

Column

MARNIE & ME

An Astrological Study

Sagewoman, 2004

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In this column I use the symbolic language of astrology to describe how my younger sister Marnie and I divided the world in two, carving for ourselves distinct identities. Marnie took Beauty. I took Truth. She took the outside. I took the inside. This split would generate a longing in me for my opposite, lived out as a feeling of sadness at the distance between us.

The symbology of astrology includes signs and planets. Planets are the energies that move through the signs. Sun and Moon, the two most important planets, symbolize the conscious self and the subconscious self. The Sun stays in one sign for 30 days, the Moon for 2-1/2 days. The conscious Sun is our adult self, the subconscious Moon represents our inner child. I was born with Sun in Sagittarius, Moon in Taurus. Marnie was born with Sun in Taurus, Moon in Libra, both ruled by Venus, the planet of Beauty.

Astrological signs refer to different approaches to life. In your personal chart the sign the Sun occupies at birth is most important as it shows the archetypal energy that fuels you. For example, Marnie's Sun in Taurus is earthy and instinctive. Taurus can refer to being patient, bull-headed or stubborn, secure or insecure, nourished or abandoned. It also refers to the Earth herself, her continuous abundance and fertility.

Those of us born with Sun in Sagittarius, on the other hand, are fiery and fearless. We tend to be optimistic, forward thinking, philosophical, even prophetic. Unlike earthy Taureans, Sagittarians move in the realms of mind and spirit, and can be indifferent to the body, to anything earthy or material that might deflect from our quest for Truth.

The sign the Moon was in at birth reflects our need for nourishment to survive and grow. Furthermore, the Moon holds our childhood memories. Our vulnerability, our wounds and habits reside here along with our response to the ways we were nurtured, or not.

Marnie was born with her Libra Moon in the exact degree as our mother's Libra Sun. Thus, the bond between Marnie and Mom was both close and inevitable. One result for Marnie, as an adult, is how to set boundaries with Mom, who would like to phone Marnie daily.

I was born with Moon in Taurus, needy and security-oriented, stubborn, and tending to hold onto pain. I also had Uranus, symbolic of sudden, drastic changes, widely conjunct my Moon and directly opposite impulsive Mars. Sudden drastic Mars/Uranu changes in my early life proved extremely difficult for my insecure and vulnerable Tauran Moon to integrate. I was a buffeted, difficult, headstrong first born child

Besides the primacy of Sun and Moon, the most personal point in one's chart is the exact moment of birth, which is why astrologers want to know it. The moment of birth sets up the exact degree that was rising in the East at the moment of birth, called the Ascendant, or Rising Sign. The Ascendant signifies our mask or persona, the presentation of self, how the world sees us. For Marnie and me, our Ascendants (Taurus, Sagittarius) are the same as our Suns. Matching of different Ascendants and Suns intensifies the split between us.

Marnie's Ascendant is in Taurus. All three of the most important points in her chart — Taurus sun, Libra Moon, and Taurus Ascendant — are ruled by Venus. Moreover, at Marnie's birth, Venus was barely visible ahead of the rising Sun in the early morning sky. With Venus on the Ascendant buttressing her Venus-ruled Sun, Moon and

Ascendant, Beauty truly is her ruling passion. No wonder she orients towards beauty in her material world (Taurus), and reigns as the queen in her wealthy household kingdom (Leo).

Today Marnie's world centers on her large gracious homes in Palm Springs and on Lake Washington in Seattle. She cares for their beauty, decorating with expensive stone statuary, large paintings, monumental furniture, richly textured pillows and knick-knacks. Recently in Palm Springs I felt overwhelmed by her collection of antique Christian crosses beautifully displayed on one wall.

Whereas Marnie's world revolves around the beauty of her homes, my world centers on my large desk and computer where I write philosophical essays and work with astrology. My desk is action central for my Sagittarian activities. My desk is functional and practical, a no-nonsense desk that works, except that it is also my chief luxury, something I actually longed for. A few months ago I finally found it on sale at Staples and spent two days screwing it together.

Besides my Sun in Sagittarius, my Ascendant is also there. Being a "double-Sagittarian," what you see is what you get. Not only does my nature seek and need to speak Truth, I am seen as a seeker who speaks my Truth with little consideration for how it affects others.

I used to live in a round, 20-foot diameter yurt in remote Kelly, Wyoming. Now I own a post-World War II tract home in fertile Bloomington, Indiana. Despite my Sagittarian core, I know intuitively that this Taurean grounding is good for me.

Somehow, grounding myself has released a new feeling, one that resonates with my long-term sense of unfinished business with Marnie. I now want to make my home warm and welcome. For Marnie, creating in the home feels easy and natural. For me it feels strange and unfamiliar.

Somehow any focus on Beauty still seems superficial, extravagant, luxurious and unnecessary. Up until now my attitude has been, the less I have, the less to maintain and protect, the freer I am to move about, to change, to shoot arrows to the stars.

My long, frustrated and inchoate need to gather Marnie into my arms is, on an inner level, my need to gather qualities of Beauty in me. Being a mutable Sagittarian with a fixed Taurus Moon is not easy. Without awareness, one simply cancels the other, as for most of my life, Sagittarius canceled Taurus. Inside me, Truth trumped Beauty.

Marnie focuses on the outside, buying, arranging, appreciating her beautiful things. I live mostly on the inside in mind and spirit. So I really surprised myself when I felt a strong desire to change my house. Forget the whitewashed walls of my old life, something else wanted to happen, something outside of me. I wanted to paint, to add color and beautify my home and surroundings.

I painted two rooms, my office (a lovely color called “wheatfields”) and my watercolor studio (a glossy, blinding white, for the light), while my bedroom, living room and bathroom baffle me. I want to be bold, to use dramatic color, but I don’t trust my own taste. I am unable to visualize a wall painted a warm cocoa brown, a color I think I might want.

So it’s paradoxical. On the one hand, I pride myself on how much I *know*, on my lifelong search for Truth. Still, I feel like an idiot when it comes to picking colors for my walls — an effortless task for Marnie. So what’s stopping me? What’s stopping me from trusting my own taste, from gathering Marnie’s qualities into myself?

I think back to the sisterhood of my siblings. There were six of us girls. I remember our blue-eyed blond heads in the large mirrors of our double-sinked bathroom, combs hunting for snarls, eyes pouncing on imagined flaws. I remember the large, shallow top hall drawer with underpants of all sizes, the next drawer with all our socks. Mom fashioned the first four of us — Ann, Marnie, Paula, Kathy — into a four-part harmony singing group. She found time to sew us look-alike dresses. I am the one scowling in the studio portrait that shows off those dresses. We were so many squirming bodies and so much energy flying about that at some level it felt like our selves were interchangeable, too, that our clothes did not hold separate identities, that nothing did. There simply was no place to get away, no space for me as an independent entity.

This may have added to my antipathy for Marnie, only 16 months younger, the sister with whom I shared a room and clothes closet. When I recall this it helps me understand and empathize with the young girl inside of me trying to get away, who polarized against Marnie in a desperate effort to feel myself as a separate, individual person.

The astrological differences between Marnie and me were set at birth with my Moon, the planet of natural responsiveness, in Taurus, the same sign as her Sun. Normally, the Moon follows the Sun. Why then, as a child, did I not follow her? Well, of course, we know the answer. Because she was my younger sister, Marnie was supposed to follow me. And she did, she tried to tag along. But I didn't want her. I hated Marnie.

Why was I always so mean to Marnie? I wonder at my hatred then, at how I spent my early years as such a mean, ungenerous person, at least to Marnie. For her part, Marnie let me borrow the sweaters I coveted. If she asked to borrow mine, I either instantly refused or reluctantly relented. I loathed everything Marnie did and said.

If she were as mean to me as I to her, would I ever trust her? If I had been traumatized at every opportunity by a big sister, would I ever let her in? My apologies have not closed the distance between us.

I fantasize that Marnie might remember with me back when Dad, a World War II flight surgeon, was away in the Philippines, when there were only the two of us at home with Mom — if only she would dive back with me into those pre-verbal times to see how our estrangement spawned. But she does not. Marnie is not geared that way. She is an extravert, not at all introspective.

During my 40s, I took on the task of remembering, of re-remembering myself, going back to uncover and feel again, my earliest memories. I aimed to take myself apart and put myself back together again, this time with awareness. I wanted to let go of what kept me armored in anger, anxious and afraid. I thought this project would take at most, two years. Looking back, I know that feelings do not live by schedules. They cannot be conjured and then put back into a box. I committed myself to this project and I had to surrender, come what may. It took seven years.

I began to recognize just how different Marnie's and my experiences had been from our siblings, two boys, six girls in all. Marnie and I were war babies. The other six were born post-WWII when everything looked rosy. They all seemed cut from a different cloth from the two of us. Little by little I felt my way back into what I imagined was Mom's experience when Dad returned home from the war.

This critical juncture in my early life came at age 2-1/2. Dad came back and took charge. Until then I'd had run of the house and this early freedom suited my fiery double Sagittarius self, a little prima donna, technicolor blue eyes and white-blond curls, the adored center for my aunts and grandmother — my Taurus Moon needing but not getting attention from my depressed and anxious mother. What energy my mother did possess she devoted to her new baby, Marnie.

My father told one of my brothers that it took him six months to gain my respect. I imagine his stern, harsh, German handling of me. I see my gentle mother, geared for relationship and shy of conflict, strongly identifying with her Libran baby. She turned away from me and held baby Marnie safe. Unfortunately for me it felt like my mother abandoned her difficult first-born to my father's discipline.

To prevent my thumb sucking my father bandaged my thumbs. This is my first conscious, clear memory. I am sitting on a green plastic seat, furious, determined that he is not going to win. I look at my hands. What can I do instead? I suck the backs of them. Today I can thank him for goading me into early self-awareness, for this first arousal of my fighting spirit. I won that battle and he won the war. In six months he had broken my spirit. I took it out on Marnie.

(I wonder how many leading edge '60s feminists were fashioned from similar experiences? How many first-born, naturally dominant girls born during World War II with absent fathers and depressed mothers were shocked by their father's return? In that generation we had our obedience training interrupted; did we all experience shock and anger when it resumed?)

A few years ago I invited Marnie out to breakfast to share my discovery of the dynamic among Mom, Dad, Marnie and me. But what I said made her squirm. Marnie

did not want to dredge up the past. Despite her discomfort, I soldiered on, ever the relentless Sagittarian. I felt determined to tell her how I traced our estrangement back to our totally different experiences once Dad came home.

As I finished my story Marnie gathered her keys. She did not connect the present to the past. And why should she? To her mind there was plenty to do now, no reason to rummage around in long over, unchangeable history. My attempt to make Marnie understand me so that I could feel close to her, had failed. Truth reached out to Beauty and Beauty dismissed her.

Feeling foolish and ashamed, I followed my younger sister out of the restaurant, my Taurus Moon responding to her Taurus Sun, wanting her to love me, to turn around and say, “Oh! Yes! Of course! Thank you, Ann. I am so glad to see the dynamic between Mom and me, and now with compassion for her. I forgive you too, Ann. I do forgive you. I see how hard it must have been for you.” It was not to be.

What I need to remember here is the wisdom in the old saying, “The stars impel, but they do not compel.” We are not doomed to forever live out the dynamics as set up in our birth charts, as if there is no way to get away. We need to realize that these dynamics inevitably constellate in childhood, a period of life when we are unconscious and reacting to events with little or no awareness. As we set our intention to become fully and consciously aware of these dynamics, we take the first crucial step in freeing ourselves from them.

Here’s the clincher. In freeing ourselves from our early memories, we do not eliminate them but learn to live with them. We learn to live with them more lightly because we grow larger than they are. We place our early suffering childhood selves in the light of compassion, feeling for both our own pain and the pain of others involved as we react to events, seeking to survive. As another wise saying goes, “We are all doing the best we can.”

My sister Marnie may not be in my life, but at least sisterhood is.

Yesterday, three wonderful female friends, all artists, came over to eat lunch and look at my walls. They held paint swatches up against the light, and confidently

compared subtleties of warm and cool, light and dark. Happily, my main instincts were good ones. All three loved warm cocoa brown for one of my living room walls and “mythical” purple for two of my bedroom walls. I am in awe of their sensitivity to color and learned something further about Beauty.