

Extreme Planetary Energies [Repost]

by Bill Herbst

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The essay below was written nearly 20 years ago. That was an earlier time of profound madness in American history — two years after 9/11, and six months after President George W. Bush and his Neocon cronies had lied egregiously to a gullible American public and the world to justify the military invasion of Iraq they wanted that was aimed at deposing Saddam Hussein and remaking the Middle East. At the time, I was building a small subscriber base for a monthly email newsletter. This essay was entitled Newsletter #58, a numbering that dates back to my earliest snail mail newsletters from the 1980s. It's an essay worth reading that holds up even 20 years later.

A new subscriber to this newsletter recently emailed me with a question that is not only provocative, but quite relevant to our understanding of ourselves and our approach to astrology.

He asked: *"Have you seen people overcome the most dire planetary energies by moving their consciousness to the plane above the level of planetary influence?"*

That's a great question. It cuts right to the heart of some very basic and unresolved issues in astrology. It's not easy to answer with a simple yes-or-no, but few really serious and important questions are. Please keep in mind as you read that what follows is not about the ordinary, garden-variety versions of planetary effects that range from beneficent to moderately difficult. Anyone can work with those. The question I'm addressing here is whether consciousness can attenuate or alter the really extreme and dreadful planetary energies that occasionally whack us hard, sometimes without warning, and twist our lives into pretzels.

Lessons of Experience

As a brash, young astrologer during the early years of my career in the 1970s, I would have answered that question with an optimistic "yes." At the time, I believed (or hoped, at least) that consciousness matters a great deal, and that personal consciousness-raising through psychological and spiritual inner

work could allow us to eliminate many of the negative effects of the fearful energies that swirl within and around our personal force fields.

Now, 30 years later, I still believe in those possibilities, but time and experience have significantly tempered my sense of the power of self-awareness, at least for most of us. I say "most of us," because over the years I've heard and read about extraordinary people — spiritual adepts, devotees, yogis, and other masters — who perform miraculous feats of personal control, transcendence, and altering physical reality in dramatic ways. In fact, I haven't met any of these people or seen them do their supposedly amazing stuff, so it's all hearsay from where I sit. Such advanced human beings may truly exist, or they may be little more than glorified versions of Siegfried and Roy or David Copperfield. Most "miracles" are eventually debunked as illusions, mere sleight of hand. At any rate, that Hollywood/Las Vegas/Disneyland level of the miraculous really doesn't interest me at all.

My youthful answer from three decades ago now appears to me to have been inadvertently judgmental. If consciousness could indeed neutralize dire planetary energies, then would not the converse be true also? That would imply that the more difficult or painful manifestations of planets occur because of a lack of self-awareness or maturity. Everything I've seen, however, suggests to me that this is not so. [I would assert this even more emphatically now, 20 years later.]

I've been tracking the lives of my core clients for up to 25 years in some cases [almost 50 now], working with them through good times and bad in their lives. I've watched these people in both struggle and growth. Two things are crystal clear: The traumas they've suffered are clearly custom-tailored to their charts, but — just as clearly, at least in my best assessment — those troubles weren't the results of immaturity or a simple lack of awareness.

Life's Complexities

Everything we create and experience in life produces paradoxical and opposite results, some happy and others distinctly unhappy. I am not sufficiently evolved personally to prevent unhappy outcomes, nor is anyone I know. But all the people I admire and respect do the very best they can to live in grace and non-attachment, so as to enhance the possibilities for positive results and not intentionally add to the burden of negative repercussions. Still, everyone I know (including me) is frail and damaged in ways that are both universal (generic) and individual (custom-tailored). For all the apparent success and good fortune that some people enjoy, the darker experiences of illness, grief, and loss remain unavoidable elements of life. Those who reach the final curtain call without much suffering are far and away the rarest of exceptions. For all its beauty and wonder, life is also very hard and can be unspeakably cruel.

Discussing planetary energies is challenging, in part because astrologers are uncertain of the true nature of these energies. Even to label them as “energies” involves certain presumptions. Are these planetary symbols literally vibrational, and therefore physical, or are such descriptions merely metaphors for some other mechanism of universal organization about which we know precious little? Do planetary symbols operate in the realm of cause-and-effect, or is their manifestation more holistic and synchronous? Are the planets true agents in themselves or merely road signs along the cosmic highway of life? No one can say with certainty, and finding an appropriate language is as much poetry as science.

For purposes of this essay, allow me the convenience of writing as if planetary energies are literal, and their radiance (whether easily measurable or not) is objectively real.

One doesn't need astrology to identify these extreme energies — any person of reasonable sensitivity can feel them — but astrology is brilliant at revealing the relative importance of different planets in the psychological makeup of our essential characters, as well as timing the ebb and flow of their arrivals and departures in moving cycles. Astrology is not particularly good, however, at predicting in advance whether these effects will be benign or malignant for any individual. We know the range of possibilities for each planet, but pinpointing which manifestations will occur in feeling and/or in fact for a given individual at a particular time is still hit-or-miss.

More significantly, astrology is even less capable of assessing the impact of planetary energies in combination. Most serious astrological textbooks do not even begin to address the problem of combined effects, and astrologers themselves are divided (sometimes, sadly, even clueless) as to what may occur when multiple planets blend in complementary and contradictory ways, as they always do. Some astrologers are better at discerning and illuminating this than others, of course, but these interactions are notoriously complex and difficult to nail down.

The Bottom Line

In my opinion, extreme planetary energies — at least as we experience them in our bodies and psyches, and as we identify them through natal charts, moving cycles, and other techniques of personalized astrology — are typically not the kind of vibrations our consciousness can accurately identify, much less alter or deflect with any certainty.

Imagine these dire energies as if they were intense weather patterns on the oceans. Individual self-awareness is like a sailboat skimming along the surface, buffeted at times by wind and waves, turbulence and current. Any experienced sailor would tell us that no boat ever built by human beings can affect or change

the environmental extremes of these huge bodies of water. When asked if we can “control” the oceans or “overcome” its storms, our sailor would probably laugh mockingly and caution us against ever venturing out onto the high seas. He would understand all too well the forces of nature we're up against. Our foolhardy presumptions of control would invite disaster, perhaps not today or tomorrow, but eventually. Remember the “unsinkable” Titanic? The Edmund Fitzgerald? Ocean bottoms are littered with the wrecks of ill-founded human optimism and arrogance that would seem unbelievable were they not so common. Even the best sailors among us can be swamped and sunk.

As attractive as it may seem to suggest anchoring our ships of consciousness in safe harbors during severe storms, that is easier said than done. Where is this safe harbor and how do we get there? Because the hurricanes hit inside us as well as outside, shelter is difficult to achieve. Just when we think we've calmed ourselves inside, another blow comes from outer circumstance, or vice versa.

Whatever we use to strengthen our centeredness and detach from ego-delusions can provide some protection, but no discipline is fail-safe. Life's tidal waves can trump them all. I know many, many people who have devoted decades to diligent spiritual practice. Most have suffered profound tragedies at some point along the way, and not one has come through unscathed. We are all strong yet vulnerable. The hide-and-seek of alternately finding and losing ourselves is an ongoing dance.

The most we can reasonably expect is to improve our talents as boat-builders in constructing more seaworthy crafts, then to apply our evolving skills as sailors to better adapt to a marine environment that changes drastically, often with very little warning. During normal weather, we set our sails to take advantage of conditions. This is consciousness working effectively with planetary energies. Squalls occur, however, and sometimes whip themselves into prolonged hurricanes. In such savage storms, sailing ships are often overwhelmed. We can't do a damned thing to work with such conditions. All we can do is batten down the hatches, ride out the storm, and hope to survive. If we're lucky, we'll have a tale to tell later.

Effects of Individual Planets

When we talk about dire planetary effects in astrology, five major bodies stand out: Mars, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. These are the provocateurs.

MARS is the symbol for testosterone and adrenalin, activating our fight-or-flight responses. Mars is Red Alert or DefCon One. Our aggressiveness is on edge with a hair trigger. In its negative expression, Mars wants to pick a fight. The problem for consciousness is to calm and soothe the wild beast inside. Have you ever tried to reason with someone who is enraged? Have you ever tried to calm yourself when you were especially angry or anxious? It's really difficult. We may

succeed for a moment or an hour, but the time-bomb inside still ticks away, waiting for any trigger, any excuse to go off.

SATURN is cold and harsh. Saturnian periods are defined externally by difficult, limiting circumstances, and internally by feelings of constraint, heaviness, and pessimism. Whatever fears lurk in our unconscious well up into manifestation, challenging us to deal with them in real life. Fear is a very tough problem for consciousness. When we're afraid, especially when we're not quite aware of it, all our systems start to shut down. We go into survival mode, like a turtle pulling inside its shell. Time and again, I've witnessed people (including myself) get incredibly stupid during difficult Saturn transits, but we realize that only in hindsight, after the transits end and our consciousness relaxes and spreads its wings again. Some astrologers suggest that Saturn mellows with age in our lives, but I'm not so sure. The stark reality is that Saturn reveals where we will deal with failure, despite dogged and prolonged ambition.

URANUS is shocking and upsetting. Its exterior effects are revolution and upheaval. Life circumstances change suddenly, drastically, and without warning. Consciousness cannot intervene here because we don't expect what happens. The electric cattle-prod shocks are meant to awaken us. The interior effects are toward willful separation and independence from whatever duties and responsibilities have become unbearable. Our previous consciousness is swept away, yet we insist that we chose this new and radical path. Yeah, sure...

NEPTUNE is insidious, as if someone had slipped a slow-acting drug into our drinks. We are altered without even realizing it. The effects are dreamlike, whether they manifest as pleasant fantasies or disturbing nightmares. Traditional astrological advice for people undergoing major Neptune periods is to keep one foot on the ground and not forget practical concerns. The problem is that I've never seen anyone who can do that. Pragmatic reality goes right out the window, and our consciousness succumbs to the Hollywood illusion. The whole point of Neptune is to teach us to transcend seduction and the inevitable betrayals that follow, but the teaching doesn't work if we don't fall into the traps. So, our consciousness becomes an unwitting accessory.

PLUTO is death and rebirth. Pluto shows its full extremes only in rare instances, but when it does, the manifestations are the ultimate dreadful energy in astrology. Like Shiva or Kali, Pluto destroys the illusions that have hardened into concrete form in our lives, provoking confrontations with forces far more powerful than our consciousness. Self-awareness and the literal circumstances that support it are shattered or crushed so that a completely new awareness may later emerge from the ashes. For astrologers, the problem with Pluto is that it's like a long-dormant but smoking volcano. Over decades, significant Pluto transits may produce only an occasional burp, but when the volcano finally does blow, it's the Last Days of Pompeii.

CHIRON is unconscious beliefs. I'm not much for asteroids or other minor bodies, especially those in the Kuiper Belt or the Oort Cloud. I leave that realm of lesser symbols mostly to the younger generation of astrologers, some of whom fill their charts with asteroids. That's fine, but I'm like an old country doctor. Take two aspirin or some major planets and call me in the morning. The reason I added Chiron to my charts many years ago is that Chiron's symbolism is relevant to the psychological/therapeutic orientations that were always tied to the practical and spiritual dimensions of my astrological work. Stated simply, Chiron is the realm of unconscious belief. It shows us what we believe and factor into our decisions, but typically without awareness. As Chiron moves through its 50-year cycle around the Zodiac and connects with other significant natal points in major transits (conjunction, square, opposition), it triggers the possibility of our becoming conscious of specific beliefs that were formerly unconscious. That can be very illuminating, especially when it turns out, as it sometimes does, that what we believed was not true and was inadvertently contributing to negative results from our decisions and strategies. Chiron gives us the opportunity to confirm or correct our beliefs, and that can be very valuable.

Where is Consciousness Effective?

Extreme planetary energies are the exception, not the rule. On average, they comprise only 20-30% of what comes up in our charts. The rest of the cycles are usually fairly neutral. Consciousness works quite well with these noncritical passages, integrating their meanings, accounting for their effects, and expanding on their possibilities. So, I don't wish to leave the impression that consciousness has no impact. Much of the time, it makes a real difference.

But averages are just norms, and life is occasionally anything but normal. As individuals, we may go through extended periods where our charts are relatively calm, with only a smattering of serious planetary events over a number of years. But then we move into extraordinary phases where extreme planetary activations gang up on us. Those times are what I'm writing about in this essay, periods of two to five years where we may go through a large number of simultaneous or overlapping events (transits) of serious consequence, with no let up, no pause to recover or catch our breath. Any one of those planetary visitations is challenging on its own, but — experienced simultaneously or in a cascade — they are often overwhelming.

Every month I do sessions with clients who are living through such trying times. I see more of this than do professionals in other types of businesses, because that's when people tend to seek out astrological help — when their lives are moving through struggle, travail, or loss. And I understand very well from the tragedies in my own life the questions many of my clients may not ask directly but are thinking: "*What the hell is going on?*" "*What am I supposed to do with this?*" and "*When will it end?*"

Those are hard questions, and often impossible to answer with precision or certainty, but astrology is well-suited to address them at least in symbolism, even if the answers are frequently not what our egos want to hear.

Conclusion

The old phrase "*What doesn't kill us makes us stronger*" is a bit macho for my taste and misses the mark, I think. We don't get stronger as we age and face successive challenges. If that were the case, we'd all be invincible at 90. No, we're strongest during the sheer biological vitality of youth. We may not be able to easily slough off negative energies and traumatic events when we're young, but chances are better earlier than later. Still, only kids (or those of us who are immature at any age) insist that we're always growing stronger. The cold fact is that nobody's getting out of here alive. We will all be taken down, if not gradually, then finally, and we'll eventually have to give up everything.

But therein lies the grace of the spiritual path. Whatever seemingly tries to kill us — either from outside or inside ourselves — CAN make our consciousness deeper and more humble. Over time, life asks us to elevate serenity above fighting, forgiveness above revenge, and surrender above control. Although we are often unable to prevent the body slams of dire planetary energies and the corresponding tragedies that overtake us, those experiences remain central as crucibles through which blunt ego is pulverized and transformed into refined consciousness. Like the intense pressures inside the earth that transform a lump of coal into a diamond, and the chisel that cuts the finished gem from the raw stone, maturity can emerge out of adversity.

Though it does not happen in every human life and is probably more rare than most of us would like to believe, I continue to hope that the possibility exists for our evolution into gleaming diamonds of consciousness — living prisms that reveal the true colors of the rainbow hidden within the Light.