

COPING/ROBERT LIPSYTE

## Palm-Reading, Yes. Crystal Balls, No.

**T**HE truth is out there. I want to believe.

"Everybody wants to believe something, which is good for my business," Mark Seltman said, studying the lines of my palm. "There's hidden stuff going on. Life is getting harder and choices are getting more complicated. People have a hunger to know."

We were sitting in his Lower East Side apartment, picking up a conversation that began several years ago. He looked from my hand to the ink print. "You're still independent, eccentric, practical. Still battling between being responsible and wanting freedom. You have trouble letting things go, even when they're not working."

"Tell me something I don't know," I said. "I can't tell you anything you don't know," Mr. Seltman said. "I'm not a fortuneteller. This is about affirmation, about finding new ways to look at yourself." "Hocus-pocus," I said, but I held out the other hand. This is the push-pull of the occult.

Mr. Seltman's fascination with hands is compelling. It may have reached a peak five years ago in a delivery room at St. Vincent's Hospital when the doctor let him help pull his daughter, Cassie, out of his wife, Joanna.

"I didn't know it was a girl until someone told me," he said, "because I was so busy studying her hands. My eyes were filled with tears, but I saw she had a short index finger, which is low self-esteem, and she had a short heartline. That meant to me we'd have to work extra hard giving her the support she needed even if it meant I'd stay home and spend more time with her."

Mr. Seltman is a muscular, sharp-featured 50-year-old whose silvery hair is pulled into a short tail. With the right lighting, he looks nether-worldly, but his easy barking laugh dispels the diabolical. When I first met him he was better known as an industrial designer out of Carnegie-Mellon in

Pittsburgh. He was sometimes called "the guru of garbage" for his ingenious residential waste devices. He taught a course at Cooper Union called "Design for the Environment." Even then, he mixed the geocosmic and the common cold. He would say, "The planet is suffering, and that's why there are so many respiratory infections in the city. That's also a psychic metaphor."

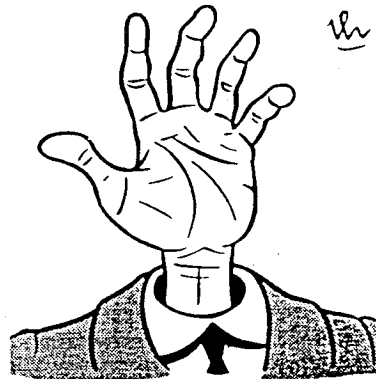
The metaphors led him into metaphysics. He became a member of a craft practicing somewhere between Jungian therapy and the gypsy storefront. Mr. Seltman began as a hand analyst; he says it is a way of studying character. (I have a stubborn thumb, he told me, also skeptical and romantic creases.) He went on to astrology, to find larger life patterns. (My chart accurately stated that the last two years have been tough, similar to a previous cycle seven years ago.) Then he studied the myths represented by the tarot cards. (This particular fool's journey is complicated by resentment and guilt. Look to the Prince of Wands.)

I hooted. "C'mon, Mark. You could say this to a lot of people."

"But what does it say to you?" he said. "How can you use these perspectives to think about yourself, where you've been, what you need to do to exercise your free will and change?"

"Pretty slick," I said. He did not look displeased.

Mr. Seltman says he has perhaps 1,000 clients, although he may see some only every few years. He charges \$150 for a two-hour



Mark Matcho

session, which seems about standard. Pro bono, he has read the hands of many terminal and chronically ill patients, including people with AIDS, and amassed a comparative print file. While he makes no diagnoses, he claims that health problems can be spotted in the hand.

Pro dinero, he dresses in spooky robes and reads palms at corporate parties. Two ma-

major financial companies would not let me accompany him, concerned that it would reflect on their investment predictions.

Much of Mr. Seltman's schedule is dictated by child care. His wife, a dancer and teacher, works outside the house, while he calls himself "an old-fashioned homemaker." He shops, cleans, cooks and takes primary care of Cassie, which he says shows on her hand.

"Her heartline has grown, and her finger is no longer short in relation to her other fingers," he said. "It's amazing how handprints show change, especially children's. Everything has a reason, but nothing is totally set. I believe in free will."

Mr. Seltman does not dispense advice, but says that everyone should look backward and forward, think about patterns of continuity. "If you've been through something, you should think about it," he said. "What I do is just a fast-forward way to the nuts and bolts of a life. You can do it for yourself."

"Most people would be better off if they looked inward. But then you have to do something about it."

He looked at his watch and jumped up. He had to pick up Cassie from school.