

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

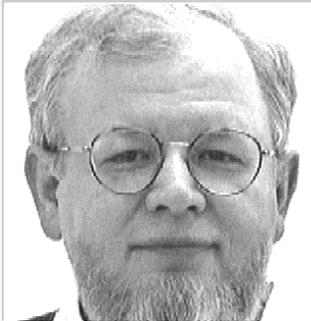
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# THE HERBST NEWSLETTER



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,

Time to take a break from the ongoing series on America's chart to address a somewhat less ponderous topic—something more personal, of smaller scope, and hopefully a bit more light-hearted.

## UNTWISTING THE ZODIAC

In my world, astrology comes in two versions, two distinct and very separate universes. One astrology is the technical system I use, both in my own life and in sessions with clients. The other is the “popular” astrology that exists in the minds of much of the general public. These two versions are so utterly different that the chasm between them often feels impossible to bridge. In fact, the astrology of one bears almost no resemblance to the astrology of the other.

Take Sun signs, for example. I hardly think about Sun signs at all. Ever. And I don't categorize people as zodiacal signs, either (as in the classic opening gambit of conversation in a singles bar: “*I'm a Leo, what are you?*”). Quite simply, I don't consider human beings as sections of the zodiac.

Despite the overriding importance in astrology of the Sun's position at a person's birth, its zodiacal sign does NOT stand out as the most important factor-combination in the birth chart. The sign placements of the Ascendant, Moon, and Saturn are of nearly equal significance. But even that admission overstates the importance of signs in general. Rather than representing personal identities, sign positions — including the Sun's — are like the subtle colors in an impressionist painting or the spices that give a dish its aroma and flavors. They are not, however, the subject of the painting or the main ingredients of the meal.

For millions of people, however, Sun signs *are* astrology. And why not? This is all the public sees in the marketplace, those little books at grocery store checkouts (“*The Year Ahead for Leo,*” or “*Love Signs for Gemini,*” etc.) or the Sun sign columns in daily newspapers and monthly magazines.

By the way, I have nothing against reading Sun sign columns for entertainment or to provide an intuitive spark (akin to fortune cookies at Chinese restaurants). If that floats your boat, by all means go ahead.

My gripe is simply this: No sane person can put much stock in the idea that “*Tuesday is a good day for romance*” or “*Friday is ideal for closing that big business deal*” for all 25 million people in this country who were born with the Sun in a certain sign. That’s just not credible.

### **Sun Signs as a Marketing device**

The general public and even some astrologers are unaware that Sun signs were literally INVENTED in the 1920s as a crude mass-marketing scheme, a way of capturing the interest of regular folks who knew nothing about astrology as a serious discipline. The ersatz psychology of “character traits” was gradually expanded into extensive “personality profiles” for each of the twelve signs.

Although tying zodiacal types to personality was an absurdly false oversimplification, that artifice succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of the few astrologers who profited economically. Beginning with articles on astrological birth signs in the burgeoning industry of Hollywood fan magazines and soon expanding into daily Sun sign forecasts in newspapers, the business of astrology-as-entertainment was born. Ever since, certain astrologers eager for celebrity have felt no compunction at all about pandering to the public appetite for “fast food.”

In other words, Sun signs have precious little to do with astrology and a great deal to do with money and marketing.

Please understand: It’s not that I’m a snooty elitist about astrology (although no doubt some people see me in that mold). As I wrote above, I don’t object to the use of astrology for fun or entertainment. I do, however, object to the notion that humanity can be divided into twelve “types” of people. The very idea of describing individuals according to one of twelve signs of the zodiac is silly and crass. And yet, these bogus generalizations are part of what we humans do.

Collectively, we have trouble distinguishing the critical differences between mythic archetypes (which do not exist at the human realm, but more as “gods” or characters in a dream) from personal identities (which are very human). Your name is a natural identity, but your Sun sign is an archetype. The former belongs to you; the latter does not.

That distinction may seem picky, but it’s relevant. Confusing identities with archetypes keeps us undifferentiated — in the womb, so to speak — and holds us back from the spiritual maturity of authentic individuation. Early on in the spiritual journey, the archetype of our Sun sign empowers us, helping us understand our natural programming. If we cling to that zodiacal sign as a personal identity, however, we pay a grievous price later on in the failure to reconcile the simplicity and complexity of who we truly are.

### **Astrological Compatibility**

I have sessions with numerous clients who are seeking intimate partners (the lack of a primary relationship or, more frequently, dissatisfaction with an existing significant other are both among the top reasons for consulting an astrologer — I’m not sure if that’s a good thing, but it’s certainly true). These clients sometimes ask me, “*What signs am I compatible with?*” The question is a code, of course, meaning: “*Tell me the Sun signs of people that might make good partners for me, because I’m not having any luck at all on my own finding someone who doesn’t drive me completely bonkers.*”

I usually do my best to gently fend off such questions, explaining to my clients that the issue of “compatibility” in relationships is extremely complicated, ever-changing, and far beyond the abilities of astrology or any other system to nail down in simple terms of good-or-bad. Technical astrology does indeed have many ways to assess the potential of any two people in relatedness, but these techniques require whole charts to begin with, and even then they’re not straightforward in saying yea or nay to being with someone. The study of intimate attraction is a fascinating and revealing part of the astrology I practice with clients, but — like everything else in technical astrology — it provokes deeper thoughtfulness rather than

easy solutions. That's one of the main reasons that popular astrology is so, well, *popular*, because it offers the illusion of easy answers. Unfortunately, those answers are almost always wrong.

If, however, I were to go ahead and try to answer my client's question about compatible signs by speaking in the language of popular astrology, I might say, "*OK, you're a Cancer, so you need to find yourself an intense Scorpio or a gentle Pisces, because those are compatible water signs. Barring that, you would do fine with a Virgo or Taurus. However, you should avoid like the plague all Aries, Librans, and Capricorns.*"

I might as well say to my client, "*OK, you're an American, so go out and find yourself an intense German, or a gentle Norwegian. Barring that, you would do fine with a Canadian or Chinese. However, you should avoid like the plague all Russians, Brazilians, or Swedes.*"

The test of my work with clients is to offer help that is accurate, real, and relevant. Both of the examples above fail that test.

National stereotypes are just as false as zodiacal ones. With human beings, we have to assess each person, one at a time. That's why the much-talked-about "clash of civilizations" in the bogus War on Terror is so specious and wrong-headed. We can't clump together a billion Muslims and assume that they're the enemies of a billion Christians. If we do, the result is needless war, massive suffering, or even armageddon. (Sorry, I got political for a moment...)

Popular astrology is based entirely on the twelve signs of the zodiac. It goes no further than that. In technical astrology, however, the zodiac is only one of five major levels — planets, signs, houses, aspects, and moving cycles. All five levels interact in extraordinarily complicated, but beautiful and subtle ways. What much of the public doesn't know is that zodiacal signs are the *least* important of the five.

Well, then, Mr. Smarty-Pants, Mr. Know-It-All, what are astrological signs, anyway? What do they really represent?

## **Two Separate Zodiacs**

First off, there are *two* zodiacs, and they're *not* the same. One is called the Tropical Zodiac, which is based on seasons here on earth, specifically northern hemisphere temperate zones. The other is called the Sidereal Zodiac, which is based on fixed-star constellations in the heavens. And get this — all the planetary positions in your birth chart, from the Sun right on out to Pluto, are located in *different* signs depending on which zodiac we use. If your Sun sign is Pisces in the tropical zodiac, it's in Aquarius in the sidereal zodiac. Weird, huh? Well, it's not actually so weird once you understand the systems, but it's sure a jolt the first time you encounter that contradiction.

The person who knows only popular astrology would scratch his head and ask, "How can I be both Pisces and Aquarius at the same time?" Well, you can, because they're different systems, but you can't, because you're not a sign to begin with.

The tropical zodiac is used by most European and American astrologers. The sidereal zodiac is used largely by Hindu astrologers in India and other Asian cultures. The difference between the two zodiacs comes from an earth motion called the Precession of the Equinoxes, which is caused by the fact that the earth is like a spinning top, but it's axis is tilted away from the vertical. As a top slows down, it starts to "wobble" around its axis. For the earth, one wobble is about 26,000 years long. About every 2,200 years, the tropical and sidereal zodiacs displace each other by one sign, moving backwards. That's where the astrological "Ages" come from — the Age of Pisces, the Age of Aquarius, etc. (You remember "Hair," don't you? The Broadway show from the 1970s? "*This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, the Age of Aquarius, A-quar-i-usssss, A-quarrrr-i-us...*")

In the tropical zodiac, signs are seasonal archetypes revealing phases of growth in mother nature's year. Aries is the initial spring planting, where seeds germinate by sending up a shoot that breaks through the crust of the soil and begins photosynthesis. Taurus is the rooting phase, where plants anchor themselves

and send out tendrils to absorb sustenance from the ground. Gemini is the expansion phase, where plants grow like crazy and differentiate themselves into stems, leaves, and buds. Scorpio is the autumn phase following harvest where we see the death of the growing season as leaves turn and drop from the trees. Capricorn is the first month of winter, where plant life pulls back into itself and when individuation lies fallow.

Another way to think of zodiac is in terms of phases of human growth. Aries is the crisis of birth, the struggle to get push out of the womb and be born as an separate animal. Taurus is period of early infancy, where we imprint on security — the body-as-identity, and mother-as-security (warmth, milk, love). Gemini is mid-infancy, where our limbs develop, and we crawl around, exploring our environment with great curiosity and putting everything in our mouths to taste the world and identify different sensations. And so on, through family development (Cancer, Leo, and Virgo) into social involvement (Libra and Scorpio) to ever-widening cultural participation (Sagittarius, Capricorn, and Aquarius) and finally spiritual transcendence, letting go, and rebirth (Pisces and back into Aries to begin the cycle again).

All twelve phases are present in every chart and — more importantly — in every life. We carry within us the seeds of each season and all the processes of ebb and flow in growth. We live them all, sometimes simultaneously, at other times in linear progression, and at still other times by bouncing crazily from one phase to another.

And yet, while the majesty and mystery of seasons and growth live within us as part of our make-up, they are not who we are. Our true identities remain separate from the symbols, which exist at the levels of myth and archetype.

Now, I don't mean to be overly heavy-handed about this. (Even if I were, I'd just be pissing in the wind.) The fact is that people will continue to refer to themselves as zodiacal signs. Shoot, I even catch myself doing it on rare occasions. It's a very seductive shorthand. But that doesn't mean that such labeling is accurate or an effective way of communicating.

Finally, human beings are *not* phases of the zodiac. So just file away that small insight in a nook or cranny at the back of your consciousness, and the next time someone says to you, "*My new boyfriend is a Scorpio,*" quietly remind yourself that really, in all truth, he's not. He's a person, not a sign.



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