

*astrological-cultural-spiritual-political
views & commentary...*

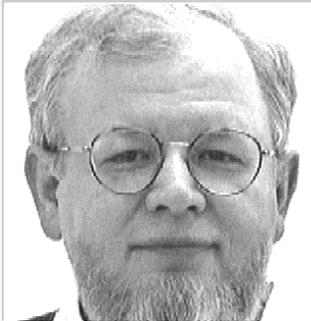
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THE HERBST NEWSLETTER



Thoughts, dates, & reminders about our lives as members of the craziest species on this lovely planet. Like a message in a bottle washing up on the sandy shores of consciousness...

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Dear friends,

During Pluto's 245-year journey around the zodiac, its passage through each of the twelve signs marks periods of profound change in civilization. These sign passages vary dramatically in length, from less than twelve years in Scorpio to more than 32 years in Taurus.

Back in 1994-95, many astrologers wrote about Pluto's then-imminent entry into Sagittarius. Given Sagittarius' stature as the most optimistic, truth-seeking sign of the zodiac, numerous astrological forecasts—some of which are still archived on the internet—painted a glowing picture of

what might emerge over that 13-year passage. I didn't write about it at the time, but I was as hopeful as anyone that civilization would be transformed for the better.

Some astrologers did accurately point out certain of the dangers (religious extremism, terrorism, forced conformity, etc.), but I think it safe to say that few of us in astrology had a grasp then of the totality of change that would alter the collective landscape.

So here, more than halfway through Pluto's passage through Sagittarius, I'll add my thoughts on one aspect of this watershed.

LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

Uncertainty is a fact of life for human beings. Our hopes, dreams, needs, and desires, however authentic and heartfelt they may be, do not infallibly shape our experience. Our efforts may influence reality, but they cannot control it. Life is too vast, too unknowable, and impossible to predict.

In general, we human beings have not yet found graceful ways to live with the frustration of life's uncertainties. Psychologically and even biochemically, we're not built to cope with the overwhelming complexity of our experience. Unlike all other animals on this planet, human beings need the solace of apparent certainty. We live in various states of denial, taking refuge in simpler beliefs, feelings, and ideas. Our big brains allow us to lose ourselves in ourselves. We cannot banish doubt, confusion, and ambiguity, but we try to hold them at bay.

Systematic pursuits such as religion, science, and philosophy strive to reveal order within the apparent chaos of life, whether that order is considered natural or divine. (Astrology is among these.) Other

disciplines, such as morality, ethics, and law, attempt to impose human order and thus limit chaos. All such schemes are designed to remove at least some of the more unpleasant aspects of uncertainty from our lives.

Enter Pluto.

Pluto shows where our obsessions will be purged through a glut of expression, rather like a cosmic colonic. Like an angel of death, Pluto is ruthless and extreme. All or nothing, which turns out to be: ALL, then nothing. Whatever has grown toxic inside us, festering beneath the level of our awareness, kept barely in check by other competing forces, is brought to the surface. What has been hidden is revealed. Pluto concentrates and intensifies our secret compulsions until they overwhelm every other consideration and explode into reality. The envelope is pushed to extremes and beyond, over the edge into the chaos that presages a new birth.

Renewed health and sanity depend on periodically cleansing ourselves of our excesses. Paradoxically, however, to get well we first have to realize when we are sick. Human beings rarely give up our obsessions until after those unbalanced passions have spun dangerously out of control. By that time, the infection overflows beyond the limited focus of the obsession, affecting every other aspect of our lives.

Consider what happened to intimate relationships and marriage during Pluto's passage through Libra in the 1970s. The romantic notions of love leading to life-long marriage that had shaped western culture for centuries were upended by the sexual revolution, challenged by the feminist movement toward equality, and crushed by unforeseen changes in the economic structure of life in America. The lure of new and better romance undermined stability and commitment in relationships, while the need for two incomes put additional stress on marriages. Divorce rates soared. The notion of couples being together "until death us do part" took a huge hit. Single-parent and blended families statistically overwhelmed the traditional Ozzie-and-Harriet nuclear family. Ward and June Cleaver became anachronisms, despite the resistance of our mythology to catch up.

Then, when Pluto passed through Scorpio during the early 1980s to mid-1990s, the appearance of AIDS marked the sudden end of the sexual revolution. The party was over as sex and death merged all too literally. Not only were we slow to appreciate the seriousness of the AIDS pandemic and other emerging immunoviruses (which now ravage the continent of Africa and threaten the antibiotic technologies of western medicine), but it remains uncertain whether we have understood the spiritual importance of regarding sex as a sacred and potent power. Pluto has told us in no uncertain terms that if we don't transcend our compulsions around sexuality, we endanger our future as a species.

These changes are not limited to the period of Pluto's passage through a given sign. Their deep roots can be traced back decades earlier, and the repercussions of the destruction extend for many decades after (in part, because people born during these periods continue to play out the "rebirth" or "resurrection" phases throughout the rest of their lives). Still, the years during which Pluto occupies a certain sign represent the fulcrum, a time of critical mass, when we see the crude, shocking, and often exaggerated evidence of our unbalanced illness—like a drunk who is increasingly manic and happy in his inebriated state until the very moment when he is seized by vomiting and dry heaves. Or worse, when he kills someone by driving drunk. As damaging as our personal excesses may be, they ripple out eventually into broader social repercussions.

So we encounter a central paradox: Pluto is the antidote to too much of a good thing. It shows us where over-development of certain areas in our collective experience or philosophy have become toxic to our health and are spinning out of control. Pluto reveals where we are lost as a society. Curiously, however, these are the precise areas where we tend to act out most unconsciously. "No," we protest, "we're not sick, we're healthier than ever! More is better!"

But more is not always better. Too much of a good thing results inevitably in its opposite. What we fall in love with may become the albatross around our necks, the source of our own undoing and downfall.

- *Television is a wonderful technology to educate and entertain. Too much television, however, turns us into passive observers, junkies for image massage.*
- *Corporations are imaginary entities invented to serve people, and they do this brilliantly within carefully guarded limitations. When corporations are given the rights of persons, however, when they grow too large and powerful, they enslave us, dehumanize our lives, and destroy cultures.*

- *Money is an extraordinary medium of exchange to foster productive interaction between human beings. When the quest for money devolves into outright greed, however, all other human values are overwhelmed, and our interactions regress into the feral competition of dog-eat-dog.*

Which brings us to Pluto in Sagittarius.

The sign Sagittarius represents infectious optimism, personal opportunism, and ideals of social participation. It spurs the enthusiastic pursuit of collective identity, the sense of belonging in a group with unified values. The search for overarching principles and illuminating truths takes shape here. Visionary ideas sharpen our moral sensibilities and give purposeful direction to our passions, elevating us above our own weaknesses and baser instincts.

And yet, the Sagittarian quest for truth casts a shadow. Great truths may be universal, but they are neither simple nor straightforward. Like the symbol for the Tao, where yin is contained within yang and vice versa, profound truths are rife with subtlety, irony, and paradox. Sagittarius has little appreciation for such distinctions. Sagittarian wisdom is based on quick realization rather than long reflection. It is more broad than deep, more youthful than mature, and more literal than metaphorical.

Faith and religion provide solace against life's fearful uncertainties. When spiritual teachings crystallize into hardened dogma, however, true reverence for life's mysteries is replaced by false and unbecoming certainty. One of the blessings of doubt is humility; when we banish doubt by fanatical belief in an ideology, humility is also lost. We fall prey to hubris, speaking for God, claiming to know the intentions of the Divine.

"Hubris" means overbearing presumption, haughtiness, and arrogance. The word has ancient Greek origins implying excessive pride and wanton violence. It is a psycho-spiritual personality disorder that grows out of vanity and narcissism. Pluto in Sagittarius amplifies these tendencies.

With Pluto, what starts out in one direction is pushed to such an extreme that it becomes the opposite, like the dragon eating its own tail. In Libra, marriage ends in divorce. In Scorpio, sex becomes death. And in Sagittarius, sincere striving for universal truths devolves into extreme self-righteousness—the self-deception that truth is absolute, black and white (where my beliefs are objectively "correct," and you're just plain wrong to believe otherwise). The tendency toward all-encompassing ideas and consummate truths has been pushed even further over the past eight years by both Uranus and Neptune moving through Aquarius.

This extremism is not exclusive to one end of the spectrum, whether political, religious, or economic. It bleeds across the entire bell curve, from the far right to the far left, from religious fundamentalists to spiritual new-agers, and from the rich to the poor. Coping with the complexity and ambiguity of modern life has become more than our psyches can bear. The sheer pace of change is now dizzying. We long for simple, easy-to-swallow truths to restore our lost sense of safety, stability, and belonging. And since such comforting truths are nowhere to be found in reality, we manufacture them from the whole cloth of imagination and ideology.

But false certainties do not address, counterbalance, or neutralize real uncertainties. Beneath the superficial platitudes, doubt is amplified, and nagging anxieties are exaggerated. Fear deepens.

Since 1995, what's happened in America has been a rollercoaster ride, a time where "unbelievable" is not just another overused adjective.

- *Clinton's sex scandal and the witch-hunt impeachment*
- *irrational exuberance in the stock market bubble*
- *subsequent economic collapse and recession*
- *a disputed Presidential election decided by the Supreme Court*
- *endless corporate scandals that bilked employees and investors*
- *defrocking of the Catholic Church*
- *the spectacular, live-on-TV terrorist attacks of 9-11*
- *the bombing of Afghanistan*
- *homeland security and other draconian legislation*
- *Bush's war in Iraq—build-up, invasion, and ongoing occupation*

All these melodramas resonate with the symbolism of Pluto in Sagittarius. Ethics, morality, law, and religion were repeatedly sullied by duplicity and conceit. Opportunism expanded into corrupt self-interest. Wild optimism proved unfounded. Authorities on all sides of the various conflicts offered sweeping justifications that proved untrustworthy. Misinformation, deception, self-delusion, and outright lies all took their turns masquerading as truth.

And through it all, noble principles were invoked time and time again. The further we sink into the quagmire of doubt, mistrust, and uncertainty, the more we wrap ourselves in the flag of our glorious mythology.

America is certainly not alone in preferring comforting myths to harsh realities. Every nation plays fast and loose with its own fictions. Ours, however, are strikingly universal in their appeal. America created the modern notion of democracy, with the hope of unlimited opportunity, unfettered pursuit of wealth, and the lofty promise of “freedom and justice for all.” We also created Hollywood, Disneyland, and Advertising. In America, ideals have always intertwined with dreams, which are then packaged with a hard-nosed, pragmatic concern for the bottom line. We can sell anything, especially to ourselves.

With Uranus entering Pisces, the last five years of Pluto’s passage through Sagittarius may take a subtly different direction. From this point on, Plutonian intensification and purging may have less to do with issues of truth or falsehood and more to do with the nature of belief itself.

Two central questions now arise: *Where do we put our faith? And how should we offer it?*

We all need to believe in something, even during a time when much of what passes for truth is questionable. Skepticism is definitely required, but so is trust. Our hearts yearn to open, even at the risk of disillusionment later.

Each of us will find outlets for our particular devotion, for it’s a big world and many paths are available. What is common to all the roads we might choose is the necessity of our treading lightly where faith, trust, and belief are concerned. We should keep our balance and remain alert, opening our hearts and minds to whatever feels right for us, but not surrendering our critical judgment and independent will.

As the old saying goes, “*If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him—for he is not the true Buddha.*” A somewhat gentler way of expressing a similar caution is to remember that we are surrounded by people who want us to buy their wares, and many of them will tell us whatever they think we want to hear to make the sale. So we need to make sure we know what we’re really buying before we sign on the dotted line and hand over our money, trust, love, or support.

Belief should not require blind obedience. Instead, our faith should be awake and aware. The freedom to give our trust out of love and to take it back when necessary is the only real security we have in an uncertain world.



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