

Saturn:

Experiencing the Authority Within

(Part Three of Three)

by Bill Herbst

In this week's final installment, Part Three of the revised reprint of my 1985 essay about Saturn as an archetype in astrology, the essay shifts metaphors from childhood resistance and denial to the more daunting challenges of mountain-climbing.

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the mountain

The Saturn experience is like having a mountain in your backyard. Every time you go outside, there it is, looming up into the clouds, casting its inevitable shadow over your life, not only inviting you to climb, but challenging you to do so, finally admonishing you, chiding you with its brooding, silent presence. Why even consider climbing it when the risks are so formidable? To use the famous answer by British explorer Sir Edmund Hillary: "*Because it's **there.***"

The mountain is there within each of us — individual, idiosyncratic, in some shape or texture, in public or private, bold or brooding, emotional or physical, mental and rational or psychic and sexual. The challenge is not one of conquest, for being at the top is not the point of the Saturn experience, although it may be the lure that keeps our ambition focused, the carrot dangled in front of our donkey. No, understood correctly, the challenge we face in climbing the mountain is more than mere perseverance. True victory requires gaining a sense of patience over our slow progress and mastery over our fears. If there is any conquest in Saturn's forced training, it is the conquest of fear, of inadequacy, and of the crippling sense of personal failure.

We cannot avoid or ignore the mountain, can't pretend it isn't there. It stands silent and haunting above us, reaching down from the super-conscious into the everyday self. Each time we go out of our seemingly secure little house, there it is. Each time we extend ourselves into the world, there it is. We can put off the climb, postponing it indefinitely, but that course leads to a life unfulfilled and the existential bitterness that accompanies feelings of cowardice. We can cheat ourselves by taking the cable-car to the top, boasting to ourselves and bragging to the world of the breathtaking view from the summit, creating fish-stories of our climb and the rigors it entailed. But the hollow echo of emptiness will ring out inside us, the sound of our own voices bouncing back from across the

chasm. Because in that case we won't truly be touching anything or anyone with real heart.

We don't need to look for our mountain. It will find us. The authority-within will see to that. We need only to recognize its existence, to pay homage to it (in the Oriental sense), or to love our divine enemy (as in the Christian ethos). This must occur over and over, during each significant phase of life (especially at the crucial seven-year-quarter gear shifts of major Saturn cycles), because the mountain will change shape and size as our lives develop. We may sincerely believe we have climbed it once and for all, that we have understood and deflated our over sensitivities and anxious obsessions, only to discover later that we were not at the summit, only another penultimate ridge-top, and that our doubts and failure-imprints are renewed with each new evolutionary period in our lives. We may realize that the mountain doesn't have a peak at all, but continues to grow beyond our accomplishments. That is very probably part of the human condition — as long as you're in a body, you're still working it out.

So, you have a mountain in your backyard. It looms up 20,000 feet, blocking out the sun. If you're ever going to get a really good tan, you'll have to climb it.

I have a mountain in my backyard too. Mine is also 20,000 feet. But my mountain appears to you as little more than a foothill. Yours appears equally small to me. This is a critical point to comprehend. I don't understand why you have so much trouble with your mountain, why it frustrates and frightens you, and you don't understand why I struggle so much with mine. Our mountains are ours alone. Not only can no one else climb them for us, but no one else even recognizes them as mountains. No one sees our mountain but us.

In pragmatic terms, your fears and inadequacies are not immediately nor obviously apparent to me, nor are mine to you. We may have to know each other for quite awhile before the unique patterns of hard-wired anxiety or neurosis in each of us become visible to the other. Once we do comprehend them in each other, we marvel that we could ever have missed them. Patterns of behavior, feeling, and communication that were previously incomprehensible become crystal-clear.

mountain-climbing strategies

To increase pure consciousness most effectively, the Saturn experience needs to be dealt with by path orientation rather than goal orientation. It's not how fast you get to the top that counts, nor how much you suffer along the way, but rather how much understanding you assimilate on the journey.

Do you learn to appreciate the climb by wringing satisfaction from the effort? Do you gain increased self-awareness, savvy, and humility, even as your physical resources are used up? Can you feel the mountain with each step? Are you understanding why it's in your life? Each night when you make camp, are you focused on how many more thousand feet you have yet to cover, or upon the

experiences of that day's climbing? Do you linger with frustrated thoughts of the ravines and crevices that delayed you, of the rock slides that buried you, of the snowstorms that blinded you? Or do you see in the mind's eye the ingenuity with which you persevered, the inner stamina that developed, the increasing purity of the air you breathe at higher altitude?

Imagine the actual experience of mountain-climbing. The prospective climber does not gaze up at the awesome mountain one sunny afternoon and say, "*I think I'll climb this mountain today,*" as if it were an afternoon's lark, a quick jog around the block. No. The actual statement is more likely to be, "*I think I'd like to climb this mountain someday.*" That is the beginning of a long process of preparation. Resources must be acquired, plans must be made, a team must be assembled. While these preparations slowly take shape, training regimens must be followed. The discipline of fitness is crucial if the arduous climb is to be a success. The team may make numerous trial climbs of slopes on similar but smaller mountains.

Preparing to deal with our fears involves a similar sequence of experience. First, we realize that our progress through life is blocked at certain junctures. Then we discover that these various blocks are patterns that repeat in our lives. As we grow in awareness of our inner mountain and its external manifestations, we experience both fear and ambition. "*Why is this happening to me? Are the Gods against me? Oh yeah, well, I'll show them — someday.*" We begin to consider strategies and tactics for dealing with the obstacles that keep us away from fulfillment. We plan, develop resources, and look for help.

Beyond mere preparation is the challenge of actually climbing the mountain. One might presume mountain-climbing to be a fairly straightforward experience: start at the bottom and climb toward the top, with each day's ascent marking a gain over the previous heights achieved. In much the same logic, some people believe — naively — that dealing with their inner authority, their ambitions, and their fears will be a straightforward, linear progression. They expect each successive period in their lives to represent a higher plateau of achievement in the conquest of fear. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In climbing a mountain, the first phase of the expedition is to establish a base camp. This is the tail end of what will eventually become a line of supply, with base camp at the bottom representing the main depot. The mountain itself will provide little if any sustenance along the way, and none at higher elevations, so everything the climbers need — food, shelter, and other gear — must be carried along with them. Outfitted with as many supplies from base camp as each climber can comfortably manage, the trek up the mountain can then begin in earnest.

The climbers face a number of double-edged swords: when they begin, they are well-stocked and secure, but the sheer weight of supplies they carry slows them down. They will consume part of their supplies as they go, and we might

presume that the decreased weight would lead to an accelerated pace, but this is offset by progressive weariness from the effort of climbing. They may be lighter, but they are also more tired. In addition, the mountain becomes steeper, more challenging, more difficult to climb as they move higher up its slopes.

In the same way, dealing with the implications of our Saturns requires us to be well-outfitted at the start. Building the edifice of ambition in the world requires a start-up investment of energy and capital. No one is likely to initially face the demons of his or her worst fears without the ballast of extra confidence. Armed with this burst of confidence, we are also weighed down by its very bravado. At the start, we really don't know what we're getting into, and our tendency is to assault the mountain rather than to climb its first gentle slopes with deliberate pacing. We soon discover, however, that our fears are not so easily conquered, and that maintaining the sustenance of courage and confidence can tax the psyche, draining our strength by the amount of effort expended.

up and down the mountain

Early on, the mountain-climbers will reach a point where their physical energy, food, and fuel are, say, one-third used up. Technically, they could continue climbing, but inevitably they would reach a point where their supplies were completely exhausted, and then they would be in big trouble: caught part-way up the mountain, unable to move higher, yet without the supplies necessary to sustain their ascent. So instead of continuing the climb with single-minded focus on the distant summit, they must now halt their upward journey to establish a *second* supply camp where they stash the bulk of their remaining supplies. At that point, the climbers have no alternative but to descend back down the mountain. They must relinquish all the ground they'd gained, returning to base camp, sustained on the way down only by their slim remaining supplies, after which they will have to re-stock with fresh resources.

Consider the climbers' psychological state as they descend the slopes. Having achieved perhaps only one-tenth of their ascent, here they are coming back down, returning to their starting point. Once they arrive at base camp, they will rest, re-stock, and turn to face the mountain again. When they renew their ascent, it won't be merely *like* starting over, it will be *literally* starting over. Can we conceive that they might feel at least slightly despondent?

Most of us have experienced the seeming conquest of one or another of our fears, along with the elation and deepened confidence — not to mention the relief — that comes with such success. And most of us have also experienced the stinging shock of disillusionment that occurs when, sometimes years or even decades later, we discover that the fear we thought we'd banished for good returns to mock and humiliate us again, often in new forms, but sometimes in the very same way as before. In those awful moments, our embarrassment is balanced with outrage: *"Now hold on, I've already done this one! I sweated blood to beat that terror. It was gone. I know it was gone. How the hell can it be back, tormenting me again? This isn't fair."* No, of course it isn't fair; it's physics.

It's the way of things here on earth, living in the forms of these bodies, working with the psyches that structure our evolving consciousness.

Back to our climbers. Having restarted their journey up the mountain, they arrive again at the second supply camp. This time they move on, climbing higher until they reach the point where a third supply depot must be established. By that point, however, they have used up most of the supplies they were carrying. Now they're faced with having to come back down once more, back to the second camp, to pick up fresh supplies and make the climb back up to stock the third camp.

You see where the scenario is headed. The entire slope of the mountain, from base to near-summit, will eventually be dotted with supply camps along the way, perhaps five or six such depots in all. During the ascent, the climbers must periodically reverse themselves to re-stock each depot in the chain. And so they go up and down the mountain in fits and spurts, periodically making new progress, but most of the time re-tracing their steps over and over along the ascent.

The logistics of re-supply are much more challenging than actually climbing the mountain. Climbing is tiring, but equally exhilarating. Each new plateau is another victory. Maintaining the supply line to insure survival, however, is the nightmare. Imagine what it would be like as a climber to reach the fifth supply camp, only to realize that in attaining that height, the intermediate supply camps have been exhausted. Consider the frustration of being forced to turn around and come back down the entire mountain, past camp four, three, and two, all the way to the base camp at the bottom.

Now, I am not in fact a mountain climber. I don't know if this scenario has any truth or relevance for actual mountain climbing. But, as a metaphor for our human experience with the archetype of Saturn in our lives, it is resonant and correct.

In order to climb the mountain and eventually reach the summit (psychologically: the summit of true maturity, with its understanding and acceptance of reality) we will have to go up and down the mountain many times, in small bites. This is necessary to avoid the complete exhaustion of our confidence. Dealing with our ambitions and fears is a lesson in patience, in pacing, in the alternation of sustained effort with careful rest. If we refuse to learn patience, racing up the mountain toward the summit, we will find ourselves stranded, lost, in danger of losing our souls. If, having already been up and down the mountain many times, we gaze up from the bottom and rail at the Gods, we harm only ourselves.

When we want to build a road or bridge a chasm in the non-Saturnian areas of our growth, we simply call in the highway department or the Army Corps of Engineers. We are permitted any and all the help we can find in arenas of personal circumstance that do not touch the symbolism of Saturn in our lives.

But in those areas where Saturn applies (which is usually clearly defined within the natal chart), we will pointedly receive little or no help. Saturnian paths are created one step at a time, and they become well-worn pathways only because we walk over them, up and down, time and again. It is because we must re-trace our steps so often that the slopes become walkable. The jagged rocks are worn smooth because we will tread over them — back and forth — ten thousand times.

the challenge of Saturn

In the harshest, most dogmatic perspective, Saturn in our charts reveals what we cannot have in our lives, where success will be either denied or elusive. In a gentler view, however, Saturn shows us where we will learn patience through slow application, and what will teach us to appreciate the experience of delayed gratification, which is critical in the passage from child to adult. Children demand gratification NOW. Adults know how to wait. This is resonant of an old spiritual joke. *Question:* Why does time exist? *Answer:* So that everything doesn't happen at once.

Our challenge with Saturn is to grow up, to preserve at least some of the essence of child-like wonder while shedding most of our childish illusions, among them many of our complaints and tantrums about not getting what we want, and learning when necessary to make do with what we've got. Full maturity implies the ability to stand as tall in well-earned dignity as our mountain is high in oversensitivity, impatience, and fear of failure. We need to become tough and resilient — not stiff or hardened, but tempered and flexible.

If Saturn in your natal chart touches on the experience of mentality, you feel utterly stupid, mentally damaged, incapable of learning or understanding or communicating, enraged that others are so much smarter. In school, you hide your humiliation in silence or become the class clown, mocking your own thickness but hating the role. You give up and drop out, only to discover that your life narrows to a dead end, so you swallow your pride, re-enter school, and hit the books again. Finally, you accept the rigors of education and relax into your deep curiosity and ambitious will to learn. Eventually you grow to feel more confident in your intelligence than those whose mentality is more easily accessible (meaning not limited by Saturn), for you know without a doubt that you've earned your smarts and savvy in the school of hard knocks.

If your Saturn is about sexuality, you feel completely unattractive, trapped in a world where everyone else seems beautiful and sensual and easily fulfilled. No one could ever want you, you tell yourself. Like the old Groucho Marx joke, you wouldn't belong to any club that would have someone like you for a member. So, one option you may choose is rigid celibacy. Or you may attempt the opposite — hurling yourself from bed to bed, from lover to lover, and yet secretly loathing the experiences. You fake it out of fear. On the other hand, retreating into the seeming safety of the convent to escape leaves you feeling hollow and empty, and eventually rings just as false. But, whether you choose

the path of the libertine or the celibate because of insecurity, you will also probably have moments of perverse confidence — certainty that you are the world's greatest lover, imbued with a special radiance of passion. Not that you ever get to experience that or be rewarded socially. If you mature, though, bravado or denial will eventually give way to seasoned humility, and your blend of tough and tender just might attract profound magic in touch.

Saturn does not dictate inevitably that we're screwed forever, nor that we will eventually fulfill our ambition. We might feel ultimate denial and failure, but we might also achieve substantial levels of fulfillment. The outcome varies sometimes dramatically from person to person. Which occurs depends on what happens to us in our lives and how we react to it.

And so it goes. Wherever Saturn is located in your natal chart — with whatever growth processes, life experiences, and arenas of circumstance are symbolically indicated as part of your mountain — you are likely to log at least some of both the best and the worst that this planet has to offer. You will strive to earn the best, even though you may often feel condemned to the worst.

Within the long-term mountain-climbing of the Saturn experience, we are likely to have many moments of grandeur where our efforts are rewarded with a panoramic view from higher than we've ever been before. And we will also have many moments of coming back down the mountain, sometimes all the way to the bottom. In those sometimes lengthy phases where achievement is not forthcoming or has proven bitterly false, we will have to fend off depression, despondency, and cynicism. When failure haunts us, we feel as if our entire lives had been a waste, just a set-up for humiliation.

In those hard times (which nearly everyone experiences with their Saturns), we may believe that nothing we've ever achieved has counted for anything, as if — like Sisyphus — we had been condemned by the gods to never be able to roll the boulder up the hill. We need to remind ourselves that we can be courageous mountain-climbers who embody not only strength and skill, but also fortitude and grit. We work to grow into people who can shoulder our burdens and bounce back from adversity. As the I Ching says, *perseverance furthers*.

Time is the great teacher... Time... Kronos... Saturn.

