

Neighborhoods

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What defines a local neighborhood?

Pragmatically, a neighborhood is the immediate environment outside our homes, within walking, biking, or short driving distance. It is an extension of our homes through familiarity and shared territory. Before the industrial revolution, cheap fuel, and the transformation of easy travel, many human beings never ventured very far from their villages or neighborhoods. No more. Nowadays, and for vast numbers of people, most especially Americans, neighborhoods are symbols of mythic sentiment or socio-economic status more than a natural reality.

Let's consider the idea of neighborhood from a different and larger perspective, that of the cosmos. Astronomically, our local neighborhood is what we call the solar system — with its relatively small, young Sun, plus a little family of planets (including our Earth) and thousands of other celestial bodies that orbit around that central solar hub.

How big is our astronomical neighborhood? Well, the size of our solar system varies according to what we include. If we limit ourselves to the known planets, the solar system is about four billion miles across, a mere stone's throw or goose fart in astronomical terms. Even if we include comets whose orbits take them way out into the icy far reaches of the Oort Cloud, which increases the span by a factor of ten, the distance across is still much less than a single light-year.

Beyond the solar system, we reside in a much larger astronomical "community" named the Milky Way, which is a very typical, garden-variety spiral galaxy — a spinning, flattened disk that contains 200 billion stars — and is 50,000 light-years in diameter. Past that, we are part of the Local Group, a set of a couple dozen galaxies, of which ours is the largest. Much farther out, the Local Group is a tiny segment of the Virgo Super Cluster, a huge system that contains 5,000 galaxies and is 100 million light-years across.

Before our minds suffer cortical brown-out from the inconceivability of such immense scale, let's return to our local neighborhood. Our solar system is far from the center of the Milky Way galaxy. It's located on the disk about 2/3 of the way out from the center, also called a bulge or dome. The dome at the center is filled with old stars that surround an invisible black hole. The pinwheel disk is

comprised of gas, dust, and young stars. So, our local neighborhood is the equivalent of a tiny village in the rural boondocks, located in the province of the Orion Arm, so far from the great metropolis of galactic center as to be unnoticed, a mere backwater in the larger scheme of cosmic demography.

Science estimates our Sun to be roughly five billion years old, about half the age of the galaxy. The entire solar system revolves around the black hole at the galactic center within the turning Orion arm of the pinwheel. So far, the Sun has made about 25 trips in its lifetime — only 25 "years" of galaxy time, about half its life-expectancy. Thus, our sun is still a young adult. In another five billion years, the Sun will expand into a Red Giant, consuming the earth and everything else in the solar system. Then it will collapse inward, shrinking into a White Dwarf. (Nice symbolism, eh? Red Giants and White Dwarves, like a Grimm fairy tale.) Such is the eventual fate of most local neighborhoods — from the ethnic urban enclaves that once made up New York City to the rural village outposts of the Milky Way. Finally, they are subsumed, transformed, and destroyed. While they exist, however, local neighborhoods provide vibrant, sometimes wonderful places of congregation for their residents. Or they may operate as imprisoning ghettos. And so it goes...

Astrological Meanings of the Sun and the Galactic Center

Metaphysically, the entire cosmic system — from the Virgo Super Cluster through the Local Group and the Milky Way right down to our home solar system — could be considered a gigantic step-down transformer, distributing radiant light and vibrational energy from Cosmic Central (the ultimate source) through various reductive steps down to us. Astrologically, the Sun represents not only our life-giving source of light and energy (Love and Power), but also our doorway back toward the ultimate.

At each step down in the cosmic transformer, context is narrowed and limited. In person-centered astrology, the Sun symbolizes individual selfhood. It represents the principle of integrity — the purposeful sense of being *someone* whose light shines within the psyche, is animated through the body, and is projected out into the world, while simultaneously defining and protecting a durable interior identity. In personal astrology, this is interpreted largely through the Sun's condition in our natal charts — its sign, house associations, aspects to other planets, etc. The entire matrix of factors is important in revealing who we are at our heart-of-hearts and determining what's bottom-line important to us. Knowing only one's Sun Sign — that bastard child of mass-marketed kindergarten astrology — is woefully insufficient to understand ourselves astrologically.

Other factors in the natal chart add to the richness: The Ascendant is the lens through which our inner light is focused through natural and spontaneous self-expression; the condition of the Moon reveals our immediate, habitual responses

and short-term needs; aspect patterns in the chart indicate how energy moves within us through the circuitry of our psyches and bodies, as well as how that energy will characteristically be expressed in thought, feeling, and activity. The Sun, however, tells us about our core, the nature of our engine, and the particular kind of cosmic fuel that keeps our lives on track and meaningful. The Sun symbolizes our "gravitational center," a way of perceiving reality that keeps all our more peripheral facets organized and coherent.

If the Sun represents individual human selfhood in astrology, with its challenge to radiate *personal* dignity and integrity through Love and Power, then what is implied by the Galactic Center, which is the next step up in the transformer back toward Cosmic Central? That meaning lies in our response to the larger challenge of participation within community and culture to express *shared* dignity and integrity.

For the past 2,000 years, the arrow pointing from our solar system's local neighborhood toward the center of the galaxy has been moving slowly forward through the sign Sagittarius in the tropical zodiac. Now it's nearing the end of that section of the heavens, about to move into the 28th degree of Sagittarius. In another 250 years, the Galactic Center's point of reference will have moved to the first degree of Capricorn.

At this point, it's uncertain if humanity will survive another 250 years. We are, in effect, on trial for our lives because of our trashing the planet and trying to dominate each other. The jury may still be out, but with each passing year the likelihood of an eventual verdict of "Not Guilty" shrinks considerably. If the verdict comes back "Guilty" — meaning that we refused to change how we feel, think, and act as a species — then we might be relegated to the garbage heap of failed evolutionary experiments (i.e., species that succeed until they grow too big for their britches and finally go belly up for one reason or another).

Extinction is, of course, the ultimate fate of all earthly life-forms. Some species last longer than others because they evolve and adapt, eventually morphing into something new. Others remain much the same throughout their time until the environment changes and their swan song plays. So far, it looks like *homo sapiens* was in the former category early on, but is now stuck in the latter category. Not only do we no longer have enough time to evolve, but we're stubbornly refusing to even consider changing how we live. Ironically, the changes in our environment that may do us in are the product of our own activity.

Should we manage somehow to survive as a species further into the new millennia, the shift in zodiacal position of the Galactic Center from Sagittarius into Capricorn will symbolically imply fundamental changes in the structure of civilization. Notions of "freedom" will seem like quaint relics from a disturbed, foolish adolescence. Democracy will be an idea whose time passed very quickly.

Future humans (if there are any...) will necessarily realize the serious responsibilities they shoulder and act accordingly.

Moving from solar consciousness to galactic consciousness is a huge leap for flawed, fallible, immature human beings, who tend to have terrible trouble getting past the shadow aspects of the psyche — ego, vanity, pride, narcissism, greed, and a very warped sense of Us-versus-Them.

We haven't done very well so far in building a civilization, and what has been achieved is now coming apart at the seams. Didn't take long, either — a mere 12,000 years to construct this screwed-up civilization and get it up to breakneck speed — which is incredibly fast, a mere blip on the radar of evolutionary time. In just the last three centuries, civilization's impact curve went vertical, and with that came all the unintended consequences and dire repercussions we now face.

But that's how many organisms operate on earth. They gestate for a long time, finally bloom in a dramatic welling-up of their vitality, then die shortly thereafter. For a single organism, the culminating bloom creates seeds that allow perpetuation and renewal of the species. For an entire species, however, the bloom presages an ending without a new beginning. But even extinction provides opportunity. By altering the mutual interdependence of the earthly ecosystem, the extinction of one species opens up niches for other evolving species to step forward and prosper for awhile. And so it goes...

Perhaps humanity's possible demise is much less perverse than it seems. Maybe it's not a tragedy at all, but an inevitability, the natural way of Life on Earth. Reality is undoubtedly richer than we know, and Gaia probably has more tricks up her sleeve than we imagine.

In the meantime, let's do whatever we can to heal our damage and, even if we don't stop the destruction, at least slow it down a little. That may not amount to much collectively (it certainly hasn't so far), but it's still worthwhile to make the effort individually and within our personal networks of relatedness.