

# When Will This End?

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For the past 44 years, I've earned my modest livelihood as a professional astrologer in private practice. I didn't set out to become an astrologer, but that's what happened. Over the past four and a half decades, I've done 12,000 sessions, most with individuals. Of all the varying questions I've been asked by clients, certain types of questions come up time and again.

The particular question I want to address in this commentary may not be the single most frequently asked in my session work. I don't have an actual list of the most asked questions, but I recognize the more common questions when I hear them, and this is definitely one I've been asked very often. Frequently, I can tell that clients are thinking it whether or not they actually ask it.

The question is: "*When will this end?*" The word "this" in the question refers to some specific circumstance or set of conditions that my client is going through. As one might expect, the circumstance referred to is almost always difficult or unpleasant — hardly anyone asks when happy times will end. I don't wish to imply that clients have sessions with me only when they're suffering or unhappy. That's not true. People consult me in good times and bad.

In the initial draft of this commentary, I composed an entire page about how I can write only about my own work and don't presume to speak for other astrologers, whether western or vedic, but I nixed that page. I don't want to wander from the point of this short essay, which is to discuss the two difficulties I encounter as an astrologer in addressing the question, "*When will this end?*"

The first difficulty involves a language problem. Ego-based human beings (meaning me and everyone I know) tend to think about our lives and circumstances in a particular language. We know what we're experiencing, and we organize our thinking around that personal experience, especially how it feels to us.

Astrology, however, speaks in a very different language. Charts are symbolic mandalas, and astrology's various systems of cycles activating through time (I use what are called transits in my professional work) refer to that symbolic mandala to unravel and reveal the various chapters of a life-journey through developmental changes, wild-card interventions, beginnings and endings, etc.

To put it bluntly, charts do not care about our ego-experience. Certain factors in a chart or pattern of active cycles over a given period may refer tangentially to our human experience, with its emphasis on feelings and overall tone, but, just as often, the chart makes no reference to our actual experience at all. Charts say, *"This is what is operating now in your personal archetype field, and here's how it relates to your purpose and meaning."* The manifestations of that can and do extend from forms our egos like to forms our egos hate.

But wait, Bill, doesn't astrology define "auspicious" versus "inauspicious" times for specific undertakings and activities? Well, sort of, but not usually in the manner that much of the public presumes. The assumption that charts specify our individual "talents" and "liabilities" is similar. It turns out that everything in astrology is two-sided (and often more multidimensional than just two sides). Every symbol or combination of symbols has expressions that we'll probably like and other expressions that we probably won't.

To a degree, astrology can predict which direction a given symbol will tend to take, in terms of our liking or not liking it. For instance, Saturn (in all its manifestations, from natal to cyclic) will typically be experienced as challenging, difficult, weighty, or serious. And yes, Saturn's activation in our charts is frequently accompanied by blockage or delay, either internal or external. By contrast, Jupiter tends to be associated with an increase of psychological buoyancy and feelings of permission, optimism, and ease. Thus, the linkage of Jupiter with "good fortune" or periods of "good luck." (Ah, if it were only so simple...)

That said, however, when Saturn's challenges are addressed with patience, fortitude, and sustained effort, the results can have lasting effects of great goodness in our lives, providing a solid foundation on which to build. Conversely, Jupiter's optimism and "good feelings" are all too easily squandered. The buoyant sense of permission can erode into privilege or entitlement. The upside of Jupiter is opportunity seized; the downside is opportunity wasted or ignored.

The same is true of Mars and Venus — Mars tends to provoke the experience of conflict, inflammation, or sharpness, while Venus promotes the experience of harmony, ease, or smooth pleasure. These are not absolutes, however. Just because one feels nice (Venus) while the other is over-stimulating (Mars) is not an end in itself. Any particular person may be a good or bad soldier, and any individual may also be a loving partner or shameless libertine. The chart alone may hint at a direction, but it won't tell us with any certainty. A natal Mercury-Neptune square may correspond to mental confusion and shameless lying (as it seems to in Donald Trump's chart), but the same configuration may also express as extraordinary intuition and a poetic sensibility. Character is complex. Possibilities within a chart are always leavened by factors from beyond the chart.

The outer planets (Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto) present a different situation. Outer planets are symbolic wild-cards. They introduce disruptive elements into our lives from the subconscious or superconscious, forcing us to make changes in direction that we probably wouldn't undertake otherwise. In that sense, they are part of a larger reality than our egos are inclined to embrace. Whether we will be pleased by the changes or shocked and dismayed at having the rug pulled out from under us is not within the realm of simple choice or ego-control. We get what we get from these jokers, and we roll with the punches.

Add to all that the fact that symbols don't operate in isolation, but as part of a complete, textured mandala of personhood, with many symbols operating and interacting simultaneously, and the plot thickens considerably. Determining from the chart as a whole an overall ego-based tone of experience is not easy, to put it mildly.

So yes, to a limited extent, astrology allows us to predict how we will react to our changing, kaleidoscopic patterns of life-experience. But not nearly as fully as some people hope it can, and even then mainly in terms of process rather than outcomes.

The second difficulty of addressing the question, "*When will this end?*" involves timing.

If I'm doing a session with a client who has described a personal situation of challenge, difficulty, or suffering, I may be able to identify a particular active cycle or an ongoing pattern of cycles that corresponds to that life-experience. I can sometimes offer a time frame when that pattern began. Frequently, my client's response is, "*Oh my God, that's exactly when this started!*" That's not always the case, but it does occur often enough to be a little spooky.

Is it not logical then for clients to assume that, having identified the beginning point in time of an experience by linking it to a particular cycle or pattern in their charts, I would also be able to identify the end point? Yes, that's sensible, but sadly, it's often not true.

The problem here is that our life-experience frequently has consequences that extend beyond the period of symbolic stimulus. Transits come and go, they arise and pass away, but our experience often perseveres, sometimes extending into and affecting the future. For example, having a baby is an experience that takes less than a year from conception to birth, but the impact of having and raising a child (or, conversely, of not having one...) then continues for decades, usually changing our lives permanently. Whatever happens — whether we create it or it happens to us without our consent — can and sometimes does last far beyond the initial period of its origin. The fact that astrology can't always account for such variables is not a shortcoming of the system, it's simply part of Life's complexity.

Having studied and practiced astrology for my entire adult life, I am well-versed in many limitations of the system, as well as pitfalls in using it. Along the way, I think I've made just about every mistake one can in using astrology, and I hope I've learned from them. Every human system, however, from theoretical physics to plumbing, contains weirdness. Study any system of understanding reality long enough, and we'll discover that weirdness. Certainly astrology has its share.

More often than not, however, the difficulties encountered in astrology are caused by our own misunderstandings rather than by the system itself. Our beliefs about what astrology *should* be able to tell us are sometimes unrealistic, based more in magical thinking than in a mature understanding of the discipline itself and its natural limitations.

Living, as we do, in a culture that regards the system and discipline of astrology as nonsense, sheer hokum, I've had to acknowledge my own contrarian temperament. I can't blame the culture for my choices. British economist E.F. Schumacher, who published a collection of his economic essays in a seminal 1973 book entitled *Small is Beautiful* (that is even more relevant today than it was then), told an interviewer that he was a contrarian. Had society embraced human-scaled economics, Schumacher said, rather than impersonal, gargantuan enterprises, he probably would have written a book entitled *Large is Beautiful*. Such are the vagaries and apparent contradictions of human nature.

The upshot is this: *Can astrology accurately and reliably reveal when a particular experience of suffering will end in our lives?* My answer is: *Sometimes*.

Very often, however, the answer to that question is more complicated than we would like. Both the question and the answer touch on so many different layers of our lives — realities and illusions, understandings and misunderstandings, tangibles and intangibles, the material and the spiritual — that coming up with a simple and straightforward answer is usually difficult, frequently inaccurate, and often moot. Experiences end in a million different ways and for a thousand different reasons.

The question is, however, a recurring spur for me to persevere in studying the whole dilemma of human suffering. I don't claim to have solved that riddle, but I've found some interesting pieces of the puzzle along the way, and the picture is gradually becoming clearer to me. Admittedly, my long experience with astrology leads me to look elsewhere for the answer, but I continue to value the many insights that astrology offers me and others. As one layer of the mystery, astrology does pretty well, all things considered.