

# Untwisting the Zodiac

by Bill Herbst

*This week's commentary is an edited and expanded reprint of an article published in 2004 as part of a short-lived monthly astrology column I wrote for a local Minneapolis magazine called The Edge. The Edge was, and still is, a New Age magazine about metaphysics, spirituality, and wellness. In the weeks ahead, I may repost one or two other articles from the ten I wrote for that brief, one-year column.*

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In my world, astrology comes in two distinct and very separate versions. One astrology is the technical system I use, both in my own life and my professional session work with clients. This version includes personal and civilizational astrology. The other version is the “popular” astrology that exists in the minds of much of the general public. These two versions are so utterly different that the chasm between them often feels impossible to bridge. In my experience, the astrology that resides in the public realm bears precious little resemblance and no relevance at all to the astrology I access and use from the other realm.

Popular astrology is based almost entirely on the twelve signs of the zodiac. It rarely ventures beyond that. Yes, pop astrology for the masses does make the occasional reference to events such as Mercury retrograde, Saturn Return, or a particularly potent eclipse, but such deviations are rare and occur only in passing. Standard fare for pop astrology is exclusive focus on signs of the zodiac, often referred to as “constellations.”

In technical astrology, however, the zodiac is only one of five major levels that comprise the system — planets, signs, houses, aspects, and moving cycles. All five levels are meaningful symbolically. They interact with one another in ways that are sometimes arcane, but generally poetic and philosophically consistent. What most of the public doesn't realize, however, is that the zodiac of signs is probably the LEAST important of the five levels.

The reason for this, as well as for the dominance of signs in mass-consumption astrology, is that the zodiac is *generic*. As a technical system, astrology requires exact input data. To erect the personal natal chart of an individual, we need to know the moment of birth in time and the location on the earth — when and where. Location is usually knowable, but an individual's exact time of birth is

frequently unrecorded or inaccessible. The problem is that small difference in the birth time of say, half an hour, can alter the core meaning of the birth chart dramatically.

By contrast, knowing one's personal "sign" — by which I mean one's "Sun-sign," literally the sign of the zodiac through which the Sun was passing when the person was born — requires no great precision. We need only the month, day, and year of birth, which is known for the vast majority of people. That information is generic rather than precise. Creating an astrology for the masses requires easy access, and Sun signs are as easy as it gets.

I hardly think about Sun signs at all. Ever. And I don't categorize people as zodiacal signs (as in the classic, stereotypical opening gambit of conversation between two people in a singles bar: "*I'm a Leo, what are you?*"). Quite simply, I don't consider human beings as sections of the ecliptic (which are what signs of the zodiac are). Signs of the zodiac are generic archetypes. People are not. For instance, I never participate in the "Guess My Sign" game. Attempting to characterize someone as reflecting or being shaped by one specific zodiacal archetype may be fun for some people, but it marks anyone who engages in such a pastime as not at all serious about real astrology.

Despite the overriding importance in astrology of the Sun's position at a person's birth, the zodiacal sign through which the Sun was passing at the time does NOT stand out as the most important factor-combination in the birth chart. The sign placements of the Ascendant, Moon, and Saturn are of nearly equal significance. But even that admission overstates the importance of signs in general. Rather than representing personal identities, sign positions — including the Sun's — are like the subtle colors in an impressionist painting or the spices that give a dish its aroma and flavors. They are not, however, the subject of the painting or the main ingredients of the meal. That distinction is reserved for the major bodies of the solar system.

For millions of people, however, zodiacal signs ARE astrology, and most specifically, Sun signs. And why not? This is what the general public is offered in the marketplace — those little books at grocery store checkouts ("*The Year Ahead for Leo,*" or "*Love Signs for Gemini,*" etc.) or the Sun sign columns in daily newspapers and monthly magazines.

By the way, I have nothing against reading Sun sign columns for entertainment or to provide an intuitive spark (akin to fortune cookies at Chinese restaurants). If that floats your boat, then by all means go ahead.

My gripe is simply this: No sane person can put much stock in the idea that "Tuesday is a good day for romance" or "Friday is ideal for closing that big business deal" for all 28 million people in this country who were born with the Sun in a certain sign.

## Sun Signs as a Marketing Device

The general public and even some astrologers are unaware that Sun signs were literally INVENTED in the 1920s as a crude mass-marketing scheme, a way of capturing the interest of regular folks who knew nothing about astrology as a serious discipline. The ersatz psychology of "character traits" was eagerly expanded into extensive "personality profiles" for each of the twelve signs.

Such schemes for categorizing people — dividing all humans into one of twelve "types" — rely on superficial generalizations. And yet, those generalizations are then applied to every conceivable arena of human activity and experience: career, intimacy, money, health, family, travel, intellect, education, spirituality, social participation, cultural values, etc. Basically, this is superficiality that's been pushed too far and spread too thin, paradoxically masquerading as depth. To suggest that all "Scorpios" are uniformly jealous in love or that all "Pisceans" are wishy-washy in decision-making is simply not accurate.

Although tying zodiacal archetypes to the qualities understood in popular culture as "personality" was an absurdly false oversimplification from the get-go, that artifice succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of the few astrologers who profited economically. Beginning with articles on astrological birth signs in the burgeoning industry of Hollywood fan magazines and soon expanding into daily Sun sign forecasts in newspapers, the business of astrology-as-entertainment was born. Ever since, certain astrologers eager for celebrity have felt no compunction at all about pandering to the public appetite for "fast food."

In other words, Sun signs have precious little to do with astrology and a great deal to do with money and marketing.

The very idea of describing (and categorizing) individuals according to one of twelve signs of the zodiac is foolish, silly, and crass. It's generic in the worst way. And yet, these attempts at simplistic generalizations are an inherent part of what we humans do. For better or worse, we long for straightforward truisms to relieve the stress and bewilderment of the contradictory, complicated, and confusing world in which we live. One of the main reasons that popular astrology is so, well, POPULAR, is because it offers the promise (however illusory) of easy answers.

## Archetypes Versus Identities

Collectively, we have trouble distinguishing the critical differences between mythic archetypes (which do not exist at the human realm, but more as "gods" or characters in a dream) from personal identities (which are very human). Your name is a natural identity, but your Sun sign is an archetype. The former belongs to you; the latter does not.

That distinction may seem picky, but it's relevant. Confusing identities with archetypes keeps us undifferentiated — in the womb, so to speak. It holds us back from the spiritual maturity of authentic individuation. Early on in the spiritual journey, the archetype of our Sun sign empowers us, helping us understand our natural programming. If we cling to that zodiacal sign as a personal identity, however, we pay a grievous price later on in the failure to accurately reconcile the simplicity and complexity of who we truly are.

Now, I don't mean to be overly heavy-handed about this. The fact is that people will continue to refer to themselves and others as zodiacal signs. Shoot, I even catch myself doing it on rare occasions, most often when I'm in conversation with someone who knows no other astrological language. Speaking in terms of Sun Signs can be a very seductive shorthand. But that doesn't mean that such stereotyped labels are useful. To me, they're not.

When someone (such as a client in a session) tells me, "*My mother and my sister are both Geminis...*," am I supposed to nod knowingly, as if learning their Sun Signs gives me special insight into who they are? I think sometimes that people must mistakenly assume that, since I'm an astrologer, I will therefore appreciate knowing someone's Sun Sign and find the information insightful or otherwise helpful. Given the thousands of times this has happened over the half century of my professional career, I have to conclude that it's a misunderstanding so common as to be nearly universal.

If I could wave a magic wand and get people to talk to me in English rather than in astro-jargon, I would. The symbolic language of astrology is terrific language to think in. It is, however, a lousy language to speak in. For all its faults, English is far superior. Failing that magical transformation, however, I'd settle for people no longer describing themselves and others as if they were their Sun signs.

The bottom line for me is that human beings are NOT phases of the zodiac. So just file away that small insight in a nook or cranny at the back of your consciousness, and the next time someone says to you, "*My new boyfriend is a Leo,*" quietly remind yourself that really, in truth, he's not. He's a person, not a sign.