools to find their truth, so that's why I, like the 9th house, could say study this way or these types of groups will lead you to a truth; it suits their personality so that that can evolve, but it's not a truth in itself.

Tore: Do you think the chart can tell us the life purpose?

Rod: No, I don't, also because I buy into the Vedic idea that there is only one life purpose, and everyone has the same one, and that is to become conscious that we are part of an eternal spiritual something, that all these individual beings have that purpose. Having said that, that's partly the way people use that idea that makes me say that, because like most professional astrologers I have people who may be forty years old, who come to me and say, "I don't know what my life purpose is, I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing?" I've always wanted to say to them, "Apart from astrology, you know you're forty years old, don't assume that you're wrong, how did you manage to live forty years barking up the wrong tree? It can't be true". Surely, whether we're created or whatever this is, it can't expect us, let's just use the idea and say there's a God – God just wouldn't expect us to find the right book or the right astrologer or the right religion, it just doesn't make sense to me. There must be a truth that applies to everyone whatever your culture or whatever your book, so it isn't that one thing that you're supposed to be doing and no one is going to tell you what it is until you find the right astrologer, or someone else. That would make no sense, so the purpose is to become conscious and the more conscious you are the more naturally you're going to follow your own path and it might be best for you to do that by doing charity work or for you to be the CEO of a company. But you've got to remember that the real purpose is for you to know yourself, not to do something on Earth, because in reality a lot of people, which I think this is strongly influenced by our very secular culture, a lot of people end up with the idea that purpose is doing things for other people. That is fine, but what they're really getting out of that, is a sense of personal satisfaction – I'm ok, because I did something for you, and I think that just becomes circular and pointless.

Tore: So what does it mean to become conscious then?

Rod: I think it probably what you also mean by spiritual, is to realise that the personality and the body are not who you are, that your consciousness or your soul or whatever you want to call it according to your culture, is what you are, and

I buy into the Vedic idea, it's very well articulated in their culture, that says your personality is an illusion, your real self lies there somewhere and your purpose is to know your real self. The Vedic astrologers of any culture, like many Western philosophers, say this is all a dream in the mind of God, or Vedics often say it's like a cinema, a playing field for us to operate on as events make you realise, and they say that's why we suffer. Buddhists say that, suffering will make us realise that this isn't what's real.

Tore: But do you think that we humans can obtain maximum consciousness?

Rod: I don't think so.

Tore: What about Jesus? Buddha? Mohammed?

Rod: Maybe those people were more conscious.... they seemed to be.... definitely, and I think that Jesus and Buddha are good examples if you look at their history of people who did realise the illusion of this world and however literal you take Jesus' path of willingly being sacrificed. It's because he realised I'm not this body and this personality that everyone's going on about and he tried to show that. Buddha, by abandoning his princely identity, shows that isn't who I am, I am a being inside here, so I think these were people who knew in that sort of culture that says we've got gurus or avatars or whatever they are. I don't think they really, really are that, I just think they are people who are much more conscious relative to us. There are lots of them who don't pick up Buddhism or Jesus... but no one is at maximum, because I don't think that's possible.

Tore: So you don't see this as some religious, a religious evolution?

Rod: No, not in that sense, because we also have to deal with the fact that evolution in itself must be a symbolic system, because both science and religion, I guess, tell us that there is no time and that everything is just all existing at the same time, so that means that evolution isn't a process. The evolution of consciousness isn't a process where we gradually get more and more knowledge.... it's more like... a better symbol is, if the universe were a person, it's standing there forever, the physical world is its feet, and it has to have those feet to stand on but its head exists at exactly the same time. Its head is this unimaginable consciousness that we don't even know how to talk about, so it's almost as if awareness has to arise out of the body; but it's not an evolutionary process: it's actually there at the same time, you've just got to become aware.

Tore: We touched on reincarnation and karma, but karma is a scary word for many. Is that if I do something bad to you this life, you will do bad to me in the next life?

Rod: No. Karma is only that potential energy. So the idea that we chose parents that people love to say, and I always see that people think that that means oh, I'll have those ones over there, and of course it doesn't because when we're dead we don't have an eye or sense. There's no person thinking I'll have those parents. There's this energy seeking entropy and energy of consciousness that doesn't have a personality, so like the beautiful thing about nature, is that it seems to know what to do and that energy is the same, it just ends up in the perfect circumstances to express that potential energy, and that's the karma. So it's not about us as individuals at all. It's not about necessarily a similar event happening, it's almost like if I do something, like I hurt you and that creates a potential energy that I'm now carrying as karma. In the next life circumstances there is a perfect situation to dissipate

that energy, it may not be someone hurting you, maybe something altogether different, I don't know.

Tore: How is astrology in South Africa? Is that popular? Because you have a divided culture.

Rod: We call it black and white in our country, and it is a divided culture because of history; but nonetheless it is an increasingly Western culture and it actually is very similar to most European cultures and our astrology is seen and dealt with.

Tore: It seems that astrology attracts the white of Westerners, is this your experience as well?

Rod: Well of course, Western astrology is a European thing, so in a historical sense it does at first. When there is the division, it's almost exclusively white and it's part of European culture as so many things are. Since '94, gradually, slowly, as cultural barriers break down, I can see from the younger generation I have a lot of black clients, not from the older generation, so I can see that that's breaking down and the culture is becoming just Westernised, and I can tell you as an African traditionalist, that traditional African culture in my life is going to disappear. That just showing how fast it's going, that the young people, the young black people think that the whole African tradition is ridiculous, and they come to an astrologer so they are highly Westernised. Give it a couple of decades and you won't see that black-white difference in astrology any more because it's all become Westernised.

Tore: Good. So where does astrology go then, for the future?

Rod: I think, I like to believe anyway that the medieval and traditional revival and things like the University of Wales survive. The schools that are around astrology and relate to astrology will lead to a greater need for astrologers to be better qualified. They're going to start perceiving themselves as needing better qualifications. The people who've got masters degrees say, they may not have it in practical astrology, but the perception is still the same, that as an astrologer who's got a master's degree in cultural astrology to a member of the public, then they'll trust him or her more. So, when other astrologers are going to feel compared, are going to start wanting better qualifications. It's going to raise the standards of astrology gradually and will help astrology get a bit more respected in some ways. You know it's hard for an insider, because as an insider I'd like to believe that it's being more accepted, but maybe to the outsiders it isn't. Nevertheless I'm still encouraged by, as I say, the effect, intention and intentional, is that master programmes like the one at the University of Wales are going to raise the standards of astrology as a whole.

Tore: Is that why you are taking the MA course at the University of Wales?

Rod: No, for me, my personal why I'm taking the MA course is just because I love knowledge and already got that profile in astrology. When I first met Dr. Nick Campion he actually suggested I apply to take a PhD. He said, you know, as a joke, you know Nick he's always joking, he said, how do you think it would be to be called Dr. Suskin? So I said, you know, firstly as a traditional doctor I'm already legally allowed to call myself Dr. in South Africa.

Tore: Are you?

Rod: Yes, you can call yourself a Dr. if you're a traditional doctor in South Africa. You can write doctor's notes legally and you can do all of that because they accept that. It's part of the culture of South Africa as a country, but I don't use

the word 'doctor'. So he said, I think it makes you more respectable and people will accept it. I said, in this country I'm a big fish in a small pond, I don't need that PhD, you know. I lecture to both big medical schools in Cape Town, and no one's ever asked me what degree I've got, though I've got a bachelor's degree, a BA.

Tore: What do you lecture?

Rod: They call it African Medicine in the medical schools. They're required to know how African medicine works because most of their patients will go to traditional doctors first, so, at both universities I teach African medicine and no one has ever asked me what are my qualifications. They're universities, whenever they require someone to speak about something, whether it's a big important organisation they'll ask me. I don't need respectability, so Nick said, but yes, it will open doors and all that, and I answered; look let me do the master's degree, I'm more interested in the knowledge you've got to give me, than the word 'doctor' in front of my name. When I did my bachelor's degree I wanted to start again, I loved it so much.

Tore: But in the traditional medicine, is that healing?

Rod: Yes, it's herbalism.

Tore: It's based on herbalism, and touching?

Rod: Not even, it's strongly based on herbalism and magic... so things like stones or you know, crystals or pieces of animals, those kinds of things.

Tore: Acupuncture?

Rod: It's not in our tradition, you know I've been to an acupuncturist and it was good for me, but it's not in our tradition. Interestingly, there is a medicine in African culture that's about cutting people with a blade which I suppose is similar to acupuncture only a bit more extreme. We cut them and rub a spiritual medicine in, and it's incredible to see the effect on people, really incredible. It's all so clever you know, there's such wisdom in ancient things, so you cut them and this medicine that we make and it looks like a black powder in the end because you burn it and then you rub it in and everyone's very worried if it's going to get infected. It's such a good antiseptic, they don't even get a slight scar, there's nothing afterwards! But it affects them so spiritually that for about half an hour after you do it they're so affected they can't even stand up, they just sit there – so you leave them alone and go away! There's a lot of magic and spirit in the medicine, but it's still all done through herbs and pieces of other things.

Tore: Very interesting! I am sure we Westerners would have a lot to learn from your traditions. Thank you very much Rod, and have a nice trip back to South Africa!



Tore Lomsdalen is a Norwegian living in Milan, Italy. Tore has a certificate exam from the Faculty of Astrological Studies and is now following the MA course in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology at the University of Wales Trinity St. David. He is specialising in archaeoastronomy and is researching astronomical intentionality in the prehistoric megalithic temples in Malta for his dissertation. Tore can be contacted at: post@astrolom.com

