

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

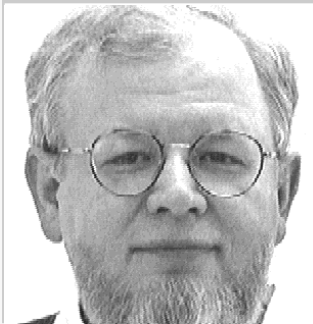
**Issue #91
Aug 2006**

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,

This month's commentary returns to my ongoing series about the 1960s and its relationship to what lies ahead in 2008-2015. This particular chapter covers more than I can comfortably compress into a single newsletter, so it's in two parts—the first installment this month and the second next month. I hope you'll find it relevant.

HEALTH AND ILLNESS

In my astrological practice, the center of which is sessions with clients, I am frequently asked about health and illness. My clients' concerns about their physical well-being have increased steadily over the past three decades, which is understandable, given the consequences of aging. When I started out as a young astrologer in my 20s, health was hardly a blip on the radar screen; the dominant issues among my clientele (who were mostly my peers in age) were relationships and intimacy. Behind those, work and money came in second, but far back. We were young, footloose and fancy free, and still hormone-driven. Most of us lived cheaply; the financial responsibilities of marriage and raising a family had not yet kicked in. Now, 35 years later, career and fiscal concerns have catapulted to center stage among my clients, and intimate relationships have fallen to a distant third. Questions about health have risen steadily and occupy a solid second place.

In some ways, all the pragmatic concerns and real-life issues that clients inevitably bring to sessions are difficult for me. I regard astrology as a great tool for clarifying our journey through life, but I'm much less certain that charts can adequately address the mundane problems in people's lives. With regard to work and money, I ask clients to bear in mind that I'm neither a career counselor nor a financial advisor. And with health concerns, I remind clients that I'm not trained in medicine and that they should consult a doctor about their health. This is not to suggest that charts have nothing to say about work, money, health, and illness, but rather that the information is embedded within the overall framework of the life-path and

its many challenges and changes.

In sessions, my main focus is to help clarify for my clients the core human experiences (which are always complex and paradoxical) that define their individual paths and highlight the custom-tailored uniqueness of their lives. Within that framework, I try to address as best I can the specific problems with which my clients are grappling. Experience has changed me in this. 12,000 sessions have taught me that astrology does not usually provide easy solutions to problems, and even when it does, the answers are often difficult to accept or implement for many people. So, I have come to regard my professional role less as a problem-solver and more as a strategist, coach, and mythic storyteller. My assumption is that the more in touch we are with the unfolding story of our lives, the better our decisions will be as we recognize the patterns we create, which re-create us in turn.

These patterns take shape through the many seasons of our lives, which unfold not in linear, straightforward fashion, but instead in a crazy-quilt of kaleidoscopic patterns based on many different cycles occurring together. At any given point on our individual life-paths, we are moving through the spring or summer phases of some cycles—planting or nurturing life-experiences into new manifestation—while simultaneously passing through the autumn or winter of other cycles—expanding the social meanings of what we’ve built or letting go of a past crop that’s already harvested and no longer relevant. Because long-term cycles have different lengths, the matrix is never the same twice. Yes, some particular cycles repeat predictably, but those repetitions occur within an everchanging overall pattern.

With precious few exceptions, illness and breakdown come to everyone. These difficult experiences are part of the human condition, and relevant to the spiritual path of growth in consciousness toward maturity through gradual understanding and acceptance of who we are and how our lives are circumscribed.

Attitudes surrounding health and illness cover a broad spectrum of philosophy and belief, but two basic approaches predominate: the *physical* and the *metaphysical*.

At one end of the scale is the physical or *mechanistic* point of view. Over the past 150 years, this paradigm has been eagerly embraced by the rapidly emerging disciplines of science and western allopathic medicine, often with stunning results. Essentially, the presumption made here is that our bodies are machines, and that our consciousness—the matrix of thoughts and feelings, personal beliefs and attitudes that constitute personality—is largely irrelevant to the condition of our physical health. In this “objective” view, our bodies are the vehicles for self-awareness, but separate from it. Vulnerability to disease or breakdown is linked internally to predetermined genetic proclivities and externally to conditions in the outer environment. Illness is understood through specific symptoms and repercussions, with particular attention paid to probability statistics and group norms.

In this perspective, maintenance of bodily health is altogether rational. We take care of our bodies the same way we would take of any complex machine, such as an automobile. (It’s no accident that both western medicine and the auto industry took root in America as mutual outgrowths of the industrial revolution.) In this metaphor, we should “drive” our bodies as we drive our cars, giving them proper fuel when needed, recognizing the limits of design and manufacture, and taking them in for periodic tune-ups. When they malfunction or break down, we fix them—as best we can—by repairing the specific parts that are broken.

At the other end of the scale is the metaphysical perspective. For lack of a better term, this is a “spiritual” point of view, holistic rather than mechanistic, and more invisible than tangible. We cannot call this paradigm “religious,” because some religions consider the body relatively unimportant, merely the shell for the soul, to be disregarded or discarded like chaff. In the metaphysical perspective, the body is seen as the mirror of the soul and a barometer for consciousness.

This framework has come into prominence over the last 40 years, largely because of the emigration of eastern religious values—Taoist, Buddhist, and Hindu, mainly—into the west, which coincided with and fostered the resurgence of what is now known as “New Age” spirituality and metaphysics. It is a huge tent that shelters diverse philosophies and mystical assumptions ranging from Theosophy through Native

American shamanism to Transcendental Meditation and all the way to Wicca. Holistic health and alternative medicine are products of this movement that harken back to the 1960s.

In the metaphysical view, consciousness is the key element and unifying principle. What we are physically in our bodies, and their wellness or illness, is seen as the result of our total consciousness, both self-aware and unconscious. Starting with the book, *The Tao of Physics*, by Fritjof Capra, a whole popular movement has sprung up that is based on correspondences between regular life and the surprising early-20th-century discoveries of quantum physics. Though this movement is severely criticized by some scientists (to the point of disdain), it has gained increasing traction with a sizable segment of the general public. One might say that the physical/mechanical view of bodies and health reflects a Newtonian universe, with its billiard balls of matter and objective measurements, while the metaphysical/spiritual view of bodies and health is based on the quantum universe, with its uncertainty principles and hide-and-seek subjectivity.

Readers might assume that I would lobby for the metaphysical perspective over the mechanical. I am, after all, an astrologer, and I have spent the bulk of my 56 years living in alternative culture, surrounded by friends, colleagues, and clients who have a decided bent toward the metaphysical. Despite all that, my earlier formal education through college was solidly grounded in science, which I still love. In addition, I'm skeptical by nature. Questioning authority is part of my hard-wiring.

So, in my personal opinion, there is much to recommend both of these quite divergent perspectives on health and illness, despite how mutually exclusive they seem. Also, there is much to question and criticize within each point of view, both in their basic implications, and even more in the extreme bias and judgmental attitudes of some of their adherents.

On the one hand, I have never understood how some people can completely discount the effects of consciousness on bodily health, especially those in the western medical establishment. How can followers of the mechanistic view place so much emphasis on behavior and lifestyle, yet none at all on inner states of mind and emotion? Are they not paying attention at all? On the other hand, I am equally dubious about the unquestioning faith that some people feel surrounding the supposed powers of self-awareness or spirit, for either good or ill. Certain followers of Christian Science, for example, refuse to allow *any* medical intervention or treatment, no matter how severe the health crisis. Are these people insane? I mean, talk about your loony space cadets.

What worries me most about both perspectives are the shadow aspects of shame and blame. That may be more the fault of human nature than of any particular philosophy, but each of the two basic points of view on health brings its own particular pitfalls in this dimension.

The mechanistic attitude seems to appeal strongly to those who believe in information and rationality. For instance, consider tobacco smoking. Any dolt with an ounce of common sense knows that it isn't good for our bodies to inhale the smoke from burning leaves, and it sure as hell isn't good to do so hundreds times a day for 50 years. Since common sense isn't sufficient to make most people stop smoking, society has amassed a huge body of scientific data from research and studies that links long-term smoking to dramatically increased probability of various life-threatening diseases. Given this wealth of information, shouldn't people then make the rational decision to quit smoking? (The same logic applies across the board, by the way, to exercise, diet, and just about every other lifestyle issue in health maintenance.) The implied assumptions, however—that rationality is the pinnacle of human consciousness, and that we are (or should be) in control of our actions—strikes me as incredibly naive. Do people who believe this know nothing about the complexities of human personality? Do they truly think that information alone is sufficient to change behavior?

What most aggravates me about the mechanistic view of illness is the implication that if we are given the information and still cannot change behavior to better maintain or restore our health, then we must be stupid. What a crock! Some of the brightest, most intelligent people I know are also extremely obsessive/compulsive, and no one I know (smart or not) has rational control over most of his behaviors. Did all those scientists and doctors sleep through Psychology 101? Do they not realize that rationality is little more than a tiny boat skimming along the surface of a vast and powerful ocean of unconscious program-

ming, imprints, and habits? They probably do, but all they can offer seemingly is another sail for the boat of logic, which does nothing at all to change the unconscious ocean.

By contrast, the metaphysical perspective carries pitfalls of even deeper, more profound blame. Some people who are rabidly metaphysical are “spiritual moralists” when it comes to illness and physical breakdown. They believe that vibrant health is a reward for spiritual development and “right living.” I won’t go so far as to say that such people therefore feel that illness is a punishment, but they do seem to regard it as an indication that one’s consciousness is somehow flawed, incorrectly developed, or “out of balance.”

This attitude is particularly prevalent among certain New Age types, from gurus to devotees. For example, media luminary Dr. Deepak Chopra has written that “right thinking and doing” (which ayurvedic medicine defines in very specific terms for each individual) can produce perfect health, emotional happiness, and social success. This is spiritual materialism of the most egregious and seductive kind. Look, I’m all for walking the dharma road of right action, but not because of any assumed magical powers that will shield me against the slings and arrows of real life.

As a central tenet in New Age metaphysics, taking full responsibility for one’s life has many benefits, especially in avoiding the rage of powerlessness and the despair of victimhood. But “creating one’s own reality” goes only so far, in my opinion. We act on the universe, and the universe acts on us. It’s a two-way street, and, despite whatever modest disciplines we may bring to bear on our side of that boulevard, we have no control at all over what happens to us from the other side, except to respond gracefully.

To suggest that an infant born with spina bifida or a three-year-old dying from leukemia or cancer is “playing out the karma of a failed past life” (something I have heard often and in many guises over the years) strikes me as laying a terrible burden of blame on the shoulders of very small, fragile human beings who already have more than enough on their plates without being accused of personal responsibility for their illnesses. Then too, if our health is indeed a reflection of our consciousness, how is it that so many saints and spiritual avatars throughout history have been saddled with so much physical suffering? We shouldn’t blame people for their suffering; we should honor them for their courage and perseverance.

Admittedly, suffering is not always ennobling. It makes some people downright mean-spirited. They become exhausted, worn-out from the pain, stress, and limitations of bodies that are sick or damaged. As a result, their personalities deflate, losing buoyancy and optimism. Others feel unjustly singled out by the universe for their harsh treatment and grow embittered. I know of more cases, however, where personal suffering has dramatically increased an individual’s experience of compassion for others. The chronic illness of my own life has produced all those reactions: frequent exhaustion; occasional bitterness; and a noticeable, apparently permanent expansion of my compassion for others’ suffering. In that last result—increased compassion—illness added to my consciousness a positive quality that health did not. My guess is that this may be true for a lot of people.

Here’s the bottom line: Philosophies about health and illness (or anything else, for that matter) are all well and good. So are belief systems, ideologies, orientations, and perspectives. But they are not reality. They exist within a larger reality that trumps them all. As Shakespeare’s Hamlet says to Horatio: “*There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*”

We cannot “understand” reality or reduce it to a formula. We can only experience reality as it reveals itself to us. Sometimes we can work in synch with reality, manipulating it to serve us, but not always, and sometimes not at all. Reality is bigger than we are. Way big. Huge. Inconceivably vast and paradoxical and capricious and mysterious. Just when we think we’ve got it nailed, reality dances away, turning to show us another of its infinite faces.

That does not imply that we should stop exploring reality, nor cease striving to better understand our experiences and the full panorama of possible origins and meanings. The need to comprehend and the drive for greater certainty are built into human nature. Unlike most animals, who simply accept reality, we are destined to philosophize about it. But whatever philosophies we embrace, we need to be willing to

consider also the possibility that other ways of understanding may be equally relevant—even those that are contradictory to our own cherished beliefs.

Many people feel that health is a blessing and illness a curse. But perhaps not. Perhaps both are gifts from the gods. Or maybe they are just different schools of instruction in consciousness. In any event, I think we would be well-advised to not leap toward quick conclusions or simplistic judgments concerning either of these two fundamental human experiences, and instead maintain a sense of wonder and reverence about both.



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