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Astrology and Psychotherapy

A Comparison for Astrologers

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Introduction

There is some dispute in the world of astrology over the issue of counseling. In the most obvious sense, every working astrologer is a counselor. We provide information and perspectives for our clients, based on a system of symbolic information. We advise them. That makes us counselors, or at the very least, consultants.

But beyond this general definition are more specific issues concerning psychological counseling and its relation to astrological practice. Where does the astrological end and the psychological begin? Are there conflicts between the two? If we practice as psychological counselors, do we need traditional credentials to be on solid ground? Is astrology a good basis for what is generally termed “therapy,” and beyond that, should astrologers be involved in practicing psychological therapy at all?

Astrology, like many disciplines, is remarkably diverse. Although the public expectation of an astrologer carries with it the presumption of expertise in every application of the system, this is rarely the case. Each person discovers a particular niche in using astrology. There are astrologers who specialize in

financial counseling, using astrological cycles to forecast the ebb and flow of economic trends, both in the marketplace and in the lives of individual clients. For a practitioner with these interests, the relationship of astrology to psychotherapy is hardly a burning issue.

But even such specialists are likely to have been drawn initially to astrology because of its psychological potentials. The rebirth of astrology in the twentieth century was propelled by corresponding developments in the infant science of psychology. Most interpretive frameworks contemporary astrologers studied to learn their craft were written by men and women with a strongly psychological orientation. The bulk of what is written about astrology — books, essays, articles, even the idiocy of Sun-sign columns in newspapers and magazines — refers directly or indirectly to the psychology of individual life.

Demographics

I define three groups of people involved in astrology for whom the issue of psychology and its counseling dimensions are relevant.

1. Professionals

This first group includes the majority of full-time, working astrologers. “Professional” is defined here in the most common way, to mean that one’s livelihood is associated with the ongoing practice of a discipline that requires specialized or advanced training. All or at least a part of this group’s income is earned from the use of astrological tools and insights in formal sessions with individuals who are regarded as clients. To be considered part of my first group, one must conduct an arbitrary minimum of 50 to upwards of 500 sessions per year.

The content of those sessions involves analysis and discussion of clients’ lives — experiences, circumstances, attitudes, or other contexts, especially as these correlate with symbolic patterns in natal charts, transits, etc.—with special emphasis on new information, insights, perspectives, strategies, options, or clarification.

This is the smallest of the three groups. Since astrology is not as well-organized as many other disciplines, accurate statistics on the numbers of professional astrologers are sketchy at best. Many do not belong to astrological organizations, nor do they state that they are astrologers on their income tax returns or census forms. Not all of them advertise. Many will not be found in the yellow pages of the telephone directory under “Astrologers.” So coming up with accurate numbers for this first group is somewhat of a problem. My guess is that there are no more than 2,000 individuals in this country who belong in this first category. This is, however, the group for which the issue of psychological counseling has most direct and obvious relevance.

2. Working Non-Professionals

The second group includes those who are not full-time or even part-time professionals, but still use astrology in regular or sporadic interactions with other people. They may or may not be paid money for their services, but in either case, they do not depend on sessions as a significant source of income. They may or may not think of the people with whom they work as clients, but either way, they feel a serious and sincere responsibility

about their role. They may or may not have the ambition to become professional astrologers, and they may or may not conduct formal sessions, but they are interested in talking to others about the events and meanings of their lives, and this general interest has become linked with the use of personalized astrological tools and insights as important components in that pursuit.

This second category is probably twenty times as large as the first. For every professional astrologer who maintains a regular clientele in an on-going practice, there are probably twenty people who share the same interests and motivations, and to some extent the same skills, but for one reason or another do not create a livelihood built around astrology. Although the concerns of this group are not as direct as those for the professional category, the issues of psychological counseling are still relevant.

3. Almost Everyone Else in Astrology

Of the literally millions of people in this country who are interested in or actively study astrology, the vast majority do not “practice” at all. That is to say, they do not use their astrological knowledge in formal or even informal sessions with other individuals. They may be interested in the astrological implications of others’ lives, but they have not studied astrology in much depth, or they lack confidence about their mental or verbal skills. They may balk at the ethical or moral responsibilities surrounding interpretation.

This is easily the largest group of the four categories. Although there are many people in this group whose knowledge extends only to the general idea of Sun signs, it also includes many others who are talented and insightful about astrology, who may have studied the philosophy and techniques of astrological interpretation in depth — they have read numerous astrological textbooks, taken classes, or attended seminars.

For this last group, the issue of psychological counseling in astrology would seem, at first glance, basically philosophical, or at least merely hypothetical. But the very fact that so many people are interested in astrology belies this.

The Spiritual Element of Real Life

Once survival needs are established — air, food, shelter, and all the basic protections necessary to maintain life — human beings turn their attention to new levels. Especially in a culture like ours, where survival is fairly easy to maintain, other pursuits become attractive. We shift our focus away from base survival and toward the quest for greater satisfaction, greater happiness, greater fulfillment. The quest takes many forms: pleasure, wealth, personal or cultural power, aesthetics, sexual gratification, mastery of and excellence in any of a thousand endeavors, etc. But however much we may become obsessed with these relatively physical dimensions of satisfaction, our attention tends to stray from those levels alone.

Sooner or later, the mystery of being alive emerges. What is this life I am living? How did I get here, and where am I going? What is my relation to the world around me? Who am I? What is this self? Who is thinking these thoughts? What is permanent about me? What is temporary? How do I work? How does it ALL

work? Even the most callously materialistic people wonder about the mystery of life, and for many of the rest of us, this mystery becomes an ongoing inner dialogue. Some would maintain that these and the infinity of similar questions are strictly within the realm of the spiritual, part of religion and metaphysics. I would counter that while they certainly invoke the metaphysical, they also concern the psychological.

Modern psychology can be thought of as a specific orientation toward the investigation of Life's mysteries, especially those associated with individuality. Therapy, as it is most often currently practiced, involves numerous techniques and processes designed to help achieve more effective adjustment to those mysteries. I use the term "adjustment" because I cannot use the word "answers." As far as I am aware, there are no answers to the mysteries of Life.

There are astrologers who believe strongly that our discipline should be separated from counseling, that it is not therapy and must not be mixed with such work. I know that some astrologers are nearly rabid in their insistence that astrology should be safeguarded from association with "psychic" or otherwise intuitive processes, insisting instead that it be used in a purely "scientific" manner. I have heard well-known and expert astrologers advise students to avoid "esoteric readings" (sessions with metaphysical or spiritual content) with their clients, unless the client specifically requests such information. Although I can readily understand the concerns raised, I have a different point of view.

My question to these astrologers is this: **How do we distinguish?** How do we draw the line between astrological interpretation and psychological counseling, between rational and intuitive methods, or between "normal" and "esoteric" delineations? Astrological work may not be the same as classical psychotherapy, but does that mean it should not be practiced with sensitivity toward therapeutic effects? Many serious astrologers may not wish to be associated in the public mind with carnival psychics, but does that mean we should banish intuition from our discipline just because it can be abused? And what is the point of practicing astrology if we omit any reference to the spiritual dimension of life?

Each of us must choose for ourselves how we will use the astrological system in practice, and there is no reason to presume that any two of us will or should arrive at the same orientation. However, I would feel irresponsible to myself and my clientele if I adopted the view that astrological sessions must somehow be differentiated from psychological counseling sessions, or that astrology could be practiced in a way that avoids the question of spirituality.

It's all a continuum. Practical living, psychology, metaphysics, astrology — finally, they are all on the same scale. The neatly-defined divisions that separate them are artificial, the product of human territoriality, possessiveness, and the tendency to clearly define a niche, in order both to carve out turf for oneself, and more importantly, to avoid the overwhelming fact that Everything is Everything. Ministers often find themselves in the role of psychologist. Psychologists often find themselves in the role of minister. And astrologers often find themselves in the roles of both minister and psychologist.

But having made that point, I need to go further. If I treat "everything as everything," then I've got only a one-line statement — haiku instead of an essay — and the book of which this essay is one chapter wouldn't sell many copies. No, in the most practical sense there are many distinctions between the

institutions of psychology and astrology, especially as they are understood and practiced in this culture. To some extent, the very future of astrology as a serious discipline depends on our recognizing and revising the distinctions that currently exist.

Therapy or Not?

“Therapy” has already been mentioned in this essay, but the term has not yet been defined. It’s one of those words that’s easy to throw around, but difficult to pin down. Almost everyone has a feeling for what therapy is, but few people can define it precisely. I asked three of my friends who are certified, practicing psychological therapists to help me out by defining what therapy is. I figured I couldn’t very well talk about how astrology was similar to or different from therapy without being clear about what therapy really is. All I wanted was one paragraph — a nice, simple, general definition for my essay.

Weeks went by and not one of my friends called back. So I called them. As it turned out, each of them had spent considerable time thinking about my question, all of them thought it was important, and none of them had come up with anything approaching a simple answer. Remember, these are **therapists** — trained professionals. Yet not one of them had a simple definition for therapy. A precise, clinical definition of the term probably does exist, perhaps in the bylaws of the American Psychological Association or the rulebooks of various State Certification Boards. But my point is that for most of us — including professionals — therapy is a lot like pornography: *We know it when we see it, but it’s very hard to define in the abstract.*

Webster’s defines “therapy” as *therapeutic nature or power*. So we look up “therapeutic,” and we find *serving to cure or heal; concerned in discovering and applying remedies for diseases*. We check “psychotherapy,” and discover *the application of various forms of mental treatment to nervous and mental disorders*. What’s common to all these definitions is the concept that psychotherapy involves treatment of mental diseases, which we can extend to include the realm of emotional disorders.

In other words, psychotherapy is for people who are ill. Now, I have no doubt that many traditionally-trained psychotherapists would disagree. Psychological counseling has undergone a radical reformation over the past thirty years, and many formerly conservative therapists have altered their practices to embrace a larger world-view.

The early standards of psychotherapy with its couch and silent, bearded psychiatrist may remain strong images in the collective mindset, but the world of psychology has virtually exploded beyond those narrow limits. Revolutionary seminar programs such as EST and LifeSpring shoved psychology off its comfortable couch. Approaches such as Rolfing and the Alexander Technique opened psychology to the benefits of the bodywork massage table. The development of transactional analysis and family systems revealed the power of relationship in most psychological issues. Chemical dependency, addiction therapy, and the huge success of the 12-step approach extended therapy into day-to-day living. Various forms of process therapy added elements of creative visualization and mythology to what was once seen as a largely rational framework.

And while the power centers of psychology may retain a certain stuffy conservatism, they are assailed by new research in various “outlaw” disciplines, including the science of psychoneuroimmunology and the neo-astrology movement that grew out of the Gaugelins’ work.

“Therapy” may remain a technical term to describe a specific form of psychological counseling, and the institution of psychology may still jealously guard its copyright. However, the general context of therapy has broadened to include hundreds of different techniques that cover a wide range of approaches and philosophies. In that sense, astrology is a discipline ideally suited to the application of psychological counseling.

Disease, Diagnosis, and Stereotype

The myth that psychotherapy is for “sick people” has diminished, but it remains a social stigma under which traditional psychology still labors. No one likes to be thought of as mentally or emotionally ill (in spite of the undeniable fact that most of us are, to some extent), so vast numbers of people continue to believe that if you are in therapy, there must be something **wrong** with you. This is furthered by the fact that many psychologists use a system of personality “diagnosis” that grew almost entirely out of the disease model used by western medicine.

While consulting an astrologer may carry with it an image of being at least slightly weird, thankfully there is no “disease” stigma. My own astrological counseling is particularly suited to healthy individuals. In fact, the healthier a person is, the more he or she can benefit from working with me. My work is aimed at furthering the ineffable process of maturation by pinpointing the particular paradoxes and dilemmas contained within an individual life, while also revealing the overall direction and purpose of that individual’s life-development.

Psychological diagnosis should help a therapist retain clarity on a client’s condition through the often-confusing puzzle of interaction. But diagnosis is no replacement for authentic recognition of the client’s identity as a whole person. Shorthand categories for pigeon-holing people are very seductive. Sometimes the diagnosis becomes the primary vehicle through which the psychotherapist interacts with his patient. No doubt most psychologists strive to avoid this pitfall, but it is there, nonetheless.

I don’t engage in diagnosis of my clients’ personalities or lives. Since psychology was my original orientation, my first love, and because my formal education was in that field, the classic personality disorders of psychotherapy — neurosis and narcissism — remain basic to my analytic perceptions. But the natal chart and transits provide me with other structures for assessment that make many psychological categories appear absurdly simplistic.

This is not to say that the general diagnoses of psychology are necessary wrong or have no value. Where illness is clearly involved, psychological diagnosis can be immensely helpful. Also, astrological patterns are sometimes so complex that we are forced to mentally simplify them to avoid being overwhelmed by all the levels and possibilities.

This issue involves more than critical judgments between the systems of astrology and psychology. Included are the talent, intelligence, and experience of

individual practitioners. There are wonderful and terrible counselors in astrology as well as psychology. Good astrologers realize that clients deserve much more from them than textbook delineations; good psychologists do not limit themselves to the classical diagnoses of their clinical backgrounds. A violinist without technique or heart will not be improved by owning a Stratavarius, but a virtuoso can make even a pawnshop fiddle sing sweetly.

I try to share my information and insight with my clients in a straightforward manner that avoids the stigma of categories (whether psychological or astrological) and helps me to establish a more intimate relationship with them. I don't wish to be seen as either a doctor or a cosmic authority, and while there is no way to prevent some people from placing me on that shaky pedestal, I do everything I can to convey to my clients that we are equals in the exploration of Life's mysteries, and specifically, their personal mysteries.

However, the absence of medical diagnosis does not prevent astrologers from rampant stereotyping. Astrology was popularized in large part of by reducing the system to its lowest level, that of Sun sign categories. Too many astrologers characterize their clients as if they were the configurations that fill their charts. The confusion between astrological tools and human beings is difficult to avoid. Charts are so personalized, so reflective of the people whom they describe, that is very easy to slip into believing that the chart is the person. In a medical X-ray, what are we seeing? The consciousness of the person? No, only the structure of the body. It is the same with astrological charts. We are looking at a diagram that reveals the structure of the person's psychological/spiritual vehicle. Charts are not the same as people. Those astrologers who believe they are identical are promoting an essentially mechanical world-view. They propagandize for spiritual materialism, the belief that consciousness itself is nothing more than a formula, that life is "written in the stars."

Very few astrologers would consciously admit to that orientation. I feel certain that most would vehemently deny it. But their denials, along with their ideals, are often undercut by the actual process of their day-in and day-out work with clients, which may be rife with the very inferences they find so offensive. Humanistic posturing is all too common; well-grounded integrity is another thing entirely.

Yes, But is it Good or Bad?

Beyond this general tendency to confuse the vehicle with the driver, astrology suffers from an even worse offense. Traditional astrological interpretations, both the kind found in textbooks and those delivered daily by thousands of practicing astrologers, too often tend to reflect a polarized orientation into either "positive" or "negative" symbolic factors.

The idea that astrology reveals the "good" and "bad" of a person's personality or circumstances is deeply planted in the public mind. Even when we use softer terminology, such as "strengths and weaknesses" or "talents and liabilities," it still comes down to good and bad. This notion is held not only by much of the public, but by many astrologers who should know better, and remains one of the most vexing of all the silly attitudes about our system.

It is an insidious, almost irresistible approach to interpretation that has fostered a new double standard: In theory we support relativity, but in practice we still

focus on positive configurations versus negative ones. Far too many students learn that trines and sextiles are “good,” while squares and oppositions are “bad.” Such a nearsighted mindset represents one link to traditional therapy that I hope we can eventually sever.

I suppose it’s inevitable that human beings tend to evaluate their experience in those terms, given the way Christianity has been reduced to absurdity after 2,000 years of religious politics, given the dialectical nature of thought processes in western culture, and given the lure of instant solutions, the “quick fix” mentality we suffer from in contemporary America. But it still rankles me.

Perhaps it is the superficial understanding of metaphysics that pervades this society, a culture that continues to cling tenaciously to propaganda holding that the “emperor” of science can alleviate all the ills of mankind with the “new clothes” of technology. Or it could be the vaguely fearful authority people sometimes associate with intuitive professionals, especially Hollywood-style “psychics.”

I don’t know. Whatever the reasons, I do seem to have to deal with the issue of good versus bad more than, say, a plumber does. If my toilet leaks, a plumber may tell me, “*Look, Mac, your toilet needs a new wax ring.*” I might say, “*Is that good or bad?*” The criteria for good versus bad in this situation is simple and straightforward: How much will it cost?

Some people seem to believe that having a session with an astrologer is similar to a visit from a plumber. They seem to believe that life is like a toilet — that there’s one right or “good” way for it to be put together, and any deviation from that must mean that their life has gone wrong. And they want to know how wrong it’s gone, how much it will “cost” to fix.

I might say to a client, “*You are on the earth to learn about personal power and how to use it well.*” Or, “*Your emotional intention is to transcend the inhibitions of exclusivity and jealousy in personal love.*” Or, “*You’re moving through a ten-month period where your basic life-purpose needs to be shifted away from passive mental images from your past and toward assertive physical productivity.*” Usually, I offer this kind of information in response to something the client has said about a real-life situation. Such comment are usually offered as an aid to understanding and strategy. But more times than I can count, the person sits there dumbstruck for a second, as if hit by lightning, then looks me straight in the eye and says: “***Yes, but is that good or bad?***”

It drives me crazy. Do people really believe I’m making moral judgments about their lives? Or that I would even want to? Do they actually believe that life is so formulaic? I am not a plumber, and my clients’ lives are not leaky toilets. Plumbing is mechanical; human lives are not. They are mysterious, sublime, and full of exquisite paradoxes that demand not repair, but integration.

For all the multi-leveled abstraction of its symbols, astrology is ultimately pragmatic. Charts say, **this** is the quality you need to create and experience in a certain area of your life, and **that** is the quality you need to create and experience in this other area of your life. If there’s a conflict between the two qualities, then it’s up to you to use the conflict as fuel for your growth while you gradually learn to embrace both sides.

It is neither “good” nor “bad” to have Venus in Capricorn, or Mars opposite Uranus, or Mercury in the 12th House. How we understand and live these patterns may be helpful or harmful in light of a particular situation, but that has little to do with astrology *per se*, and a lot to do with us.

So let me lay this issue to rest, once and for all. Everyone I know, including myself, struggles with the issue of positive and negative meaning, of good versus bad. As foolish as it is, we are constantly judging ourselves to be good people or bad because we want something or don’t have something or need something else. It’s been that way since we crawled out of the slime a million years ago, and it’s likely to continue, regardless of whatever I say about it here. I’m going to keep doing astrological counseling sessions, and more often than I like, people are still going to respond to my information with the question, “***Is that good or bad?***”

But please understand: The tools of astrology — charts, cycles, and the like — do not contain moral judgments about the individuals whose lives they describe in symbolic terms. Goodness or badness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Power and Prestige

One of the most significant differences between astrology and psychology surrounds the way the two institutions have developed in our society. Largely because it grew out of medical practice, psychology has carefully carved out a niche for itself, in spite of much skepticism by the general public. Psychology created hierarchical structures for acceptance into its club, including standards and practices, educational requirements, and certification procedures. In addition, psychology courted public favor by presenting a very formal image of authority. In remaining linked with the medical establishment, it achieved the dubious benefit of insurance coverage for its services. Finally, it associated itself with the great American “religion” of Science.

Psychology has posed as the handmaiden of Science, although in actual counseling practice it uses as much hoodoo-vooodoo as any other discipline. We simply don’t know much yet about the inner workings of the psyche. The surface has been barely scratched, many of the conceptual frameworks are arbitrary, and **all** forms of counseling remain much like the blind men and the elephant — each can identify a certain part or texture, but none encompasses the whole.

Where psychotherapy has really shone brightly is in its smashing success **as an institution**. It may not have lived up to its billing as an infallible tool to reduce human suffering, but psychology is a powerful institution in the culture. The same cannot be said of astrology.

For those of us attuned to participation in the larger culture, there is a definite ostracism associated with being an astrologer. In choosing to pursue the study and practice of astrology, we tread a path that is largely mocked. Despite increasingly widespread private interest in astrology, our culture is not merely cautious, but downright condescending in its adamant refusal to even consider that there may be value here. Many of us have clients who occupy positions of influence — CEO’s, politicians, doctors, lawyers, etc. But even though these individuals consult astrologers, the institutions of which they are a part continue to scorn astrology. Where anything esoteric is concerned, our society reacts with childish fear.

An example may serve to illustrate. Decades ago, the American Medical Association decided that chiropractic represented a threat to the power and influence of traditional allopathic medicine. Adopting an official policy of non-recognition, they began an unofficial effort to undermine chiropractors and subvert their success. To some extent, there was a real philosophical debate over methods and practices, but basically the issue came down to power, influence, and money. The AMA represented the “haves;” they sought to keep chiropractors the “have-nots.” Finding themselves in a David and Goliath situation, chiropractors fought back by creating professional organizations and lobbying groups. Recently, the courts upheld that there was in fact a conspiracy against chiropractic by the AMA, but the battle goes on nonetheless.

By its nature, chiropractic tends to be somewhat more esoteric than western medical traditions. It relies not on technology and the concept of bodies as machines, but instead on the more holistic idea that healing is a function of body, mind, and spirit. As a result, chiropractic attracts a larger percentage of individuals interested in the metaphysical implications of health and disease. However, because of the power struggle waged between the institutions of chiropractic and traditional western medicine, many chiropractors have been forced to practice in the shadows.

While there is no such clear-cut battle surrounding astrology, we labor against similar cultural biases. Our struggle may be less well-defined, but it is just as real. Like chiropractors, astrologers tend to be seen as radicals or fuzzy-minded flakes. But there is a difference between chiropractors and astrologers. From a statistical point of view, the temperaments of those interested in formal medical training tend to be more grounded in linearity than those of astrological students and practitioners.

By and large, astrologers are an idiosyncratic lot who tend to eschew professional organization and regulation. From my perspective at least, the odds of our creating a strong central lobby are very slim. Astrology will probably never attain the influential status psychology has achieved as an institution. Discussion surrounding “standards and practices” will undoubtedly continue among certain groups of astrologers, but part of what draws people to this field in the first place is the renegade status of our discipline.

Working with Clients

Beyond cultural acceptance as an institution, there is another level where the distinctions between psychology and astrology stand out in bold relief. Psychology has been particularly successful **as a business**. Once again, the same cannot be said for astrology. The issue here revolves around the nature of services, the packaging and marketing of those services, and the frequency of purchase by customers.

Psychologists realized early on that what they had to sell was the promise of greater fulfillment through personality change. They packaged their services so that the process of interaction was in the foreground, while their tools remained almost mystically shrouded in the background. And they marketed on the basis of repeat business through continuing work in ongoing sessions.

Astrologers have consistently succumbed to the illusion that we sell mere information. We package our services as if the tools were the product. And we market those services on a hit-or-miss, one-shot basis.

The result is obvious: Thousands of consulting psychologists have overflowing practices that earn them a good living. Most astrologers in this country would starve if they depended solely on the income from sessions with clients. And it's a mystery to me why astrologers don't wise up.

It is not unusual for psychotherapists to see their clients three, sometimes even five days a week. One session per week is a general minimum. Most astrologers consider themselves lucky if their clients come back at all. And for repeat business, once a year is not uncommon. Even those the precious few astrologers who maintain a regular clientele do not see the bulk of their clients more than once a month.

When a psychologist enters into a relationship with a new client, the emphasis is placed on the client's life, not on the psychologist's tools. People expect that they will need to talk to a psychotherapist, to explain their situation and their feelings about it. The product — fulfilling change — is a result of the interaction, and people know going in that those results will take time to reach, often a year of sessions, and sometimes more.

Astrology is almost universally marketed as if the tools and techniques are an end in themselves. Both astrologers and their clients tend to focus on charts rather than on the clients' lives. This is an absurd mistake. The product of astrology is not chart interpretations! It is awareness, effectiveness, and harmony with oneself and the universe. Focusing on charts as our product is not only an unsophisticated approach to the use of astrological tools, limiting the help astrology can provide, but more to the point, it is a virtual dead end for generating return business, thus keeping the astrologer dependent on an endless stream of new clients to make even a modest living.

But wait, you say, haven't astrologers addressed that problem by creating a whole package of different interpretations: natal reading, progressed reading, relationship reading, career reading, relocation reading, etc.? My answer is **no**, absolutely not.

We need to stop marketing ourselves as if we sell "products." Astrology will never support successful careers for any but the most brilliant (and fortunate) among us until we begin teaching our students and the public at large that the product of astrology is life-enhancement, and that working with an astrologer is an ongoing process, not a one-time purchase.

It is boringly common for a prospective new client to call me on the phone and say, *"I've already had my natal chart done. All I want from you is progressions."* They offer this request as if one 90-minute session with any astrologer for a "natal reading" is sufficient for them to completely understand all the implications of their birth chart! As if the process of self-understanding involved little more than mechanical chart interpretation from some textbook. They think of it like a piece of furniture — buy it once and it's "done." Another common statement from a prospective client is, *"I'm calling you because I'm interested in learning about my chart."* Again, this is offered as if the chart were the end product, complete unto itself.

Why do so many people have such ridiculous misconceptions? Because **astrologers** — some who are well-meaning and some who are flat-out idiots — have **promoted** these misconceptions.

High Expectations

Also, while people may seek out astrologers for many of the same reasons they might engage a therapist, their expectations of astrologers tend to be much higher. In my practice, it is no surprise for a new client to start a first session by saying, “*Well, what did you find in my chart?*” or “*Tell me what you know about me.*” These questions come from someone I have never laid eyes on before! Very few people have such outrageous expectations of traditional therapy.

Picture an initial psychotherapy session. Can you imagine a client expecting the therapist to know in advance not only what his personality is like, not only what his precise circumstances are (as well as when they began, when they will end, what they mean, and why they’re happening), but also exactly what his problems are and how to solve them? No way!

M. Scott Peck, psychiatrist and author of mainstream books on psychotherapy, mentions in his book **The Road Less Traveled** a client with whom he conducted 150 sessions before he even had a diagnosis of her problem. Three times a week for a full year, this client spent an hour with him (and God knows how much money), and in all that time, he didn’t have a clue about what was going on with her, much less how to help her! If I were so brazen as to suggest to my clients that we have even one session — much less one hundred and fifty — without my offering professional insights, opinions, or conclusions, they probably wouldn’t come. People expect astrologers to know a great deal about them, and they expect us to know it immediately.

In truth, one of the distinctions between astrological counseling and traditional therapy is that our system is much more revealing as an information base than most traditional approaches to counseling. We do in fact often know more, and we usually know it more quickly. This factor is one of many reasons I became an astrologer.

When I began to make my living as a professional astrologer in 1973, one of my motivations was to provide an alternative to traditional therapy. I felt then that standard psychotherapy was at best a crapshoot and at worst a well-meaning scam, where the costs in time and money far outweighed the benefits.

Some of that opinion was based on my own anger at the educational system. Undergraduate psychology had been less than enlightening, in fact, it had been downright deadening to my enthusiasm. Professors I anticipated as brilliant mentors turned out to be mere drones. Courses that sounded exciting turned out to be deadly dull. My introduction in 1970 to astrology as a serious psychological system revived my interest as well as my hope. I gradually came to believe that I could offer as much in one two-hour session as many psychologists achieved in twenty.

Over the years, my resentments have mellowed along with my bravado, and I have gradually come around to the idea of ongoing sessions as having a value all their own. Real change — authentically conscious maturity — usually takes

considerable time, effort, and commitment. What some call “change” is often little more than passage through automatic, relatively unconscious phases. We can lead the horse to where we think the water is, but whether the water is really there is as much an unknown as whether the horse will drink. The proof is often not in the pudding at all, especially when the pudding is intangible.

Low Expectations

Economic stupidity in astrology tends to promote a vicious cycle. The bulk of textbooks and classes offer only rudimentary training in astrological technique and analysis, much of which contains questionable wisdom. Students are often cut adrift without ever being exposed to the wide range of non-astrological, human skills necessary to convert interpretive technique into effective counsel. After achieving what passes for sophistication in astrology, most “professionals” have difficulty attracting a working clientele, so in desperation many turn to the lowest common denominator. They hire themselves out to write Sun-sign columns and booklets (the kind found on grocery store check-out racks). They write textbooks filled with short-hand, cookbook-style interpretations, which starts the treadmill all over again for a new generation of unlucky students.

A few achieve relative success by creating mail-order businesses that specialize in computer-generated interpretations. Such enterprises may generate sales in volume, but however comprehensive they may be, they further the unfortunate belief that information is our product. On the whole, these services take food out of the mouths of working astrologers by fostering the mistaken impression that if people can get a supposedly “bona-fide” interpretation from a computer for only \$19.95, then why pay anywhere from \$40 to \$100 per hour to talk to a real astrologer? It’s all the same, isn’t it? Information is information, whether it comes from a computer or a person, right? Wrong. Insight is not the same as information. The kind of mature life-enhancement that astrology can offer does not emerge from pre-packaged natal interpretations or shrink-wrapped daily transit guides.

Some astrologers argue that there are benefits to mass marketing, that even superficial products result in increased awareness about astrology in the public mind. I would counter that such a result is a benefit only if you don’t mind rigid misconceptions about what astrology is, what it offers, and how it works. The law of supply and demand applies here. We condition the public to want only kindergarten levels of astrological sophistication, resulting in a virtual tidal wave of lowered expectations in the marketplace. Even the best astrologers must be very strong swimmers to persevere against this current, and most students will drown in the undertow without ever realizing that real artistry is possible.

Feed people a steady diet of junk food, and how many will appreciate the subtle delicacy of gourmet cuisine? A few will; most won’t.

The force of my opinions concerning the practice and marketing of astrology will no doubt offend some members of the astrological community. My arguments will be criticized as stuffy elitism. So let me be clear. As in every other field of human endeavor, those interested will reflect a multitude of attitudes, beliefs, and talents. A wide range of approaches are required to serve a diversity of needs in the marketplace, and many levels of sophistication can and should coexist in services and products.

What disturbs me are the relative proportions. Too much of what is offered comes from the bottom of the scale. What passes for excellence in astrology is frequently little more than sophistry. From the initial creation of Sun signs in the 1920's as our first mass-marketing device, far too many astrologers have demonstrated a disregard for serious development and public consideration of our system that is short-sighted, cavalier, and largely self-defeating. A certain percentage of astrologers are blind to this issue, preferring a rose-colored, naively occult vision of the world. Others complain bitterly, but continue to support the status quo by pandering to the public hunger for garbage. Most astrologers are guilty of contributing in one way or another to the problem.

The great tragedy of twentieth-century astrology is that we have done this to ourselves.

Why Use Psychology?

In Minnesota, where I live, it is illegal to practice psychological therapy without Board Certification. But in reality, that means only that you cannot **call** yourself a therapist without running afoul of the authorities. As long as your work is performed under a different name — astrologer, psychic, consultant, personal counselor, etc.—you can practice therapy with relative impunity. (It is worth noting that laws vary widely from state to state, both in their letter and their spirit. Most states have laws against everything; often, those laws go unenforced. If you wish to use astrology as a basis for psychotherapy, you would be wise to check out the formal laws governing such practice in your particular area of residence, as well as the characteristic enforcement of those laws.)

So if the institution of psychology has gone to such extreme measures as legal prohibition to prevent outsiders from practicing therapy, if it is still so careful to publicly avoid any hint of association with astrology, then why don't we just walk away and forget it? As astrologers, why should we even try to increase our sensitivity and skills in the area of psychological counseling? Why? **Because astrology alone is not enough.** It never was, and it never will be. Life is bigger than astrology, so to use our astrological tools and perspectives in a way that really connects to our clients' lives, we need to recognize and account for the many non-astrological factors that influence those lives.

As has already been stated, the whole re-birth of astrology in the twentieth century was linked with the development of psychology as a serious and valid discipline. The kind of astrology currently used by the majority of astrologers and students focuses on the reality of individual life. Although many astrological writers direct their thoughts toward the use of astrology to reveal evolutionary trends in the larger collective, the bread-and-butter, day-to-day practice of astrology is almost always directed toward particular individuals. Natal charts certainly contain information that goes far beyond the uniquely personal, but those levels of meaning are relevant only insofar as they relate back to the individual life being analyzed.

Especially for particularly fervent students and professionals, astrology is regarded as a kind of "Holy Grail," a mysterious but all-encompassing system. They believe it to be capable of revealing everything about a given individual, if only the chart could be explored in sufficient depth, using the right techniques. This reflects a brand of fanaticism that is sad to see. I repeat: **Life is bigger than astrology.**

For instance, I notice certain repetitive patterns in the individuals and couples who make up my clientele. Often these patterns surround the emotional perspectives clients have on their situations, and more to the point, their expectations of what our work together will provide. Some patterns have nothing to do with astrology; others are the direct result of uninformed opinions concerning what astrology is, how it works, and what it can reveal.

A client telephones to set up an appointment. For me, that's a straightforward secretarial procedure. All I need to know is how quickly the person wants to see me. Is it an emergency? A routine check-in? A special occasion?

For some clients, however, calling to set up an appointment is not nearly so cut-and-dried. Although many have entirely positive motivations for sessions, some clients are laboring under any of a number of different anxieties or insecurities, and they want to address these in the phone conversation before they schedule a session. Naturally, every conversation is different, because each person's situation is unique to his or her life-drama. But there are recognizable patterns.

Wake Me When It's Over

The telephone rings. I answer.

Bill: *Hello?*

Client: *Hi, Bill, this is Jane Doe [or John Smith]. I saw you back in December.*

Bill: *Oh yes, I remember. What can I do for you?*

Client: *Well, I was thinking of coming in to see you for another session.*

Bill: *Fine. When would you like to come?*

Client: [sidestepping my question] *Uh, well see, I've been going through some financial difficulty [or relationship problems, family issues, general confusion, etc.] and I was wondering if the chart might have anything to say about it.*

Bill: *Jane, charts contain a great deal of information about every level of your life. I'm not exactly sure what you're asking.*

Client: *Well, I'm real tired of this, and I was sort of hoping that my chart could tell me when it's going to end, you know, when things are going to get better?*

At this stage of the conversation, it's obvious that we're firmly stuck in what I call the "Wake-Me-When-It's-Over" Syndrome. This person is undergoing an unpleasant experience that she doesn't understand. She's tried to cope with it as best she knows how, but she's gradually worn down. Nothing has worked, and now, after a long on-again, off-again period of stress and struggle, she's finally calling me out of desperation.

Jane knows enough about astrology to understand that there are many natural cycles in each person's life. However, she probably doesn't have an astrologer's awareness of the symbolic and multi-leveled nature of these cycles, perhaps believing instead that each cycle is "about" some very specific part of her life, perhaps even a concrete event.

She's no longer really interested in the dynamics of the situation, although she worries about it constantly. The idea that there might be meaning or purpose to what she's going through has long since vanished. And the possibility that she could conceivably learn or even benefit from her experience by understanding or acting differently is not on her mind. All Jane wants now is to survive whatever

it is that's giving her fits, to outlast it. To that end, she's looking for a cosmic authority (like astrology, or more technically, an astrologer) to tell her that whatever has her by the tail will come to an end.

Jane's also probably divided inside herself about having a session with me. On the one hand, she wants to see me, because she hopes I will have "good news:"

"Oh sure, what you're describing is right in the chart. It started on such-and-such a date, and it will end on such-and-such a date, so if you can just hang on for another couple days [or weeks, or months], this awfulness will be over, and everything will return to normal." [Translation: These "bad" factors in your chart will fade out, and you'll be alright.]

However, on the other hand she's anxious about having a session, for fear I may say:

"Your chart says this is permanent. It's fated to be. You're going to have to put up with it from now on." [Translation: It's your karma, and you can cry if you want to...]

Her expectations, both hopeful and anxious, are very understandable. First of all, she's human, which means she's subject to limits of understanding, strength, objectivity, etc. The puzzle of individual human life is often more than the best of us can gracefully handle. In addition, her beliefs about astrology have probably been formed largely by pop culture propaganda. She may even have been to one or more "professional" astrologers who reinforced these images and expectations because of their own superficial understanding or unexamined beliefs about astrology.

The Relativity of Astrology

Our symbolic system is not a single, unified body of knowledge. There are as many different "astrologies" as there are people practicing it. Each individual adapts the system to fit his or her particular evolutionary path. Certainly, the ongoing study of astrology can alter a person's paradigms of understanding, and every working astrologer has had the experience of clients being dramatically affected by some tidbit of astrological insight. But at any given moment, most of us compress "pure" astrology into something more selectively limited, something that fits our current levels of comprehension, maturity, and consciousness. All of which is unavoidable, of course, but it is nonetheless important to remember.

In addition, charts don't "say" anything. They hold their secrets silently. It is only when a human being interprets a chart that it reveals its mysteries.

Certainly there are conventions within astrology, basic meanings upon which most astrologers can agree. Being a competent astrologer presumes a thorough understanding of these conventional interpretations, since they represent the background of experience and wisdom amassed by our astrological predecessors, both living and dead. But such meanings can be learned through rote memory, without delving further into the assumptions behind the interpretations.

If we digested the contents of every textbook or treatise ever written on the subject of astrological interpretation, we might suffer a kind of cortical brown-

out, because each author's interpretations are produced in part by the metaphysical value systems he or she is using. Assumptions, attitudes, and expectations are critical to the art of astrological delineation, because they represent the value systems that shape the raw symbology into an interpretive fabric that has real, practical implications.

Through the Looking Glass

We don't look at charts "directly." Instead, we look at them through the lenses of various value systems. Change lenses, and the meanings derived from the chart shift in much the same way that a child's kaleidoscope will form new patterns as we rotate the cardboard tube. We have to decide what lenses we're going to use in working with this symbolic system. Even if we don't actually choose, it's still important to let our clients know what our basic presumptions are likely to be.

The astrology inside my head and heart — the astrology I practice with my clients — is not about knowing how long we have to "put up with" something. Nor is it really about the passive experience of "things getting better." Yes, I can understand that there are astrologers who use the system in that manner, especially given the high percentage of people who want them to use it that way. But I believe that's not even close to its real or best use.

Sure, I too have had that seemingly universal human feeling — When is This Crap Gonna End??? I have no trouble admitting that I'm a Bozo in good standing. But if that's how I use astrology, especially with my clients, then I'm not giving them the best of who I am. If that's how I look at charts when they ask me for help, I'm not using the best of what this symbolic system has to offer.

In my opinion, life is not about getting past things, suffering through them blindly until they pass away. Life is to be experienced, not avoided, and in the willingness to experience, experiment, and create lies the possibility, however intangible, of real learning — the kind of learning that brings growth and realization, not the kind that is essentially an endless repetition and magnification of unconscious or previously-imprinted patterns.

Whose Life Is It, Anyway?

Viewed from one metaphysical perspective, we create our own lives. In this view, we are responsible for everything that happens in our world, either literally or figuratively. At that level, we can choose to change our behavior or our feeling patterns. We can recognize our part in the events and experiences of our living, and we are free to change at any time. Even when we do not recognize how we influence our environments, we can still work within the spiritual paradox of Acceptance versus Change, patiently observing ourselves and the world around us until the realization of causes, effects, and correlations become apparent, helping us to awaken into truer responsibility.

Interpreted from the opposite perspective, life happens to us, and we are mainly responding to what occurs. In this view, we are individuals living in a world we did not create, a world with its own perverse logic. We have to adapt to that world, adjusting our lives as required by circumstances often well beyond our limited control. But even then, we have a responsibility to ourselves to understand as much as we can, so as to consciously respond rather than

unconsciously react. We still have to observe ourselves and the environments around us, if only to maximize the effectiveness of our responses.

These two viewpoints appear to be paradoxical, which is to say, mutually exclusive. But the experience of countless sages over millennia suggest that they are not. Each way coexists with its opposite. Even further, each contains within it the seed of reflective inference that makes the other not only possible, but necessary. Philosophically, one perspective could not exist without the other.

Astrology, with its symbolic techniques of natal charts, transit cycles, composites, etc., reveals meanings from either of those extreme perspectives equally well. As such, it is a discipline particularly well-suited to the investigation of life's ironies, especially when applied to individual experience. In other words, we could use either lens to look at the chart, and the symbols will respond with different, but equally plausible interpretations.

Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch...

I should not leave the impression that all my clients see me because of "problems" involving negativity or other suffering. Many of the people with whom I work are motivated by the positive search for enhanced self-awareness and increased fulfillment. But once I have established a working relationship with a client, further sessions naturally tend to occur during times of heightened stress or personal challenge.

When Jane Doe (or John Smith) calls me for help with a problem, I already know that what she thinks she wants from me is not what she's likely to get. My job is not merely to give her information. On the contrary, it is to help her change any habitual mental or emotional patterns that may block her ability to act effectively. I try to help my clients gain access to more of their natural grace, freedom, and intelligence by shifting their metaphysical perspectives back toward consciously creative responsibility (read: the ability to respond).

How will I do that? I'll use the basic information from her natal chart, transits, and any other astrological tools that seem relevant, to help her remember her life-purpose, her mission, and the mountains that stand in her way. I will assist her as well as I can in disconnecting from invisible hysteria or the subtle negativity of emotionally-reactive states. The very same natal configurations or transit patterns that correlate more or less with her current predicament will offer other options for understanding and self-expression that may help her remember who she is and why she's here.

Could You Give an Example?

OK, let's say that my client Jane Doe has Mars at 10° Cancer in the 2nd house of her natal chart, in trine to the Sun at 7° Pisces/10th house. Then presume that Saturn and Neptune are simultaneously opposing Mars in transit, as they would in fact be in 1989.

There are infinite scenarios we could conceive out of this limited set of factors using basic, "conventional" interpretations. In an event-oriented interpretive framework, we might discover that the financial difficulties she spoke of involve unexpected challenges involving an external source of income. A loan she needs may be denied for no obvious reason; a death in the family could result in a

legacy or will locked in probate battles; property settlements in a divorce or other partnership dissolution could be contested; a critical real estate closing might be delayed, or she could be in danger of mortgage foreclosure on her home; she may have “apparently” won a contest involving money or prizes that she comes to count on, only to discover a catch in the fine print; an important team project she’s leading in her work could be threatened by in-fighting, management changes, office politics, competition from another company, etc.

All those scenarios are based on the crudest, old-line symbolism of the significant factors: Mars in Cancer in the 2nd is interpreted as a battle over personal finances and the desire for security through money. The two simultaneous transits are oppositions in the 8th house, inferring blockage. Saturn is used here only in its most negative meaning, that of frustration, delay, or denial, and Neptune is interpreted as adding elements of illusion, fantasy, or subterfuge, clouding the issue and making the blockage impossible to understand logically.

The interpretations are utterly devoid of any humanistic or psycho-spiritual content. They are anachronistic, and could hardly be considered sophisticated. But they are conventional, and they do reflect much of the pessimistic thinking that swirls around astrology, both on the part of some of its practitioners and many of those who naively seek it out for advice.

Viewed from a more positive framework, we could suggest that her desire for self-worth (Mars in the 2nd) has now come to a culmination, a period of fulfillment or realization (transit oppositions) where she needs to integrate the idea of polarity, to understand the connection between the value that is hers alone (2nd) and the value that comes through relatedness (8th). The fulfillment is “forced” because of the involvement with Saturn, and Neptune’s presence may correspond to her experience of circumstances as mysterious or beyond her control.

To fulfill personal desires now requires her to take fuller responsibility in her relationships with others. These reality demands interweave with fantasy, and the imagery from either her fondest dreams or her worst nightmares may bleed into the situations. She could dissolve old attitudes involving anger over money or struggles surrounding selfishness, or she may drown in those same attitudes as they expand and spill over into her world. This time in her life allows literal manifestation of conflicts that had previously been relatively private, to promote transcendence of any twisted attitudes that may have kept her from experiencing personal fulfillment and collective responsibility together.

Whatever lens we use, there are an endless number of possible scripts. In my own work, rather than try to figure them out in advance, I simply wait for my clients to explain their situations to me. What is actually occurring in their lives usually turns out to be more astrologically far-reaching than anything I could think up on my own. The interpenetrating weave of circumstances and their extension into actual life is often downright fantastic in light of the astrological factors involved. In fact, one of the things that has kept me from burn-out over sixteen years as an astrological counselor is the amazement I feel in hearing peoples’ stories. Time and again, the circumstances are “tailored” to the chart in a way no Hollywood screenwriter could dream up. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

Having established that there is more than one way to approach the interpretation of a significant astrological factor, such as the transits used in the example, I must also state that no single approach is always infallibly correct or helpful. My preference with clients is to use the humanistic approach whenever possible, because I believe in astrology's potential as a raja yoga (or royal path). Similarly, I lean away from the kind of old-line textbook interpretations I used as illustrations some paragraphs above.

But I cannot deny that those crude and negative orientations do often show up in real life. During the 7,000 sessions I've done with people, I have heard every conceivable kind of horror story, from the ridiculous to the sublime. So my point is not to suggest that these old-style, fire-and-brimstone interpretations cannot or do not occur in actual fact. They can and they do, in spite of positivist philosophies.

Astrology can be downright scary in its often uncanny ability to "predict" what will go wrong, and when it will happen. And even when prediction is not the issue (since most serious astrologers eschew the fortune-telling mode) astrology is better than any system I have ever seen in confirming through symbolic correlation what has gone wrong in a given individual's life, when it happened, and why it occurred.

However, that's not the point. If all I do with my client Jane Doe is listen to her story and tell her that, yes, it's right there in her chart, and that the cycles will be over in November, I am doing her a disservice. That may be exactly what she wants to hear, and it may comfort her to know that these "awful" transits will come to an end, but it leaves out the whole question of how she might better work with reality now. Such simplistic advice presumes that the symbols in her chart have only one level of meaning, those indicated by the negative circumstances over which she's currently obsessing.

In telling her that the transits will end, am I relieving her anxiety? Or am I merely putting a band-aid over the wound while I inadvertently give it more importance than it deserves? Actually, I'm reinforcing her belief in life as a series of unavoidable "wounds" that are inevitable and must be suffered. I'm also suggesting that her difficulty is solely the product of the phase of circumstances, issues, and choices symbolically revealed by her current pattern of transits, which may or not be true. I've seen many emotional patterns far outlive the transits under which they began. The transits stop, but the person continues to rev on the patterns with which they correlated. Also, real circumstances have their own natural momentum, and there can be little certainty that the end of the symbolic associations with which they correspond will also represent an end to real-life repercussions.

For example, an individual may undergo a particularly challenging set of astrological factors surrounding finances. Questionable decisions, bad luck, or numerous uncontrollable factors may combine to produce bankruptcy. If, as is often the case, there are transit cycles that correspond to the initial period of difficulty, the cycles will probably end far before the effects of the bankruptcy. A Saturn-Sun or Neptune-Moon transit cannot possibly endure more than a year or two at most. However, the bad credit rating will remain for ten years, continuing to affect the individual's life despite the fact that the transits have long-since ended.

Certain outer-planet transits to Venus correspond to a period of upheaval in personal relationships that may sometimes result in eventual loss, heartbreak, or grief. Again, the transits will end, but often the emotional depression lives on, affecting the person's ability to handle future transits.

Merely understanding astrology is not enough. Mastering the technical side of interpretation is insufficient. Astrologers need to understand more than that. We have to understand what being human means. And that requires us to shift our view of the chart to fit the person we're trying to help.

A Different Path

Consider the previous example with my client "Jane Doe" who has Saturn and Neptune in transit opposition to Mars. I may discuss with Jane the implications of her circumstances at any of various levels: mental, emotional, psychological, familial, sociocultural, mythic, sexual, spiritual, etc. Each level can be addressed by looking at the chart through the lenses of different value systems. My job is to help Jane ease out of her fearful fixation into a more creative and fulfilling sense of herself and life around her. I will pick the lenses that seem most suited to that task.

We could discuss the nature and purpose of desire itself (Mars) and the way those desire patterns are linked with survival emotions that were imprinted in her infancy or early childhood. We can move the conversation back to her childhood if that seems feasible, helping her to remember incidents that echo what is happening now.

Having established that there may be a frightened child still living within her, I might then discuss the idea of "parenting one's inner child," an issue of special importance for her because of her 10th house Pisces Sun. I could suggest to her that the experience of responsible parenthood is crucial for her in terms of life-purpose (Sun in 10th), but that she might become confused about it, sometimes losing herself in fantasies of external authority (Sun in Pisces).

We could discuss her relationship with her father or other significant authority figures. I might then suggest that she has unconsciously grown dependent on other people or positive external circumstances to take care of her inner child's need for security, and that when life didn't cooperate, her personality succumbed to the resulting fear tantrum. I could even suggest to her metaphysically that the very reason these negative circumstances are occurring might be as a way for her higher self to put her back in touch with the importance of assuming the role of responsible parent to her inner child.

None of these ideas are objectively true or false. For instance, I don't really know whether or not she has a "higher self," and the idea of its intervening in her life is an unprovable assumption. But offered to the right person at the right time, and conveyed in the right spirit, such ideas can sometimes have the effect of awakening that person out of an habitual state of expectation.

Furthermore, these ideas aren't just random. I'm not making them out of thin air. Everything I've said so far and a thousand other ways of looking at and discussing her life are there for the finding in the symbolism of her particular astrological patterns.

The point is that it's all in her chart. What I'm saying isn't chosen at random, nor is it the product of an arbitrary psychological system. To an observer, our interaction might look like more traditional counseling, but the content is still solidly based in astrological technique.

Perhaps a "family systems" approach won't work with Jane. She might not be emotionally secure enough to discuss her family. She could have a psychological blind spot with regard to one parent or the other. Also, the metaphysical suggestion of a "higher self" might backfire. Her religious background or beliefs might be offended by such blatant metaphysics. She might take the mythic poetry of my metaphor too literally, becoming convinced that her higher self will run her life for her.

There are many reasons a particular approach might not work with a given client. But that's no problem. I'm not limited to only those lenses as ways of reaching her. The chart provides information and direction no matter what approach I take. I just have to be sensitive enough to Jane to know when one approach isn't suitable, and intelligent enough to switch gears.

For example, I could discuss the general symbolism of the Saturn-Neptune conjunction, explaining that it's a repetitive cycle recurring about every 36 years, with definite implications for humanity as a whole. I could talk about how cultural institutions periodically reach a point of stagnation, and that this conjunction of outer planets correlates with a dissolving of old structures to make way for new visions of how we can create collective life. I would explain that certain individuals are "selected" to be representatives for this mass change, by virtue of their natal charts having certain sensitive points activated in transit by Saturn and Neptune. We could then discuss how her circumstances fit into this larger perspective.

There is no guarantee, of course, that my client will "get it." God doesn't sell that kind of insurance. No, that's up to her and me. She has to be receptive and creative with her intelligence. I have to be skillful and sensitive as an astrological counselor. She has to be patient with her problems, taking responsibility in accepting certain aspects of her life, as well as changing her circumstances and self-expression as she can. I have to remember that life is bigger than astrology.

But time and again, going back to the basics of the chart works. At least the feedback I get from clients and the visible, long-term changes in their lives suggest that something positive is occurring. More than that I couldn't measure anyway, since my work is not about rats in cages, nor statistical norms of definable behaviors. Instead, it is about real people and the subtle experience of moving toward fulfillment.

The Bottom Line

I believe the astrological community would benefit from the recognition that our clients' needs are not best served by an approach that ignores the value of counseling. Astrological insights are helpful only when they can be heard. In other words, the actual, technical process of astrological interpretation is far and away the easiest part of our work with people. By and large, interpretation is a snap. Accessing information is easy. The real challenge lies in reaching people.

I want to interact with each client in a way that works for that particular individual, at a certain time in his or her life, with respect to the unique chemistry of our relationship. It is pure joy when I work with clients who are in synch with themselves, with me, and with my information. The sessions take off and fly in the shared exhilaration. But that doesn't happen every day.

Clients usually consult me when they are grappling with an issue or a challenging set of circumstances, or a new experience for which they have no previous understanding. When they are working through Wake-Me-When-It's-Over, Is-It-Good-or-Bad, or any other typically human blind spot, my first responsibility is to help them out of the hole. Sometimes information from their chart or transits is very helpful to that process. Sometimes it is not. Other times an explanation of the astrological frameworks behind the information may be more effective. Or it may not be. Often, what works best has nothing to do with astrology.

There are many paths. Not all of them lead home with every person in every situation, but some will. All the various astrological tools and techniques at our disposal can certainly help us determine which lenses might be of benefit, but common sense is important, too, as is good intuition.

Every person has an "inner grid," an emotional, mental, and spiritual framework for interpreting reality. My job is not merely to shovel information into that pre-existing grid, especially when the grid itself is so often the problem. My job is to alter the grid.

The revelations of astrology can assist us in clarifying the presumptions, expectations, and unconscious attitudes of the grids under which our clients may be laboring. It can also aid us in finding new directions to offer them in their journeys, and more importantly, more effective ways of looking at the journey itself. But one thing is clear: **Astrology alone is never enough.**

Without the development and use of other skills, we will remain handcuffed, despite our knowledge of astrology. Without communication skills, our wisdom will be mute or misunderstood. Without cultural awareness, we will miss powerful, mythic factors that go far beyond individual experience. Without the active involvement of our minds to look inside someone, we will overlook the patterns of their inner thoughts. Without the receptive opening of our hearts to gently embrace their reality, we will never finally gain their trust. We need to listen to our clients, and feel them, and see who they are.

Then the symbols come to life, and astrology becomes the wondrous tool it should be.

