

# Is Astrology Fake News?

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Recently, during the increasing media attention surrounding the August 21st Total Solar Eclipse, I watched Chuck Todd, host of Meet the Press Daily on MSNBC, do a brief segment on astrology. Mr. Todd began by saying something (I'm paraphrasing here) about "*the **real** Fake News — not the online variety of the Alt-Right, but a kind of fake news that millions of people follow anyway.*" He then proceeded to mock astrology (which he clearly believes to be bunk) and have a good laugh, as if any "intelligent" viewer would agree.

Having been a professional astrologer for 44 of my 67 years, I have a very thick skin when it comes to the mainstream culture dismissing my discipline as sheer hokum. I've seen, heard, and read such excoriations before — over and over and over — too often to be taken by surprise.

What I want to say in reaction is not that I'm outraged. No, quite the contrary. Instead, I feel that I understand very well Mr. Todd's (and others') point of view. In fact, I've spent a good deal of time during my tenure as an astrologer asking myself a similar question: *Why ISN'T astrology mere bunk and hokum?*

I mean, c'mon, why shouldn't it be? Consider the central presumptions of modern astrology — namely, that the apparent positions of bodies in the heavens as viewed from an individual's time and place of birth somehow correspond to (and can identify) deeply embedded character traits of that individual's personality, and further, reveal through ongoing cycles the specific timing of many significant changes in that individual's journey through life? Wouldn't any rational, thinking person reasonably conclude that this is magical thinking, if not complete lunacy?

I am not and never have been a "true believer" in astrology. Actually, I'm a grudging convert. In 1970, when I first looked into astrology, I did so with profound skepticism.

That year, I was suffering through my great "birthing" love affair (what idiot said that romantic love was pleasurable?), and the coed who was the object of my obsession happened to ask me one day — purely as a throwaway aside — if our astrological birth charts might be "compatible." Ah, there was the hook I needed for my driving ulterior motive (hint, hint). I replied that I would find out.

Initially, I set out to find someone in my midwestern college town who could do our charts, but none of the three people I found passed muster for me. The first was a hippie girl who said stuff like, "*Oh, so you're a Scorpio. Far out!*" Uh, no. The second was a dormitory math nerd with horn-rimmed glasses and a pocket protector, who was fascinated by the celestial mechanics of astrology but couldn't interpret a chart to save his soul. Scratch him off. The third was a "townie," an older woman who was a Theosophical Occultist and lived in a house that was all dark curtains, incense, and gargoyles. Well, that was three strikes and you're out.

Still, it was 1970, and I was a member in good standing of my generation's burgeoning alternative subculture. I said to myself, "*There can't be much to this astrology stuff, I'll just learn to do it myself.*" So, I went down to the local hole-in-the-wall metaphysical bookstore (most college towns had one) and bought the necessary books — ephemerides, tables of houses and logarithms, textbooks, etc.

After a couple weeks of reading to prepare followed by a 16-hour ordeal, I had erected both my beloved's and my own natal charts. Armed with a couple of interpretive textbooks about natal astrology, I began my first tentative "delineations."

I fully expected to find nothing but garbage — random assignments of "qualities" that wouldn't match my perceptions of either of us. Instead, what I discovered shocked me. Even armed only with the canned interpretations of planets in signs, houses, and aspects (which is really the bottom of the barrel in astrology, but about as sophisticated as any astrological textbook can be, given the astonishing complexity of the system), our respective charts reflected who we were with an accuracy that was stunning. Whoa! My beloved's chart corresponded eerily to my own perceptions of her after four months of my obsessive attention, and my own chart "knew" secrets about me that only I knew. On top of that, the interpretations for her chart and mine were as different as night and day. This was not even close to generic information that would apply to anyone. It was both specific and accurate about each of us.

My first reaction was to be dumbfounded. How was this possible? How could it be possible? How could this ridiculous system reveal true information about who we were? I didn't know the answer, but I began asking all my friends for their birth information — full date, accurate time, and place of birth — to see if their charts were as revealing and insightful about them as mine and my beloved's were about us.

That was the beginning of what would within three years become my, ahem, "career" as an astrologer. It was a little like taking a dime out of my pocket — just one thin dime, no big deal, a mere tenth of a dollar — and innocently buying

a ticket for a roller coaster. Once I got on, however, I couldn't get off until the ride was over. And even now, almost half a century later, it's not over yet. So far, the ride just goes on, through twists and turns, good times and bad.

Some days, the ride is downright exhilarating. I raise my arms overhead and shout "Wheeee!" as the roller coaster whooshes down an incline and around a corner. Other days, it's not so much fun. Occasionally, I get nauseous as hell and puke my guts out over the side. But the ride goes on, and mostly, I just hang on.

The the word "astrology" literally means the "logic of the stars," which can be summed up by the phrase, "*As above, so below.*" Astrology assumes that the heavens present an accurate, if symbolic, reflection of life on earth. That central belief is simultaneously both mysteriously compelling and also one hell of a stretch.

Clearly, life on this planet is connected to the mechanics of the solar system. We might say "shaped," but a better phrase would be "in harmony with." Daily periods of day alternating with night as our planet rotates on its axis, the monthly cycle of the moon as it orbits the earth, and the yearly progression of seasons are all profoundly important rhythms.

For instance, a researcher named Brown at the University of Chicago conducted an experiment with a certain species of clams that live on the sand and mud flats of the Massachusetts coastline. Every day when the tide comes in, the clams open their shells at just the right time to receive the plankton and other small organisms on which they feed that are carried in by the incoming ocean tide. As the tide goes out again, they close their shells for protection. Professor Brown went to Massachusetts and collected a sample of live clams, which he then flew to Chicago and placed in a laboratory environment he'd built that replicated their home territory on the Massachusetts coast. Within two days, the clams had adjusted the opening and closing of their shells to be timed exactly when ocean tides would have been high and low, *even though there were no ocean tides in Chicago.*

Brown concluded that the clams' DNA allowed them to accurately and precisely sense the gravitational pull of the Moon and automatically open and close their shells in perfect harmony with the incoming and outgoing tides.

Well, OK. DNA is amazing, animals are smarter than we knew, and life on earth is connected to the heavens. That's all hard-core science. But what about the whole business of character traits in individual human personalities? What about the timing of events that have little or nothing to do with basic biological processes, such as the Saturn Return or the hundreds of other significant cycle activations in astrology that mark significant changes in our life-journeys? How can our charts possibly reveal that???

I don't know. Oh sure, I've read, heard, and even taught all the analogies and metaphors, all the theories that attempt to explain why astrology is real. But I don't *really* understand how or why it works.

What I do know is that science is ill-suited to "prove" or "disprove" the astrology I've been interpreting for clients to make my modest livelihood for the past 40-some years. With an educational background grounded in analytical thought and science, then steeped in psychology, and with some exposure to both eastern and western forms of religion and spirituality, it was obvious to me right from the get-go — when I first looked at my own chart and my beloved's way back in 1970 — that astrology didn't fit into any convenient reality framework. I could see early on that astrology wouldn't lend itself well to the rigors of scientific investigation.

What I mean is that astrology is not science, doesn't live in that realm, and won't translate easily or effectively into the limits and terms of scientific inquiry. If someone wants to prove or disprove astrology through science or statistical studies, they will face an impossible task and almost certainly come to incorrect conclusions. In other words, astrology is a very slippery beast.

At its heart and in actual use, astrology is much more art than science, and its insights emerge (often uncomfortably) out of many different disciplines and approaches to reality. Some of the time, astrology is elegant and sensible. At other times, it is maddeningly obscure and arcane. Unlike science, which is really quite young, astrology goes back so far in human history that its roots are lost in the mists of time. As a result, some of astrology's ancient rules seem quite bizarre for contemporary life, while certain of its more modern metaphors and analogs may be a bit too convenient and facile.

Another important consideration is that charts don't talk. They just sit there on the printed page or LCD screen as symbolic mandalas. Human beings have to interpret those symbols through written or spoken language, and once you start doing that, look out! You are then filtering an archetypal system through all the flaws and fallibilities of human nature, and that can (and does) lead to all sorts of mischief. You'd better be damned careful about what you say as the astrologer, or what you believe as the student or client.

Then too is the difficulty that the symbolic language of astrology is not the same as the everyday language of English. The way that people typically think about their lives and the questions to which they want answers are often not even remotely similar to the language of an astrological chart, which is a different paradigm completely. In a sense, astrology requires an entirely different perspective on one's life.

Beyond even that is the extraordinary complexity of the astrological system itself. An astrologer named Marc Edmund Jones — who was a seminal figure in

astrology's rejuvenation in the mid-20th-century — once defined astrology as "*the study of the relationship of everything to everything else*," and that's a pretty good description. Any astrological chart contains enough information through the interaction of the symbols to fill an entire universe. Sifting through such an inconceivably vast symbolic language requires great savvy in what to focus on versus what to ignore. Since it's all interpretation anyway, mistakes are all too easy to make, despite our best efforts to be truthful and accurate.

An astrological chart is like a gigantic pavilion or fairground in which a battle of the bands is being held, with many musical groups playing different kinds of music all at once: classical orchestral symphonies, rock and roll, Irish ceilidhs, Bulgarian vocal choirs, troubadour ballads, Kabuki music, Gregorian chants, and so on, damn near to infinity. Sometimes the overall effect is amazingly beautiful — the Music of the Spheres. Other times, it's an ear-splitting, brain-disturbing cacophony of noise. Making sense of a chart (and translating it into relevant, usable, shared information) requires not only great technical skill and experience, but also a sense of proportion and grace. As I wrote earlier, astrology is more art than science.

After more than four decades, I think I've heard just about every argument put forth to defend or attack astrology's validity. Many of the arguments on both sides make a good deal of sense, and some are quite compelling. At this point, however, they've all grown tiresome for me. I have no interest in arguing in defense of astrology, and the arguments against it show me time and again how little the people who make those supposedly damning cases know about what astrology really is. Sure, they think it's a scam, a flim-flam, like snake oil sold to a gullible public, and they believe that all of us who practice astrology professionally are either deluded or con artists. But every so often the objections the critics raise against astrology are thoughtful and well worth considering. Hell, I personally object to some of what passes for astrology.

So, it's not that I dismiss the arguments against astrology out of hand. I don't. In fact, I try to make damned sure that I don't fall into the many traps that result in misuse or abuse of the system. In that way, astrology is like golf. No matter how good a golfer you are, you'll occasionally hit the ball into a sand trap or water hole, or you'll miss a two-foot putt and take a bogey. Like every other discipline, astrology can be profoundly humbling.

The wonder is that, in my experience and opinion, astrology does work — not infallibly and not perfectly, but sometimes with stunning relevance. The "Ah-Ha!" factor in astrology can, on occasion, be life-changing. I wish I understood how and why it works, but astrology remains shrouded as part of the astonishing, profound Mystery of Everything. For me, that's OK.