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,

As of the beginning of April, Mercury is already one week into the setup phase of its retrograde period (when it's moving forward past the point in the heavens to which it will later return). Mercury will be "officially" retrograde from April 6th to April 30th, moving from early Taurus back through the last third of Aries. Be very cautious about entering into contracts, commitments, and major purchases (such as homes or cars) during the coming month. Expect delays and communication snafus. Also, April is chock full of long Moon Voids—168 hours of them. That's one entire week when the Moon will be Void-of-Course. So slow down and smell the roses. Play it cool and reserved until May.

KARMA AND POLITICS

In American social discourse, the labels "liberal" and "conservative" are tossed about as if we all agreed on their meanings. The general consensus has been that liberals are political Democrats who favor big government, the social welfare state, and regulations over business, while conservatives are political Republicans who favor smaller government, fiscal restraint in social programs, and unfettered free markets.

Throughout the past century of American history, the balance between these two contrasting social philosophies (and, more importantly, their respectability in American life) has ebbed and flowed. One side held sway for awhile, then the other.

Until the end of the 19th century, conservatism ruled, but liberalism was a rising tide in the first decade of the 20th century through trust-busting, early environmentalism, and the class struggles of labor and women's rights. The end of World War I gave another boost to conservatism, which reasserted itself through the Roaring Twenties, but then collapsed with Great Depression. In an attempt to deal with the economic suffering, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal brought a tidal wave of liberal policies that defined America's social contract for the next four decades.

That tsunami of liberalism strongly affected the American character. Slowly, over time, Americans increasingly saw their government as a source of entitlement. As federal power and largesse grew over the lives of the population, we became more dependent on government to solve our personal problems. The majority of this newsletter's readers were born during that period of American life and grew up assuming that liberalism was the norm. Though conservatives remained the loyal opposition, their voices were minimized. The nadir of conservatism occurred in 1964, with the Republican nomination of Barry Goldwater, who was subsequently routed in the Presidential election, which provided a mandate for Democrat Lyndon Johnson's Great Society civil rights initiatives.

Conservatism, however, would rise again. Among many cultural changes that shook American society during the remainder of the 1960s, two factors stand out as critical in the conservative resurgence that followed:

First was the tragedy of the Vietnam War, which divided the nation to the point of massive civil unrest and provoked deep psychic trauma among Americans. Beyond that, however, the more subtle effect of Vietnam was to undermine the economic viability of Great Society social programs. The ongoing military escalations of the Cold War created a "Guns or Butter" problem in our allocation of collective resources, and Vietnam tipped the balance. Progressive policies of social engineering aimed at equalizing wealth and opportunity in America began to lose popularity, especially among the richest, most powerful segments of our society (which had formerly gone along with such policies, even if their support was sometimes grudging).

Second was the sting of indignity felt among conservatives at their long political humiliation. A backlash that had simmered for 40 years finally took root. After Goldwater's defeat in 1964, conservatives began to seriously organize, creating thinktanks and lobbying groups funded by wealthy and influential capitalists. As their institutions grew, conservatives found an unexpected ally in a surprising grassroots movement—the reassertion of fundamentalist Christianity as a significant phenomenon in American culture. Together, these two constituencies were able to capitalize on a failed Carter presidency to elect Ronald Reagan in 1980. From that moment—although few of us realized it at the time—the die was cast. Conservatives determined to crush liberalism with a vengeance.

For the last 25 years, America has moved steadily to the right on the political and economic spectra. Conservatives have been incredibly effective at influencing government policy and redefining the terms of public debate. Their stunning success can be seen in the rush toward deregulation of business, privatization (meaning private ownership and control) of assets formerly held in commonwealth, and the "dittoheads" of a conservative-talk-radio-led chorus that literally caused the word "liberal" to fall into scathing disrepute for a sizable percentage of the general public.

Beliefs Versus Realities

Apart from politics and policy, however, and beyond academic debates about economics and markets, what are the spiritual underpinnings of liberalism and conservatism? What do those in each camp really believe deep down about life for themselves and others on this small and shrinking planet?

Beliefs may have little to do with objective reality, but they are extremely powerful in shaping social attitudes and government policies. Toward the end of looking inside ourselves more clearly, I'd like to explore some of the spiritual beliefs that distinguish conservatives from liberals, specifically, attitudes concerning karma, family, property, and wealth.

Personal Karma

None of us is actually "born equal." Perhaps in the abstract, but not in fact. Human beings are birthed into lives of extraordinarily different talents, liabilities, and external circumstances. Some of us are born into great opportunities and conspicuous bounty, while others suffer terrible limits and chilling deprivation. To quote the most famous stanza of "Auguries of Innocence," by the English poet and visionary, William Blake:

Every night and every morn
Some to misery are born.
Every morn and every night
Some are born to sweet delight.
Some are born to sweet delight,
Some are born to endless night.

Why is this so? Karma.

The term "karma" has its origins in eastern religions, but the concept is universally understood. Technically, karma is defined in Hinduism and Buddhism as "reaction" or "inevitable consequences," specifically, the consequences of one's actions in life, whether those reactions are experienced as positive or negative. More generally, however, personal karma is seen as the sum total of benefits and liabilities that are associated with an individual soul. As each of us walks the road of our "dharma"—our unique life-path—we encounter the results of our past karma, either as lovely Easter eggs hidden along the way to be discovered with delight, or as land-mines buried in the pavement of our path, waiting silently and with sinister intent to detonate when we step on them.

Karma is popularly associated with the concept of reincarnation, especially as an explanation for why otherwise seemingly random events happen to some individuals but not to others. In this view, karma is a system of "cosmic justice." The rationale is that events aren't random at all, but are rather the cumulative result of all the actions we chose (or perhaps will choose) over the many lives in our soul's long evolution.

Buddha held that we are seduced by illusions and enslaved by our desires. Our spiritual path toward true liberation consists of slowly coming to understand the ramifications of actions undertaken out of illusion and desire. By experiencing the repercussions of those actions in our own lives, our souls gradually learn to distinguish the consequences of ways of being and doing that keep us attached to the material plane, basically trapped in suffering here on earth, versus ways of being and doing that release us from maya—deceptive subjectivity and ego-centered vanity—back into the objective reality of life.

But karma need not be seen only through the filters of metaphysical scenarios. Belief in reincarnation or an afterlife is not required. In a larger sense, karma is the spiritual teaching of whatever happens in our lives.

If you're ten years old and come down with leukemia, that's karma. You did nothing to cause the disease, but it's your lot nonetheless, no matter where it came from. The disease is simply what you encountered, the hand you were dealt in the card game of life. That last statement may be galling to those who insist that we "choose" our reality, but such a belief is mainly a philosophical hedge against feeling victimized. The full paradox is that life puts its stamp on us just as we put our stamp on life. At the heart of the mystery, life embodies both suffering and joy. We do the best we can with both.

Most of us hope for "good" karma. Some people count on it. Conversely, many of us are concerned about "bad" karma, although the tendency to worry in that regard takes hold mainly after we've suffered some. Certain people go so far as to suggest that bad karma is the only way we learn necessary limits, as well as respect and compassion for others. In this view, our suffering—whether deserved or not—sensitizes us to pain. Over time, we gain empathy and sympathy for others' suffering, learning eventually the wisdom of enlarged perspective beyond our own desires and needs—namely, to see oneself in others. We can then better comprehend how our unconsidered actions may result in damage to ourselves and to others, and thus not choose such behaviors.

Ultimately, bad karma teaches us to do (or not do) in ways that produce no harm. Though few of us will reach anything close to full understanding of the ripple effects of our behavior, we can learn to avoid at least the obvious mistakes of actions or inactions that cause unnecessary suffering.

If karma can be boiled down to the unique path of spiritual teaching for any individual, then what exactly is the extent of our responsibilities for other human beings, especially those we don't know?

Karma and Responsibility for Others

Conservatives tend to believe that personal karma is sacrosanct. The core belief is that each individual's karma is sacred, whether decreed by God or by the results of one's actions, and NOT therefore to be interfered with by others. If you have good karma in the form of wealth, then that's your inheritance to be enjoyed fully. Should you have bad karma in the form of poverty, that's your lesson to learn, and no one should lighten or remove that burden from your shoulders.

Liberals tend to embrace a quite different belief, namely, that the earthly playing field should be leveled toward greater equality. Liberals do not trust cosmic fate, believing instead in the dutiful necessity of human intervention through social legislation aimed at correcting apparent unfairness. This is equivalent to the Robin Hood approach, to take from the rich and give to the poor as a way of equalizing society.

Conservatives sometimes accuse liberals of being too soft, while liberals sometimes accuse conservatives of a lack of compassion. Under these accusations lies a common belief—in justice—but justice viewed from a different perspective. Conservatives lean more toward divine or natural justice; liberals lean more toward human social justice.

Ask yourself: *How do I feel about other people's karma? Is life just or unjust? Do people get what they deserve?* Your answers will reveal much about your politics.

The Limits of Family

Does this mean that conservatives are totally committed to non-intervention in other people's karma? No, of course not. If that were true, then conservatives would share their wealth, however much they have, with no one but themselves. People routinely intervene in the karma of others. Conservatives and liberals alike recognize that no man is an island (although some conservatives like to think of themselves as "self-made," and some liberals dilute personal responsibility to the vanishing point). We all interact and share with others. We all tie our karma to that of others in various ways, both by choice and by necessity. The question is, with whom do we allow this sharing?

Conservatives tend to believe that the blood family, both biological and through marriage, is sacred. In other words, their belief is that one's karma is linked to blood relations in an order of importance that flows outward from parents, wives, and children, toward lesser relations of aunts, uncles, and cousins. One's blood line and heritage have great spiritual consequence for conservatives.

Beyond blood, conservatives feel a kinship with those who share cultural and religious similarities. Their friendships matter in terms of karmic linkage, as do their business associations. In other words, conservatives value familiarity and conformity.

Liberals also believe that family is sacred. Unlike conservatives, however, liberals let the ripples of family connection extend toward infinity. All men are seen as brothers. All humans are one family in liberal belief. Liberals may share less with those on the outer rungs, but they believe that our karma is no less linked because of distance or lack of familiarity.

At the edges of the bell curve, some extreme conservatives would feed their own families, friends, and beloveds, while letting your family and friends starve without a shred of remorse. Conversely, some extreme liberals could not sleep at night as long as a single human being suffered with hunger or any other deprivation. The gray area here is in how much we take on of other people's karma. Conservatives take on less; liberals take on more. But both conservatives and liberals believe that karma should be shared through family.

Ask yourself: *Who do I consider part of my family? To whom do I owe my love, loyalty, and the generosity of my help? How do I feel about strangers?* Your answers will reveal much about your politics.

Ownership, wealth, and poverty

For conservatives, ownership is absolute. Private property is sacred. Thus, conservatives believe in capitalism, where ownership of the means of production is primal. For liberals, however, ownership is relative. Liberals believe that some property should be held in commonwealth for all.

A basic conservative tenet is that hard work leads to success and wealth. Conversely, some conservatives hold that the poor must therefore be lazy. Liberals believe that wealth too often comes from personal advantages having nothing to do with merit, so liberals tend to see the poor as disenfranchised.

For conservatives, poverty is a problem of defective character and personal irresponsibility (a visitation of karma with which we should not interfere). For liberals, poverty is caused by lack of opportunity and social irresponsibility (the shared karma of collective family, in which we must intervene).

As a result, conservatives tend to believe that extremes of wealth and poverty are correctly part of the natural order. Liberals tend to believe that extreme wealth and poverty are aberrations to be limited.

Ask yourself: *What do I believe about property, wealth, and poverty?* Your answers will reveal much about your politics.

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