

*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,

Among astrologers, the birth chart for America used most often is the so-called "Sibly" chart, erected for the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776, at 5:10 p.m. local mean time, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

In that chart, two pairs of planetary relationships stand out in bold relief as extreme conflicts. The first is the Sun in Cancer/8th house squared to Saturn in Libra/10th house. The second is Mars in Gemini/7th house squared to Neptune in Virgo/9th house. If that astro-jargon makes sense to you, fine. If not, don't worry, because I'll explain what it means in plain English.

Starting this month, both of those dramatic planetary pairs will be activated in the most major ways possible. From October through next June, Saturn in the heavens will conjoin the USA Sun in Cancer. Then in January, and for almost two years to come, Pluto will oppose Mars and square Neptune in the USA chart. These and other overlapping astrological events in the birth chart of America carry profound symbolic meanings. How we handle them will have sweeping consequences for our future as nation, both pragmatically and spiritually.

Last month we passed the culmination (the halfway-point) of the Sun-Mars-Uranus configuration I wrote about often over the past year. Even as the objective results of that aggressive explosion continue to play out, we are moving into a new and quite different feeling. False triumphalism is giving way to somber concerns about unintended consequences on many levels. What those in power have wrought is now coming home to roost.

There's a great deal to be said about the astrological events emerging in America's chart, and I will write about them often in the upcoming year. Setting up what I want to say to effectively illuminate the implications of these developments will take a number of newsletters, however, so please bear with me. This is just the first installment.

AMERICA: CHART AND SOUL

CONFLICTS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Part One: Sun Square Saturn in America's Chart

In any natal chart, the Sun indicates the central source of power and meaning. It reveals the life-purpose through a set of core experiences that act as a magnetic center. Though correctly associated with vitality and pride, the Sun's deeper function is coherence—it is the organizing principle whose expression allows our lives to make sense to us.

In the USA natal chart, the 8th house Cancer Sun indicates that the power and purpose at the heart of the American Dream reside in two fundamental drives. The first is the protection of family through ownership of one's own home. Nothing is more sacred in America than property rights and home ownership. The second, more general drive is the creation of wealth, usually through business, but even more through inheritance. Our heritage of material abundance emerges fundamentally from the blessings of the land itself through the extraordinary natural resources of this continent, which we have plumbed and exploited with a gusto few other cultures can match. Americans worked this land with a singular genius for business and passed on a legacy of inherited wealth and power. In one sense at least, pursuing, amassing, and handing down riches from one generation to the next within blood families or small networks of friends and associates is the very essence of the American experience. More about that later.

Though this particular Sun position has other, more provocative meanings—sex, death, and spiritual transformation among them—a basic, pragmatic conservatism bulls through. Saturn's placement in the 10th house at precisely a right angle to the Sun (the "square" relationship) indicates that we embody a certain no-nonsense attitude, especially about the importance of commerce. We may be sentimental about our history, but our ambitions are altogether hard-edged. Americans believe almost desperately in the unfettered pursuit of material wealth for themselves and their families.

We evolved from the tough pioneer conquests of our early history, through a cut-throat entrepreneurial industrial age of mass production, to our current posture as self-righteous defenders of capitalism and free markets. For better or worse, the profit motive of business is the American mantra, more a national religion than an economic system. Look at a dollar bill sometime—really look at it. Even our money is an alchemical blend of spiritual magic and common sense. That's where we have invested our power.

This core relationship of Sun and Saturn in America's chart has other meanings, however—meanings that go far beyond simple ambition and hard work to achieve success in business. A deeper and entirely contradictory karmic agenda is also implicit in the symbolism.

In every natal chart, Saturn shows the restrictions, obstacles, and harsh responsibilities forced on us. Though Saturn's limitations and blocks are not welcomed by the ego, they serve a critical function. They remind us that unrestrained power is too often arrogant and corrupt by smacking us hard with the repercussions. Saturn cannot prevent us from overstepping the bounds of spiritual humility, but it lets us know in no uncertain terms when we have done so. The Sun provides the basic power; Saturn sets the limits to the use of that power. Too much Sun and too little Saturn makes us drunk with the egotism of power and pride. Too much Saturn with too little Sun, however, and we sink into frustration, impotence, and despair. We need both symbols in balance to live sanely, with dignity and reverence.

In the USA chart, Saturn is in Libra, positioned overhead in the parental—and paternal—area of the 10th house. Our most serious responsibilities as a nation emerge in issues of balance, fairness, and the protection of social equality. Saturn's position suggests that our collective mission in the world (as opposed to our self-centered purpose of amassing wealth and property) is to foster "justice for all."

The tight square between the Sun and Saturn in our nation's birth chart indicates that our solar purpose is always tied to our limiting responsibilities in ways that are at conspicuously at odds with each other. A profound spiritual struggle is being played out in America, one that we can neither escape nor permanently resolve. Our "God-given right" to pursue wealth for ourselves and our families is in dramatic contradiction to our sober responsibilities to promote a social contract of fairness, equality, and justice for every individual.

Thus, the fabled American Dream is always at war with itself. One part of The Dream is "streets paved with gold," where anyone can succeed through grit and hard work. Another part involves not only amassing wealth, but achieving power and control over others. A third element is justice, where no one is supposed to be above the rule of law. And a fourth is social equality, where everyone has a fair chance at a decent life.

All these elements of the American Dream are woven into the fabric of our national mythology. Each is held out as a fervent hope for different people, even though the separate parts of the Dream are utterly contradictory and often mutually exclusive. And behind The Dream is a deep feeling of destiny—the belief in American exceptionalism, the certainty that America is fated to lead the world toward a new Valhalla that integrates the values of both prosperity and justice. This is a very tall order, and whether that assumption is a humble truth or an arrogant falsehood is still being tested. So far, it has been both.

The Ongoing Struggle of American History

At any given period in our complex history, certain elements of The Dream rise to ascendancy and dominance in the collective American psyche, while other elements are temporarily held down.

Our first century was more about unrestrained opportunism than social equality. Rugged individualism held sway, and pursuit of wealth won out over justice. Law and government, especially the concept of federal government, were minimal. We wanted the entire continent, so we either bought it outright or simply took it by force. Power over others manifested in the destruction of indigenous AmerIndian cultures and imported African slavery. The latter culminated finally in the bloodbath of the Civil War, which, while technically freeing us from the shame of slavery, resulted not in greater social equality, but rather in the centralized authority of the federal government and corporate commerce. In the Gilded Age of Robber Barons that followed, corporations emerged as legal entities with immense power and all the rights of persons—a 19th-century mistake that now haunts us in the 21st.

For numerous reasons, our country skirted much of the madness of the 20th century. We were insulated by our ideals, by our privilege, by our youth and optimism, by two vast oceans, and also by our own comforting illusions. Throughout the social and philosophical struggles of the most violent century in human history, America eased through its many problems and chugged along relatively unscathed, while the rest of the world quite nearly destroyed itself. We grew into a juggernaut of economic influence and military might, but we retained a basic decency that was sincere, even though we remained naïve, somewhat self-righteous, and didn't always practice what we preached.

Despite the injustices America overlooked—and there were many, some of them grievous—we attempted to balance those transgressions with a fundamental goodness, expressed through the beliefs that human life was sacred, that equality mattered, and that each human being deserved the chance for a good life. To the limited extent that we can even talk about real spirituality at the level of mass culture, America became a shining beacon of hope on this planet during the first half of the 20th century.

In asserting this, I understand and accept that spirituality is not the same as material wellbeing. Wealth, in its most-often-used context of amassing capital and wielding the power it brings, is not enlightenment, nor is it maturity. The great spiritual teachers throughout history have pointed out repeatedly that temporal riches are not the same as the Kingdom of Heaven. So I'm not suggesting that America's extraordinary endowment of physical bounty was, is, or should be the measure of our spiritual achievements. Still, our conspicuous abundance of physical resources and economic wealth has always been relevant to the question of American spirituality.

Myths Versus Realities

Our mythology tells us that America is a “land of opportunity” where every person can better his lot through hard work. We speak glibly of “self-made” people and hold up their success stories as models. Some of us also cling to the propaganda that those who do not succeed materially are lazy, stupid, or otherwise deficient in character. No doubt all of these assumptions are sometimes true. Too often, however, they are cruel falsehoods, mere justifications for fictions we choose to embrace.

The folklore of pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps may have been true for many Americans, especially during the flood of immigration from 1890-1920. The darker truth that has driven American history, however, is not primarily individual self-reliance, but rather the power of inherited wealth. Those born into rich families established themselves as the ruling class, usually quietly, and always cloaked in secrecy behind the scenes. Despite our overt disdain for royalty and the divine right of kings, American democracy has been mostly a sham. Our royalty is the moneyed elite. While the rest of us scramble for our piece of the pie of abundance, the super-rich—whose money comes predominantly from inherited privilege—have parlayed their power into iron-fisted control of the country.

I don’t mean to suggest that the rich are less virtuous or more heinous than the poor. Wealth may make some people insensitive to the suffering of others, while poverty may breed in some people a seething resentment toward the rich, but these generalities are misleading stereotypes. At all levels, the bell curve applies. There are wonderful and dreadful human beings at every economic level. Finally, this is less a question of class distinctions than of the inherent problems of concentration and scale. When unlimited wealth and power are concentrated into too few hands, equality and justice fade into mere lip service. Lack of consequences for those who wield such unimaginable resources has a corrupting effect, especially in modern corporate culture. Even in the midst of recent corporate scandals—the biggest and most widespread in American history—those individuals at the top who were implicated admit neither responsibility nor remorse. Such are the failings of human nature.

The progressive political movements of the late-19th and early-20th centuries were attempted antidotes to family-based plutocracy. The social covenant that emerged in this country during the last century was—for all its flaws—an amazing and largely unprecedented development in human civilization. After the altogether improbable event of our birth in revolution, followed by multiple crises in a rough-and-tumble 19th century, the momentum of social reform at the beginning of the 20th century forced America to consider that opportunities to acquire wealth should not be limited only to those of privilege and status.

We challenged the notions of blind fate by an awkward process of social engineering through laws of regulation and entitlement that, to a small extent at least, limited the overwhelming power of those who had much, while empowering those who had less. As distasteful as that was to some people, especially in business, the reforms grew out of a concern for the common welfare, the greater good. We were beginning to mature in responding to our Saturnian responsibilities.

Of course, no one can remove the inherent inequities of life and the mysteries of fate. Our efforts to promote and maintain a modestly equitable distribution of wealth and social advancement were sometimes crude, usually biased, and often ineffective. Nevertheless, America pushed the envelope of human spirituality by confronting the assumption held throughout the entire history of civilization, namely, that those born into wealth were inherently deserving—literally, as if God loved them better—while those born into low status were indeed worthless and deserved their impoverishment. We couldn’t banish greed and injustice—those traits are well-entrenched in the recesses of human nature—but we tried to chip away at their bogus justifications.

Our metaphysical presumption in these reforms was that the accident of birth should not be the dominant factor in who gets more and who gets less. Instead, we went out of our way to level the playing field at least a little. In so doing, we challenged ourselves to rise above the worst elements of human nature—greed, hatred, and violence.

Beyond the obvious bellwether programs of Social Security or Medicare, consider the GI Bill. This extraordinary legislation after World War II set aside a part of the national wealth (via taxes) to allow those who served in the armed forces to attend college afterwards. This was a social equalizer, providing a

leg up toward successful careers for ex-soldiers, based not on privilege or class, but on service to their country alone. Admittedly, the benefits were skewed toward white, middle-class ex-soldiers, but that valid criticism does not negate the fact that the middle class was dramatically expanded by this progressive legislation. America was a better country for it.

But the movements toward social equality and economic parity that marked much of the 20th century have come undone. Over the past 30 years, the pendulum has swung back with a vengeance. The law of the jungle has fiercely reasserted itself. The relationship of America's Sun and Saturn—always stressful—has tilted crazily, disrupting the delicate balance between pursuit of wealth and social responsibility. Both business and government are now dominated by an unyielding ideology that recognizes only the bottom line of profits, and the public good be damned. This generation of power brokers makes the Robber Barons of the Gilded Age appear modest and gentle by comparison.

The Dance of the Mundane and the Spiritual

How does this ongoing struggle affect consciousness? One answer is that we grow through both pleasure and pain, through wellbeing and through suffering. All of us get both ends of the scale over our lifetimes, and much of the proportion is custom-tailored to who we are as individuals. Still, the state of the collective influences this mix, sometimes intensely. What happens to each of us is not just a function of our private lives. The belief in “creating one's own reality” so common to New Age philosophies tends to discount the fact that realities interpenetrate. When collective wellbeing is disturbed, more of us—many more—are forced to evolve spiritually through suffering rather than joy.

Real events are factors in this, such as economic depression, loss of jobs, and the tragedy of war. But less tangible, more subtle factors also affect our spiritual paths—the psychic condition of our families and friends, our communities, and our nation. Mature consciousness is less likely to flourish when the force fields around us are whacked. Polluted water kills fish, and a polluted psychic environment stifles human consciousness. We are moving through a period in American history where cold fear is an invisible but icy presence—not only in fear of violence, but in the alienation of a society that is losing its basic humanity.

Lies and illusions also play a role in consciousness. Fantasy always intertwines with reality, and sometimes that merging is creative and fertile for real spiritual growth. When illusions overwhelm reality in poisonous toxicity, however, the effect on authentic spirituality is chilling. And we are moving through such a time, where sincere beliefs too often serve cynical ends. Hearts can be fooled as easily as minds, and America is now a land where deception rules. This would be shocking were it not so routine and banal.

So what I intend to write about in upcoming newsletters is no mere history lesson, nor just the usual blather of politics. It's much more than that. The factors emerging in America's birth chart over the next two years will affect not only Americans, but beings all over our lovely, troubled planet, and in ways that are every bit as spiritual as they are mundane.

The soul of our country is at stake, and we're about to hit bottom.



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