

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,

**FINALLY**, after a decade of my feeling nauseous at Bill Clinton's sellout failure and George W. Bush's demented regime, I am again proud of a public figure in my generation who wields cultural power: Neil Young.

The ex-Buffalo Springfield and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young singer-songwriter-guitarist, who survived heroin addiction to rock on, has had enough. Young's new album, *Living With War* (which he describes as "metal folk protest") is a true social phenomenon, a blend of passionate truth-telling, heartfelt social activism, and a stunningly creative use of capitalism via the Internet. Written, recorded, and produced in just under three weeks, the album bursts onto the scene just as Uranus reaches the same point in the heavens occupied by Saturn 40 years ago in 1965-66 when it opposed Uranus and Pluto—a classic astrological *trigger point* (like an *acid flashback* or, in this case, a *flashforward*). Along with the recent massive immigrant demonstrations, these are initial salvos in the return of the '60s. The impact will be thunderous. A groundswell of other protests will follow as we approach critical mass in the months ahead and years to come.

So get ready, people. Even as we continue to stumble through perilous times, the dawn is breaking. Stand up for what you believe. Let your voice be heard, and shout if you need to!

While I'm eager to move up to the present in the newsletter series, the astrological configurations that shaped the 1990s deserve one further examination before moving on. This month's commentary takes another look at the two most recent Uranus-Neptune cycles and their meanings in the archetypal matrix of where we've been and where we're headed.

## SATURN, URANUS, AND NEPTUNE

As I wrote in last month's commentary, the gently revolutionary, strongly utopian, and mythically visionary impulses of the Uranus-Neptune cycle are better understood and differentiated in tone and meaning by the zodiacal signs in which the initial conjunction occurs at the beginning of each cycle. All Uranus-Neptune cycles share the same planetary symbolism. They differ, however, in the sections of the heavens where the cycles activate and change phases.

In 1136 A.D., a conjunction between Uranus and Neptune took place in the sign Libra, the glyph of which is the scales, symbolizing balance and justice. The nearly two centuries that followed gave us the Magna Carta and English common law, which still form the basis of our modern justice system today, almost a millennium later.

The next two cycles, starting in 1307 and 1489 respectively, occurred in Scorpio. Coming out of the Middle Ages, these were centuries of fervent passion in culture and religion. The darkness of the Black Plague and the Spanish Inquisition were followed by the opening of the western hemisphere and the great works of the Renaissance.

The 1650-1820 Uranus-Neptune cycle began in Sagittarius and includes the culminating epoch of the Enlightenment, where the divine right of kings was challenged by new ideals concerning the essential dignity of all human beings. The Sagittarian search for transcendent truths in social philosophy galvanized that age. Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and the founding fathers of the American revolution left their marks on this fiery period. In France, the revolutionary cry was “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” for the common masses. In addition, the infant discipline of science leaped forward during the 17th and 18th centuries. The upper classes played with science like kids with a new toy.

The last two Uranus-Neptune cycles both began in Capricorn, the only times in a thousand years that these bodies converged in an earth sign. The idealized revolutions therefore took shape in more practical directions than in earlier cycles. Uranus-Neptune’s enthusiastic vision streamed through the Capricorn lens, transforming the ways societies are organized and run. As practical inventions coalesced and cascaded, commerce and business discovered powerful ways to manipulate the natural world, reveal its secrets, and overcome its barriers. Life without limits was the new vision. In addition, the long, slow process of biological evolution was suddenly trumped by the dizzying acceleration of sociocultural evolution.

In this commentary, I want to offer a brief overview of certain specific ways that human life is changing as we move away from the isolation of our past through industrial and technological advances so fantastic as to be barely imaginable in earlier millennia. In the short span of two centuries, through one complete Uranus-Neptune cycle now past and the beginning of another only recently begun, we have commenced with the creation of an all-encompassing nervous system for Brain Earth that not only altered how we live, but is transforming the very idea of selfhood, relatedness, family, and community. Even the all-powerful nation-state may soon go the way of the dodo, as boundaries dissolve before our eyes. These developments are tied directly to the symbolism of the Uranus-Neptune pairing. As with all astrological cycles that stretch our consciousness, there are upsides and downsides, and I’ll share some of my opinions about those peaks and valleys.

## **RAILROADS: HARNESSING THE POWER OF STEAM**

The Uranus-Neptune cycle that began in 1821 changed the mobility of humanity more than any previous alignment of these two planets. People have always traveled and migrated, but in earlier times that involved great effort and considerable risk. Travel by water required either wind for sails or muscles for rowing, while travel over land was basically accomplished on foot or in wagons pulled by animals. Either way, treks were long and arduous. Few people traveled for fun, at least not very far.

With the invention of the steam engine in 1801, the possibility of harnessing that power quickly focused on increasing the speed at which human beings could travel over water and land. Throughout the entire known history of humanity before the 19th century, about the fastest any human being had ever moved through space was in the gravity acceleration achieved in free-fall off a long cliff (not a particularly effective mode of transportation). Next to that, the 30-or-so knots of a sleek sailing clipper in strong winds was the best we could manage on water, followed on land by the 20-some miles-per-hour of riding fast horses. Steam locomotion and the railroads that were quickly spawned changed that. Though not much faster than horses, trains could carry more people and goods across much farther distances.

In 1825, during the Uranus-Neptune conjunction, along with the opening of the Erie Canal (another Neptunian dream), the first steam-powered trains carrying passengers and goods started regular runs over

iron rails. Soon, a frenzy of track building began in Europe and America. The factories of the Industrial Revolution would not have sprung up like mushrooms without trains to carry their supplies and ship their products.

Railroads transformed the landscape. Distances that had taken weeks to cover by horse-drawn wagon or on foot now took mere days. Letters and packages sent overland by mail saw a quantum leap forward in speed of delivery. Other parallel developments went hand-in-hand to compress time and space. The telegraph, invented by Samuel Morse in 1844, made communication instantaneous over long distances and would lead in 1876 to Bell's telephone. This was the first electrical wiring of the planet. Later on, radio brought wireless transmission.

Various methods of photography were formulated in the same era as the telegraph, which gave us near-instant images. Motion pictures would follow half a century later, only to be supplanted in another half century by television. All these industrial inventions resonate to the symbolism of Uranus-Neptune, and each is a worthy topic, but space does not permit further discussion here. I mention them because they are part of the breathtaking panorama of Uranus-Neptune in Capricorn—shrinking the world for the sake of commerce and markets, fundamentally changing society and even the earth itself in the bargain.

In 1869, the exact year that Uranus was 90° ahead of Neptune in first-quarter transition, a golden spike was hammered home at Promontory Summit, Utah, celebrating the culmination of the transcontinental race of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads. From that moment on, the vast expanse of North America was connected by rail from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. As befits first-quarter transitions, what had been initially only a dream was now manifested in reality: The railroad made America one unified country, from sea to shining sea.

All through the remaining decades of the waxing half of the cycle, the steam locomotive earned its place in history. However uncomfortable travel by rail may have been for most passengers on 19th-century trains, the images of huge steam locomotives belching smoke and fire permanently embedded themselves in sentimental myth. They became central symbols of modernity and progress.

At the halfway point of any astrological cycle (in this case, the opposition of Uranus to Neptune), meaning shifts. Earlier efforts of preparing the ground, planting seeds, and tending the crops give way to harvesting the fruits and distributing the products. Whatever was envisioned at the beginning of the cycle has been realized, at least as fully as could be achieved, and our attention turns to the refinement of what humans and nature co-created.

During that full phase transition early in the 20th century, locomotion by steam (Neptune) was converted to electricity (Uranus). In 1903, at the beginning of the Uranus-Neptune opposition, New York state enacted legislation that barred steam locomotives on the island of Manhattan, spurring the electrification of tracks in New York City. In 1913, near the end of the opposition, the first gas-electric internal combustion locomotive appeared on the Dan Patch line in Minnesota. Railroads had come of age and entered their golden era. These new leviathans would be enshrined in stylish Art Deco imagery two decades later.

In that same full-phase transition, we achieved powered flight for the first time. Airplanes would eventually eclipse railroads, but that would take another half century.

The full phase of each cycle eventually reaches the last-quarter, which is the symbolic equivalent of the transition from autumn to winter in the seasonal flow. The last-quarter phase shift is the point of cutting loose of the previous growing year. Farmers turn away from working in their fields, which are now nothing but stalks and soon-to-be frozen ground. We break from a concern with past investment to a sudden interest in future possibilities, experimenting with different visions, some of which may become seeds to be planted when the spring phase of a new cycle emerges later.

As the Uranus-Neptune cycle corresponding to the Industrial Revolution reached its last-quarter transition during the decade of the 1950s, passenger traffic by rail was dealt a deathblow by two factors: the onset of cheap air travel (formerly reserved for the rich) and the construction of the Interstate Highway System. The Iron Horse was put out to pasture. What was good for General Motors had to be good for the

USA. Assuming that cheap oil would last forever, Americans embraced the airliner and the automobile as our preferred means of personal conveyance and thumbed our collective noses at the more disciplined and efficient transport of railroads. Boxcars steadily replaced Pullman sleepers as railroads were reduced to carriers of raw supplies such as coal and lumber. Interstate trucking gradually challenged even that use. Once-great rail companies went down like dominoes in waves of desperate but unprofitable consolidations. From that point to the next conjunction of Uranus and Neptune in the 1990s, American railroads slowly rusted away, sacrificed at the altars of convenience and individual freedom. We may come to sorely regret that decision in the future.

Europe and Asia were not so hasty, not because they were wiser or more farsighted than America, but because they were poorer. They not only maintained but improved their railways. Now bullet trains are common throughout much of the world, while even urban light rail still languishes in America (where many cities have no mass transit at all in their suburbs, not even buses).

The American love affair with the automobile that began so innocently and with such high hopes has—like many seductive romances—turned toxic. Witness the near-destruction of New York City in the 1950s and 1960s by Robert Moses' "urban renewal" projects that razed once-vibrant neighborhoods, carving up the city with swaths of concrete-ribbon superhighways, as if cars were more important residents to be served than the real people who lived in Gotham. Consider also Los Angeles, whose streetcar tracks were ripped up in the 1920s. Most of Southern California turned into a nightmare of highway gridlock by the 1970s. As the newest place on the planet, California was a harbinger of things to come, and now traffic congestion has taken over most of urban America.

That brings us to the current Uranus-Neptune cycle, whose effective initiation occurred from 1988-1999. However amazing the previous cycle was in altering the map of civilization through the Industrial Revolution, this new cycle is even more extraordinary. Not only did Uranus and Neptune come together again in Capricorn, but this time Saturn showed up at the party to form a triple conjunction in 1988-1990. This threefold meeting of outer planets was unprecedented in the 20th century. While never precisely aligned, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune were within 8° of each other for much of the two years between the summer of 1988 and the fall of 1990. And heaven knows, that period saw changes in the structures of world governments that were nearly unimaginable, much less believable.

After 40 years of a Cold War standoff and nuclear arms race that scared the crap out of every sentient human being on the planet, who would have predicted that Gorbachev would initiate the *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* reforms in the Soviet Union in May, 1988? Or that tens of thousand of Chinese students would gather to protest in Tiananmen Square in Beijing during the spring of 1989? Further, who could have foreseen that also in 1989 the Eastern European Warsaw Pact nations, which had been Soviet satellites for so many decades, would simultaneously rise up in independence movements that resulted in their tossing out communist regimes in democratic elections? Then the Berlin Wall came down in November, 1989, and we hardly knew what to think when East and West Germany were reunified just as Saturn moved out of the triple conjunction in October, 1990, leaving Uranus and Neptune to their *pas de deux* for another nine years.

Meanwhile, the run-up to the first Gulf War began when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August, 1990. The preparations for repelling that occupation were methodical, almost like a slow-motion ballet. Then came January 1991, when all hell broke loose suddenly in those grainy TV images of nighttime Baghdad lit up with antiaircraft tracer fire. The air war was like nothing so much as a video game, and the blitzkrieg ground war that followed in February was, well, a slaughter. It was definitely the weirdest war of all time, in keeping with the detachment of Uranus and illusions of Neptune. For Americans sitting at home watching on CNN, the war appeared almost antiseptic and bloodless. Not so for the tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers killed. In another Uranus-Neptune expression, a mysterious illness called Gulf War Syndrome affected thousands of U.S. soldiers in the aftermath, perhaps because of depleted Uranium, but that was, of course, denied by the Pentagon.

Finally, the Soviet Union itself collapsed. In December 1991, the USSR officially passed into history, leaving behind in its wake the 15 former republics, all of which became new states. I mean, who knew that any this would happen, much less all of it?

Some Republicans believe with religious fervor that Ronald Reagan ended the Cold War and deserves credit for the collapse of totalitarian communism. That's not only untrue, it's silly. The Soviet Union bankrupted itself in the 1970s, and Reagan's military buildup merely kept the Soviet hard-liners in place. No, it wasn't Reagan who caused the collapse, it was Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. Or, more correctly, millions of human beings in Asia and Eastern Europe caused it by responding to the vibrations of those planetary archetypes. Government authority (Saturn) ran into sudden, revolutionary change (Uranus) through dissolution and corruption (Neptune).

What did America do in the aftermath? We congratulated ourselves as the victors (again) and turned our attention to letting the good times roll. Capitalism had won, so collectively we went out and bought lots of stuff to celebrate. Clinton moved into the White House, the stock market climbed, and all was right with the world.

Or was it? In spite of all the apparent good news, something was amiss. America too was dissolving.

Idealistic "free market" propaganda masked the deeper corruption of a corporate welfare state, especially in military spending. Community and family morphed into abstractions as we surfed the Internet, emailed, hung out in cyberspace chat rooms, played Game Boys, and watched HBO. The sense of alienation and unreality were subtle but pervasive, as is to be expected during Uranian-Neptunian times. The Clinton impeachment was a bizarre circus, and nothing seemed quite real, not believable or trustworthy. In an attempt to counter the vague unease of emptiness and eroding values, millions turned to fundamentalist religion or new age metaphysics (both of which have a certain "Disneyland" quality of simplistic imagery woven into their tenets and beliefs). Still, rampant consumerism continued even among those groups, often to absurd excess.

The triple conjunction of Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune had been a spectacular event symbolically. The new cycle had kicked off with a bang, and the world had shifted into another chapter of Maya. Communism was dead, but capitalism was also dying, poisoned by the corporate plutocracy. Saturn's presence gave a warning: Governments can fall. Economic systems can fail. Insidious forces of corruption and decay are at work. Things may appear fine on the surface but be rotting from within. So look inward.

Saturn's linkage with Uranus and Neptune changes the core meaning of the entire 172-year cycle to come. Rather than the feeling of "no limits" that went with the previous Uranus-Neptune cycle during the Industrial Revolution, we have moved now into a new cycle where the recognition of necessary limits is absolutely critical. If we don't restrain ourselves wisely and by choice, we will be forcibly limited. We may still dream and innovate, still cross-fertilize reality with fantasy through the genius of invention, but we will reap the benefits only if our dreams are sustainable in the real world.

For the past two centuries, bigger was better in the pantheon of human aspiration. But no more. Now, small is beautiful. Small can work where big won't. The larger the enterprise, the more likely it will collapse. Gargantuan structures are the new dinosaurs, headed for extinction. And this applies in everything: government, business, society, religion, art, technology, even personal ego.

Life is on the verge of pruning back the tree of civilization, which has outpaced itself by growing too big too fast, without a corresponding expansion of consciousness, humility, and grace. Collectively, we have grown without evolving, sought power without love, and failed to respect the balance of the Tao in both physical reality and human nature. Many of us who realize the inevitability of this rebalancing are intentionally pruning back our own lives first, to prepare ourselves as best we can for the stunning acceleration of evolution that is just around the corner.



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