



PSYCHIC CAPITAL

When all else fails, tech-industry workers turn to old-fashioned New Age gurus for advice

BY JEREMY LYBARGER • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES HOSKING

The names of the tech workers in this story have been changed.

Ten thousand miles from Silicon

Valley, in a room near the Black Sea, Yegor Karpenchekov dreams of money. At night, while the rest of Odessa sleeps and cocaine smugglers drift in and out of the port under cover of darkness, Yegor logs onto FaceTime and talks to a 70-year-old woman in San Francisco. Her name is Sally Faubion, and five months ago she recruited Yegor from the freelancer marketplace UpWork to code her apps. She believes “divine intervention” brought them together; for Yegor, it was likely \$20 per hour and the promise of steady work.

Before hiring Yegor, Faubion asked for his birth date. “I never work with anyone unless I read their chart first,” she told him.

Which is how Yegor learned that his new employer is a numerologist who makes her living reading birth charts over the phone. Faubion’s website describes her as “one of those rare happy spirits the American dream was built around” — and she has the airbrushed headshots to prove it. Her roster of 1,700 clients includes employees from Apple and Genentech, all of whom want to know what their futures hold. Although Faubion doesn’t consider herself a psychic, her talents include preternatural insight into strangers’ destinies.

The apps Faubion has hired Yegor to make are not so much a sideline business as the spinning-off of her gifts into a lucrative new market: Search for “numerology” on iTunes and you’ll turn up nearly 300 apps; search for “astrology” and it’s more than 1,200. Sally Faubion Concepts — headquartered in a studio apartment in Lower Nob Hill — has already rolled out Forecast Wheel, whose prophetic roulette spits out fortunes such as “your financial and social status will improve when you marry”; Meaning of House Numbers, which reveals a house’s prime selling or purchasing price; and Cosmic Mates, the crown jewel of the lot, which for \$3.99 teaches people

the “secrets of [their] personality and destiny.”

“I call myself the Dr. Phil of numerology because I’m so incredibly honest and forthright,” Faubion says. “I help people, and if I didn’t help people I would never stay with this. The money isn’t that great. You have to hustle, and I don’t like hustling.”

For Yegor, living in a city made occasionally symphonic by the bombs of pro-Russian separatists, hustling is a fact of life. To quote an old Ukrainian proverb: “The devil always takes back his gifts” — so you’d better make bank while you can.

That proverb could be San Francisco’s slogan. Ever since the Gold Rush a

century and a half ago, the city has weathered legendary boom-and-bust cycles.

The ‘90s dot-com bubble was perhaps the climax of the Bay Area’s gaudy triumphalism, and its implosion 15 years ago still haunts San Francisco and Sand Hill Road. As recently as this month, Wells Fargo’s chief economist cautioned San Franciscans to “put some money aside in the piggy bank.” And David Sze, managing partner at the venture capital firm Greylock Partners, told Bloomberg TV, “I think there’s not a lot of fear. There’s just a lot of belief and not a lot of fear. And those are, you know, worrisome times, and can be dangerous if unchecked.”

Doomsaying has become as unsatisfying a pastime as wondering when the drought will end. **» p14**

Maybe it's no surprise, then, that many tech workers in San Francisco turn to psychics for a glimpse of the future. Or that psychics, in turn, are rebranding themselves as spiritual therapists, executive coaches, and corporate counselors. The trend is common enough to be spoofed on HBO's *Silicon Valley*, where the show's fictional tech CEO confers with a spiritual guru. Meanwhile, real-life tech execs are increasingly candid about their spiritual hygiene: Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff endorses yoga; LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner advocates mindful meditation; and the late Steve Jobs, a student of Buddhism, was mentored by a Zen priest.

The San Francisco Yellow Pages list 128 psychics and mediums in the city; there are 141 listings for astrologers (with some overlap between the categories). In the Bay Area at large, psychics are keen to cash in on tech's spiritual awakening.

Nicki Bonfilio is one of those psychics. "I have many clients from Salesforce, Facebook, Apple, Twitter, Zynga, Microsoft, and Cisco," she says. We're sitting in her office in the Mission. The room is small and luminous, with white shag carpet, and white furniture, and a view of Twin Peaks glazed with white light. The decor is multicultural, as though set-dressed by a producer uncertain of her audience: a Buddha, framed pictures of the Orient, a glass Anubis. Nobody wears shoes in here.

At 45, Bonfilio has the demeanor of someone recently deprogrammed from a cult. She's serene but formal, and lithe from years of serious yoga. Her white cotton shirt matches the furniture. She refers to herself as an intuitive rather than a psychic,



"It was like going from slight color to HD," Bonfilio says. "Everything was suddenly so vivid and clear."

Bonfilio hid her talents and went about charting a traditional adult life. After earning a degree in psychology, she fell into accounting, working mostly with restaurants in the Bay Area and occasionally as a corporate controller. Still, she couldn't quell her visions. After she warned a close friend of his potentially fatal tumor — a warning confirmed by an MRI — she decided to quit accounting and do intuitive counseling full time.

only tinged with the exoticism of seed rounds and IPOs: "What does my trajectory look like over the next six to 12 to 18 months?" "Should I try to laterally move into another department where I'm not product manager but might be more on the platform side of Salesforce?"

One of Bonfilio's clients, Caroline Cross, compares their relationship to that of a patient and her psychiatrist, a common analogy that many psychics embrace. "You can tell her very little but she can tell you a lot about people and what they're thinking,"

Nicki Bonfilio, in her Mission office, says, "I always ask, 'Does this need to be spoken?' I ask it of some other level that I tune in with."

Francisco's energy has been more ambiguous. "There's a hum going on in this city," Bonfilio says. "I can hear different things that I've never heard before. Everything has changed because of tech. Nine out of 10 people walk around looking at their phones, and there's all this construction going on, all this traffic, all these startups. I have a feeling the city is not down with that mass of energy."

To deflect any dark juju during her sessions, Bonfilio holds a shard of obsidian she bought online. It acts as a kind of psychic firewall — the only tool she uses aside from a deck of oracle cards. "I think there's karmic soul recognition that draws people together," Bonfilio says, watching the rooftops of the Mission go jagged with afternoon shadows. "I don't think the soul is finite at all. Your body is finite, but the soul keeps going."

Much like the Internet.

Across town, in Lower Pac Heights,

Joyce Van Horn is talking about death. We're in her home office, a room whose walls are the fatal blue of a Windows crash. Behind her, a bookshelf holds paperback copies of *Owning Your Own Shadow*, *Exploring the Tarot*, and *Skymates*, as well as a framed photo of her with Steven Forrest, the father of evolutionary astrology and, according to Van Horn, a close confidant of Laurene Powell, Steve Jobs' wife.

"Death is trending," Van Horn tells me with the casual authority of a newscast, "but if we look at it we can have more pleasure, because the time

is now. We need to play more. We need to love more. Let's be ridiculous sometimes. *Carpe diem.*"

Van Horn used to be an actress and a disc jockey, and, at 63, still speaks with scene-chewing gusto. She calls herself "a wild child that turned into a wild woman," which could refer to anything from her early-onset telekinesis to her belief in fairies to her penchant for feather earrings. "I've had a real messy life," she says more than once.

Like Bonfilio, Van Horn grew up in the Bay Area — in a haunted house, no less — and started giving professional readings in 1984. She charged \$10 a session back then; today, her rate is \$150 per hour. She says that's a bargain for someone trained in evolutionary astrology. (Sally Faubion, by contrast, charges \$180 per hour for a private numerology session.)

"Most of us are born having forgotten the information from our past lifetimes," Van Horn says, "but there is information encoded in us that remembers the essence of who we were and what we were about." She helps people recover that information.

The majority of Van Horn's clients are from the tech industry. Besides in-person readings, she also does phone and Skype consultations, and twice a year hosts a retreat in Calistoga where 50 people gather for a weekend of astrology and mayhem in Wine Country.

In the past couple of years, Van Horn has branched out into private readings for startups. On a recent Friday, she found herself in the back room of one such company in SoMa, hunched over her computer and shivering as, one by one, people half her age asked about their careers, their love lives, their futures, and their souls.

"A lot of what I see in my tech clients is a longing to belong," Van Horn says, "The longing to do something. A lot of them are on Tinder and OKCupid," she adds, as if that says all you need to know about their psychological state. "People are hungry but not everybody knows what they're hungry for."

Even those who aren't single keep Van Horn in their contacts list. For the past 19 years, several women in tech — all in their 40s now, all married to tech husbands — have hired Van Horn to give an annual spring reading in a "fabulous house" in the Richmond District. The sessions average four hours, which, at a rate of \$150 per, means Van Horn nets \$600 plus travel expenses.

"There is this trickle-down effect from the ethers, or the divine, or whatever is outside of us into our consciousness," Van Horn says, wide-eyed and flushed. "There's something else trending which is this era of compassion and inclusivity and music and the healing aspect of a community."

Drugs are trending, too. Nootropics — dubbed "smart drugs" because of their cognitive

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"I have many clients from Salesforce, Facebook, Apple, Twitter, Zynga, Microsoft, and Cisco."

— Nicki Bonfilio

suggesting that the latter evokes images of "a crystal ball and a palm in the window." Hers is no amateur storefront.

"I'm a seer, and I'm also clairaudient, which means I can hear things on a different level," she says. In other words, she can read your mind.

When Bonfilio was 5, she says, an apparition of St. Francis visited her in the backyard of her family's Mill Valley home. That kicked off a childhood procession of phantom colors and 3D shapes levitating in midair. When she was 13, she experienced something like "an explosion from the inside out" — a firework in the brain that uncorked her extrasensory gifts.

That was 15 years ago. Today, Bonfilio sees about 25 clients a week and has a calendar that's booked two months in advance. "The tech boom seems to have helped my business," she says. "It created more people who are here looking for answers in a different way."

Among those people are young startup CEOs seeking advice about which apps to launch first, or which to shop around to venture capitalists. Bonfilio claims to see product names switch on "like klieg lights" and says she knows if they'll be successful. "It's almost like I'm on a different neurological level," she says.

Bonfilio's clients ask questions clients from any industry might ask,

Cross says. "She can read a situation from so many different angles."

Cross, who requested that her employer be identified only as "the largest SaaS CRM provider," began seeing Bonfilio in 2010. She and five co-workers, all women, would get readings once a year and compare notes. Bonfilio and Cross mostly discussed Cross' career trajectory at the large CRM provider.

"Nicki definitely kicked off that whole process of leveraging intuitive guidance," Cross tells me, noting that since 2010, many more co-workers across departments have started seeing Bonfilio.

While tech has been good for Bonfilio's business, its effect on San

enhancements and alleged ubiquity in Silicon Valley — have inspired dozens of trend pieces; they're this year's answer to 2014's ayahuasca craze. But Van Horn's clients prefer old-fashioned MDMA.

"I have one client around 26, and he works his tail off, but at least once a month or every six weeks he and his soulmates get together for a weekend to take MDMA in a sacred space and use that to clear the decks, and connect, and relax." You can almost feel Van Horn italicize the words as she says them.

According to Michelle Jackson, a Van Horn client who works for a software startup near Union Square, MDMA is the cornerstone of "journey work." She twice spent an entire day at Van Horn's house tripping on MDMA, meditating, and letting herself be guided through "an intense therapy session."

Jackson started seeing Van Horn in 2007. She had just moved to San Francisco from Texas, an adventurous 25-year-old eager to escape her fundamentalist Baptist roots and memories of the Sunday school where she'd "pledged allegiance to the Bible along with the American flag." Although she wasn't looking for a tech job, she landed a gig at a startup that monetized blog ads.

"When I was 27, I had a panic attack at work," Jackson says. "There was just so much pressure and stress. And I realized that that job wasn't making me happy anymore, and I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I went to Joyce. I don't know why. I just needed a sign. I needed something."

Wary of traditional therapy with its doctor-patient protocols, Jackson plunged headlong into a confessional intimacy with Van Horn, calling her a "kind of life coach." Van Horn turned her on to Abraham Hicks, the name given to a collective consciousness from another dimension discovered by Esther and Jerry Hicks, a husband-and-wife team who now preside over a cottage industry of inspirational books, CDs, and DVDs. (In a cosmic coincidence, the Hickses also hail from Jackson's hometown of San Antonio.)

"Whenever I start to feel like I'm not doing okay and need some help, I listen to one of the Abraham Hicks CDs that Joyce let me borrow. I transferred them onto my phone so I can listen while I'm walking," Jackson says.

Her work with Van Horn has clarified something she's suspected since 2007: The tech industry rewards conformity. "It's like a cult," Jackson says. "When I walk downtown it feels like everybody is saying the same thing and talking about the same VCs." Her honeymoon phase with San Francisco is over, she says. Someday, she plans to saddle up and decamp to Wine Country, where the pace is slower and the sky alive.

It started with a bloody handprint.

A young woman in Oakland — a tech worker, like her boyfriend — saw the grisly omen on the blinds of her bedroom window. Days later, similar handprints appeared on the wall, followed by bedraggled letters spelling out obscene words. Desperate and terrified, the couple turned to the only source they trusted: Google.

A quick search for "house clearing" led them to Reverend Joey Talley, a

Despite lacking a background in computer science or IT, Talley is occasionally called on to perform cyber security miracles. Her approach is more Etsy than McAfee.

"Most people want me to protect their computers from viruses and hacks," she says, "so I'll make charms for them. I like to use flora."

Jet, a black gemstone energy-blocker, is ideal for debugging office hardware, Talley says; bigger or

failed to rout whatever poltergeist was causing the alarm to shrill at odd intervals, the company contacted Reverend Talley.

"I don't know anything about electronics, but I got the spirit out," she says. It's hard to tell whether she's boasting or apologizing.

If it's surprising that companies should entrust critical office maintenance to a witch, it's nearly breathtaking that they also retain her for

on-industrial complex, and the male species. Occasionally, though, her aphorisms achieve the craftsmanship of folk sayings: "Witchcraft is the art of changing consciousness at will"; "People can't walk around with their minds open any more than they can walk around with no clothes on"; "Auras are information." In those moments, it's almost possible to imagine her clients getting their money's worth.

"That job wasn't making me happy anymore ... So I went to Joyce. I don't know why. I just needed a sign. I needed something."

— Michelle Jackson

Wiccan witch in Marin County with more than four decades of experience and three master's degrees.

"It was a new condo building in Oakland, but there was a parking lot across the street, and I knew terrible crimes had been committed there," Talley tells me. "I could feel children suffering. I'm pretty sure there had been a murder at some point."

Talley built what she calls a "psychic seawall." It's akin to an exorcism, except more benevolent and with none of the Judeo-Christian trappings. According to her own tagline: "No problem is too big, too small, or too weird."

Nor, as Talley's tech clients can attest, too beyond her qualifications.

more vulnerable computer networks often require "a rainbow of colors to divert excess energy." If all else fails, she can cast a protection spell on the entire company, office supplies included.

Talley's foray into tech is still fresh enough that she sometimes calls it the "techno industry." That hasn't dissuaded savvy clients in the market for spiritual counseling, hypnosis, dream therapy, moon rituals, house clearings, potion-brewing, and other niche services. Her speciality? "I really like dealing with demons," she says.

She recounts a recent episode involving a startup whose office alarm was infected by an "invasive species." After multiple electricians

legal counsel. Talley says that when companies are threatened with litigation, she can cast spells to "divert" (one of her pet words) the plaintiff or the plaintiff's attorney. It's all child's play for her, no more taxing than donning the floppy hats that announce her professional uniform.

Talley's philosophy seems to be a melange of ecofeminism, occultism, and a 1-800 hotline. "You can call me 24/7; I'll pick up," she tells me. (That turned out to be false.) Her conversation is strewn with New Age platitudes that shear into harangues against the judicial system, the pris-

Sally Faubion has more than 1,700 clients, some of whom she's counseled for two decades.

For her regular phone clients, the transactions are essentially automated. "Investment questions are really simple and can often be answered with one card over the telephone," Talley says. She and the client put their feet flat on the floor and take deep breaths together over the phone. Then Talley deals her deck of tarot cards one at a time, enjoining the client to imagine his investment clearly. Once he has it in mind, Talley deals cards until Yahweh or Gaia or Ganesh, or the client's deity of choice, compels him to say "stop." Whatever card he landed on is the measure of his fate.

Talley has become something of a den mother to Bay Area women interested in Wicca. In the backyard of her Fairfax duplex, hemmed by a rustic board fence and lush greenery, she emcees monthly moon rituals during which she and a handful of female clients chant into a cauldron, fall in and out of trances, and eat a vegetarian potluck. Men aren't welcome. "I used to invite men but they were just there to get laid," Talley tells me. "They had no interest in goddess worship, and that's very annoying when you're trying to reach the divinity."

The exception is her husband, a frontman for local reggae and New Orleans funk bands. Joyce Van Horn, a friend and occasional client of Talley, claims that Mr. Talley is an angel investor, but Reverend Joey is mum about her husband's alleged riches. "We live in Marin County, and I got a sports car, and we have a great life," is what she says.

A great life in San Francisco's psychic industry is rare. The city is rife with fortunetellers — hole-in-the-wall shops where you can get your palm read or your aura cleaned for \$30. Such places cater to tourists and curiosity-seekers jonesing for a cheap thrill. Some aren't even listed on Yelp; like the city's more unsavory massage parlors, they seem to exist in their own illicit underworld. **» p18**



A lot of them, Sally Faubion says of these psychics, “take advantage of old people and people who don’t know any better.”

You could chalk this up as a businesswoman’s slur against her competitors, except Faubion has a point. In June, *The New York Times* reported on psychics in Manhattan who prey on people in crisis. In exchange for cash, psychics promise miracles they can never deliver: reunions with jilted lovers, career upgrades, sexual conquests. Sometimes they claim to cleanse customers’ money — but clean them out instead.

“The psychic community is close knit, often including members of large families that trace their roots to Roma families, also known as Gypsies,” the *Times* reported. “They compare notes ... There are rules. For example, a ‘three-block rule’ establishes turf boundaries ... Disputes are taken up by a tribunal known as a kris.”

In 2003, San Francisco passed a law requiring psychics to register with the city, submit to fingerprinting, publicly post rate sheets, and pay a \$500 permit fee. The legislation sought to protect consumers from psychics who sold dubious services such as curse-breaking; it was the first law of its kind in a major American city. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported a week after the law passed, there was an uproar among several psychics of Romany descent in San Francisco who felt the new ordinance persecuted them on religious and cultural grounds. (The SFPD noted it had received 60 consumer complaints about psychics in the city between mid-2001 and July 2003.)

The legislation was notable not only for its breadth — the umbrella term “fortunetelling” designated



Sheldon Helms, vice chair of Bay Area Skeptics and an associate professor of psychology at Ohlone College in Fremont, dismisses the psychic industry but isn’t surprised that it attracts tech clients. In an email to *SF Weekly*, Helms wrote that astrologers routinely fail to make testable predictions, while numerologists cherry-pick statements whose vagueness is broadly applicable. Clients do much of the interpretive work themselves, particularly around financial readings. “Psychologists have seen that belief in, and reliance upon, superstition and the paranormal

they were interested in astrology or alternative forms of spirituality. I don’t think that’s true anymore,” she says.

Lanyadoo came to San Francisco from Montreal in 1994. She was 19 at the time, and looking to set up shop in a city that could support a small astrology business. San Francisco’s reputation as a haven for bohemians and misfits was legendary, and its spiritual pedigree was nothing if not alternative. After all, this was where Anton LaVey founded the Church of Satan and where astrologer Joan Quigley held an open invitation to the Reagan White House.

Joyce Van Horn, in her home office, says the popularity of psychics in the tech industry is a “secret that’s coming out.”

practice that continues.) “I remember one reading I did at a tech company and every single reading was about how unhappy the employees were at that particular company, and they were all talking about when they could vest out,” Lanyadoo says.

The tech industry wagers a classic Faustian bargain, Lanyadoo says: the promise of enormous wealth and freedom in exchange for time, brain-

disconnect it and turn away altogether,” Lanyadoo says. “My clients don’t want to disconnect.”

The irony is that the same free-spirited culture that inspired tech to experiment with spirituality is also threatening that spirituality’s existence in San Francisco. “I’ve read countless articles about how all the artists are moving out of the city, but I haven’t read much about what’s happening to the spiritual values of the Bay Area,” Lanyadoo says. “It’s had a crippling effect.” She speaks from personal experience. In December, she was forced out of her apartment in the Mission and relocated to Oakland, where rents are comparatively — if just barely — cheaper. And during the reporting of this story, Joyce Van Horn was boxing up her house of 20 years, the victim of a no-fault eviction.

Neither Lanyadoo nor Van Horn blames tech workers for her reversal of fortune, but the tech companies themselves aren’t without fault. “Look, you can call them dot-coms, you can call them startups, you can throw a bunch of soda in the fridge, it doesn’t matter: These are corporations. Just a new form of that,” Lanyadoo says. Although she acknowledges that the opportunities she’s had “have everything to do with San Francisco,” she’s dismayed by the city’s drift into stratospheric wealth.

For Sally Faubion, what’s happened in San Francisco is the realization of an ancient prophecy. “The Bible says the meek shall inherit the earth, and what are all these tech people but nerds?” In her own research, Faubion has discovered that dozens of tech CEOs’ birthdays fall into the 1-4-7 trilogy that in numerology denotes a tribe of renegades and workaholics.

“Think about it,” Faubion says, ticking off the names, “Steve Jobs, Tim Cook, Travis Kalanick, Bill Gates, Larry Page, Sergey Brin, Paul Allen, Larry Ellison, Elon Musk, Sheryl Sandberg ... it goes on and on.”

If the billionaire meek haven’t inherited the earth yet, they’ve certainly inherited San Francisco, along with its spectacular crash-and-burn destiny. But what about the bohemians and misfits who comprise what used to be called San Francisco’s soul but is now just its mood? Lanyadoo says their extinction will pass unnoticed by the city’s new generation. “There’s been a huge influx of people here recently, but have they lost anything? How do you lose something you never had? They moved here for the technology. They’ve lost nothing.”

In the future, the misfits and the bohemians, the psychics and the astrologers, the numerologists and the white witches will build communities elsewhere. Maybe even in faraway places like Ukraine, where, 10,000 miles from San Francisco, a man named Yegor waits for the devil to take back his gifts.

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“Psychologists have seen that belief in ... superstition and the paranormal increases in areas of our lives where there is randomness and uncertainty.”

— Sheldon Helms

readings based on “cartomancy, psychometry, phrenology, spirits, tea leaves, tarot cards, scrying, coins, sticks, dice, sand, coffee grounds, crystal gazing ... mediumship, seership, prophecy, augury, astrology, palmistry, necromancy, mind reading, [and] telepathy” — but also for its liberality. The definition of fortuneteller under the San Francisco Municipal Code includes anyone “pretending to perform these actions,” thus effectively licensing the sale of occult services even when those services are known to be bogus.

increases in areas of our lives where there is randomness and uncertainty,” Helms wrote. “In the past, we’ve used professional baseball players and their fans as poster children for the tendency to rely upon such superstitions. I suppose now, we’ll be more likely to use investors.”

While there is reason to be wary of palm readers with crystals in the window, Jessica Lanyadoo sees some of the shops as holdovers from San Francisco’s earlier, more idealistic astrologer wave. “This city used to be the place where people came because

Lanyadoo found a cheap apartment in the Mission, a then-seedy neighborhood with drug deals and stabbings a near-weekly ritual in Dolores Park. Almost overnight, Lanyadoo tells me, everything changed. The dot-com bubble loosed a staggering amount of cash on the city, although Lanyadoo estimates it was just a fraction of the wealth in the current tech boom.

Newly minted companies hired Lanyadoo to do private readings in their offices, a practice that continues today. Many required her to sign a nondisclosure agreement (another

power, and loyalty. The rhetoric of the sharing economy, in particular, offers the illusion of community within what Lanyadoo deems a “monoculture.” She says that tech companies, with their foosball tables and climbing walls, enable a prolonged adolescence that, in turn, pushes employees to seek spiritual fulfillment in drugs ... or Burning Man ... or SoulCycle ... or psychics.

“So many people move here from the middle of the country, and they have traditional American values, but entering into tech requires people to either amp up their spirituality or to