

Essay

THE SATURN RETURN

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The Nature of Astrological Cycles

History repeats itself, so they say. And for most of us it does, most of the time. Over and over again, we sing the same old story, the same old song. This repetition in our lives is, of course, vitally necessary to establish and maintain habits — those patterns we use to provide the continuity, the stability, in our lives.

Even so, there are certain times in our lives when our experience and our habits do not fit together comfortably, times when our habits are not large enough or flexible enough to handle our experience. These crisis periods then, provide periods of opportunity — to recognize our own patterns, and to choose whether or not to change them.

Always, experience precedes knowledge. What we experience we are given an opportunity to (consciously) know only when that same experience happens to us again. The first time it just happens; with the second time comes the recognition, that eureka! Experience: “It happened once, and now that it’s happened again, I finally understand what the first time was all about.”

At the heart of understanding the eureka! experience is understanding the nature of time. If time is linear, then time goes on forever in a straight line, and things cannot

repeat themselves. However, if time is cyclical, then each time the eureka! experience occurs, we can see it as the point of juncture between the ending of one cycle and the beginning of another.

Astrology is a language which views the nature of time in this cyclical manner. In astrological terms, when any planet returns, it often comes as an awakening to the kind of energy that planet represents.

Astrology considers the cycles of the planets and the cycles of relationship among the ten planets so far discovered in the skies (including Sun and Moon). Each of these planets has a different time cycle. Most of the planets make their first cycles within the first 12 or 13 years of a person's life. These are the Sun, Moon, Venus, Mercury, Mars, and Jupiter. Three of the planets, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, have extremely long cycles, so long that with only one of them — Uranus, with an 84 year cycle — is it possible to complete the return of even a single cycle. Thus the experience of these three planetary energies can never be consciously known, as they never repeat the same positions twice in a single lifetime.

Between these three outer planets and all the others lies Saturn, having a cycle of anywhere from 28 to 30 years. Saturn thus provides the link between those planets that complete themselves during childhood and the three outer planets. The return of Saturn for the first time to its own natal place then, is crucial for the evolution of an individual's life: for if the Saturn Return is not successful, there will not be the saturnian discipline necessary to usefully channel the subtle, but powerful and therefore dangerous energies of the three outer planets.

The fact that so many planetary energies complete their first cycles during childhood is the astrological description of the fact that most significant learning opportunities do occur during that early part of our lives. By the time a person is 12 or 13 years old, his or her character is formed to the point where, usually, all further experiences can be fit into the patterns already developed.

Thus the first time any planetary cycle completes itself is crucial to the formation of the developing personality. To complete a cycle is to develop a tendency or habit to act

in a certain way. These tendencies form our behavior in operating within the world, and they also form the memories which we then use to interpret our continuing experience within the world. Soon the earliest memories are pushed down to the subconscious level, and remain there, unnoticed, though they are being used in an unconscious (i.e., habitual) way as we go about our lives.

This may be why, as a rule, “grown-ups” have so little consciousness of the cyclical nature of time. Most of our first cycles were completed during childhood, and the memories of those awakening experiences are no longer consciously available to us.

And this may be why the first return of Saturn comes as such a profound shock to so many. The last such shock took place at 12 or 13. For at least 16 years we have gone on relatively undisturbed.

It's no wonder then, that many people who are experiencing Saturn's return begin to act in ways that especially other people consider “childish” or “adolescent.” (When my Saturn returned, I experienced a resurgence of acne which lasted for two years!) Like the child when she or he learns something new, something is going on inside which disturbs the previous equilibrium. Like the child, there is frustration, anxiety, as the new experience presses for assimilation into the system. And, like the child, there is the same excitement, curiosity, joy — as the old system changes to meet changing demands.

Thus, in a very real sense, we can say that to successfully complete a Saturn Return is to become like a child again. Is to begin to look at the first 28-30 years of our lives and to wonder what it all meant. Is often, to change, and change radically, as new tendencies, habits, memories begin to be formed markedly different from the old.

(It goes without saying that the years from 56 to 60 provide another opportunity when Saturn returns for the second time, only now we are older, wiser, that is, now we have two two cycles of Saturn under our belts, and thus two opportunities to recognize the kind of perspective required to understand and act upon a life-cycle which lasts for so very long.)

Saturn's Return: A Feminist Perspective

So, far, I have been describing the experience of any cycle, and attempting to show why Saturn's cycle is so important, and often so profoundly felt. The longer the cycle, the more profound the experience — as the more of life has to be seen in its terms.

Now I would like to describe the particular kind of energy that Saturn represents, as this has a tremendous bearing on understanding astrology from a feminist perspective.

The basic meaning of the energy of Saturn is that of the need for order, form, or structure. This need for order can be felt in two ways: either as that which serves to provide meaning and definition for life, or as that which obstructs and frustrates life. This basic double-meaning has many permutations — both positive and negative — as shown by a partial list of the kinds of concepts used to describe the energy of Saturn.

Saturn represents: discipline, order, control, the animus, the father, the guru, authority, tradition, the status quo, conservatism, depression, repression, worry, obstruction, frustration, oppression, superego, conscience, limitation, ambition, status, honor, prestige, recognition, patience, endurance, restriction, long range plans, anxiety, fear, caution, testing, time, persistence, the male, rigidity, paralysis, and responsibility.

Many of the (positive) concepts used to indicate Saturn's energy will for many women appear to be describing, if not their own fathers, then at least their internalized perfect father-images. And it's no wonder. Saturn is the energy that structures or forms the developing character of the child. The father usually serves as the model for this kind of structuring — as he is the one who usually has ambitions outside the home, the one who makes long-range plans, carries responsibility for the family welfare, etc.

So, often, it is not until Saturn's first return that a woman comes to recognize the full extent of her father's influence in her life. This influence can take varying forms. The father's image might have been completely internalized, in which case, saturnian control and discipline were completely formed in herself. Or, she might not have completely

internalized it, and instead, projected it — out, onto her mate or husband, or any and all human relations she enters into.

If the women did completely internalize the Saturn function, then she will be one of two extremes. Either she will be the “exceptional” woman, the kind of woman who thinks and acts “like a man” in a “man’s world,” or she will have so internalized her own (guilty) conscience that she uses it to oppress herself — and she will be then, shy and retiring (and often, very “religious”: “God” then, has become her “father.”)

Most women, however, do not internalize the Saturn function so completely. Most still function in the role of “child” to the “father” because of their continuing projections of their own Saturn function onto another person.

Most women who are raised in a traditional family, and who are “under 30,” still fall into one of these categories. (Or several. The trouble is, most people *can* be categorized. But categories seem as slippery as we are. Often, a set of categories is valuable not so much to show what slot any particular person does fit into, but to show the boundary system of any particular set of slots. Categories function to show not so much who we are, but who we can be, given a certain set of conditions. And most women do seem to fit at least some of these categories some of the time.)

After 30, however, some women cannot be so categorized, and needless to say, these are the women who have successfully completed their Saturn Returns.

Because our culture is a patriarchy, and because Saturn’s energy is considered to be the kind that usually, only males are encouraged to adopt — the Saturn Return for a woman is usually experienced in quite a different way than it is for a man. For both sexes, the period of Saturn’s return begins as a feeling of restriction, oppression; however, it is only the man who goes on to transform this feeling into saturnine control and discipline.

Thus, a man in our culture often tends to fulfill the Saturn Return in terms of his career ambitions. He makes new long-range plans, he decides he needs more responsibility, more recognition, etc. A woman, on the other hand, tends to feel the Saturn Return in merely its restrictive, oppressive aspects — and then to resent someone

for it. Either she directs it against herself (depression), or against her mate or husband (father-figure), or her boss (another authority figure); or, if she's a more abstract type, then she might direct it against the (patriarchal) system as a whole. (This last is the beginning of the feminist experience, but, I emphasize, it must be only the beginning.)

The fact that the woman is allowed to experience only the negative aspects of Saturn's return means that she is allowed to not complete that return, i.e., is allowed to not enter into the experience in its entirety. (On the other hand, the man who doesn't complete Saturn's return, who doesn't gain more responsibility, more authority, is considered to be not as much a man as the one who does.)

If she begins to complete the return, that is, if she begins to come alive, if she begins to lift her own (guilty) conscience from her shoulders; if she begins to withdraw her projections of her perfect father from other people, and to begin to see the need to take responsibility for her own life; if she decides to become her own authority, and to have ambitions of her own — then she is considered “odd” in the culture's eyes.

So, whereas, during the first cycle of Saturn, the woman is usually, in this culture, operating under her father's influence, it is during her own Saturn Return that the opportunity comes to either continue to operate under the same father image or to create her own. As is often said, those who are free are those who have stood on the shoulders of their fathers, and who, by so doing, have begun to see their fathers from a new and higher perspective, have begun to reorder their entire experience of their internalized fathers from this perspective, and thus have begun to create new habits, new tendencies, new memories by which to order their lives.

In any case, the Saturn Return is felt as a distinct and long-lasting crisis. (It lasts, usually, for a period of two years or so.) Saturn's return is a two-edged sword. The new need for self-responsibility and self-definition come up to consciousness, and so do all the fears and all the caution which led to the formation of the kind of conscience or superego developed during childhood the first time around.

To successfully complete one's own Saturn Return then, a woman must face those fears, and go through them to the other side. Otherwise, she will do again what females

are taught to do as children. She will, at 28 to 30 years, begin the same old cycle all over again — the same old story, the same old song. She will continue to depress herself, and/or to project out onto others her own Saturn energy, and thus continue to regard another as bearing the ultimately responsibility for her own life.

Then, instead of becoming childlike, she will remain childish, with a personality that is fixed, rigid, unable to move. And as Marx said, if what happens the first time is tragedy, then by the second time around, it has turned into farce.

(Whether or not the Saturn Return will be successful is up to the individual. No astrologer can say, simply by looking at a person's astrological chart, whether or not that person will succeed or fail. The basic instinct for life and growth of a particular individual is and will remain mysterious to any system of human measurement.

What astrology can do is to be helpful in describing the kinds of ways a person might go through this experience — given the kind of energy pattern represented by that person's chart as a whole. And this analysis/synthesis, needless to say, is very complicated.)

The Successful Saturn Return: Notes for a WomanSpirit Perspective

I want to begin here with two questions:

Question One: I mentioned earlier that the Saturn cycle is the link between the cycles of the inner planets and the cycles of the three outer planets — Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. I mentioned that saturnine control and discipline is necessary to channel the subtle and powerful energies of these three planets. These three planets, I said, have cycles so long that no one can ever repeat their revolutions more than once in a single lifetime. Put these three ideas together with the idea that experience always precedes knowledge, and what do you have?

Question Two: If a person successfully undergoes a Saturn Return, then she or he begins to operate at a new level of being. This new level is often very different for a man than it is for a woman. A man can, often, begin the second Saturn cycle by gradually

assuming more and more worldly responsibility. A woman, however, often finds this way blocked, or, *she chooses not to take it*. Why?

Let us begin to explore the second question first, as in some ways, it is easier.

Women are culturally oppressed, and have been for centuries. Because of this, we have been forced, again for centuries, to discover and find value in the more subtle areas of experience — areas which more men have yet to notice. Notice I say the subtle areas of experience. Those that are hard to pin down, hard to formulate, yet full of meaning. Subtle areas, the areas which have to do, somehow, with the spaces created between the lines, the laws, the rules. The subtle areas, the silences, the nuances, what fills a woman's day.

Men, on the other hand, have been directed to worldly ambition — to the lines, the laws, the rules: all governed by Saturn! — for centuries. They receive praise for this kind of ambition; they have not had the *need* to begin to question its value, nor to look for anything else.

The differing situations of men and women, then, automatically present different opportunities as to what they might do with the new discipline and control gained by a successful Saturn Return. A man, though he might learn to operate at a new level of control, still usually operates in terms of worldly ambition — in terms of the kinds of goals and rules that society has traditionally set up for him. In other words, he will still be a conservative, though operating at a more powerful level.

Now, it has been said that the “conservative” is one who never thinks that anything happens for the first time. If one is a conservative then, one cannot allow oneself to experience anything new, and the opportunities offered by the subtle, higher, more spiritual energies of Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto will never be taken. Each time one or more of these three energies enters our lives, it provides us with an entirely new world, and if we aren't prepared to accept these energies, and to channel them, they will either disrupt our lives so completely that they cause mere chaos, or, they won't be felt at all.

Uranus, Neptune and Pluto represent the links between the solar system and the galaxy as a whole. In human terms, this means that these energies are the sources of

new and larger perspectives on the human condition; new values, new ways of seeing wholes, new wholes to be seen. So, if we can somehow get in tune with these energies, they open to us possibilities for psychic discovery and exploration that the usual world-view (bounded by Saturn) has yet to even dream of.

But we can't receive these energies and their possibilities without some kind of channel. And it is Saturn which provides that channel. Somehow, we must make our Saturn energy work for us in spiritual discovery, and to do that, our discipline must become somehow flexible enough not to be totally disrupted by such powerful energies. This is an enormous task. Some of us are attempting it already. Especially some women are, as they learn to turn their histories upside down; as they learn to tune in even more with the subtle areas of experience so familiar to them; as they learn to appreciate the unusual perception and unusual values their oppression has, ironically, given them.

But Uranus, Neptune and Pluto open the gates to perception of worlds beyond our (conscious) knowledge. And this we must remember, as we begin to explore the ramifications of, now, the first question. We must be prepared to *not* understand what is going on. We can experience the subtle energies of these three planets, but we can never know them. Each time one or more of these planets intersects a sensitive point in our own energy pattern, it opens up opportunities fraught with both possibility and danger. Each time the experience is new. There is nothing to go on — no landmarks, no lines, no laws, no rules — that we can understand from our viewpoint in this human life on this planet Earth. We can only appreciate these energies, we can only surrender to them. And this only if we are prepared. Prepared with a (Saturn) channel spacious enough and plastic enough to receive them.

Then, we can become as children again, and we will remain childlike our entire lives. But with this difference: the child learns automatically, and as she does she is assimilated into the society around her. But ours is a second, and a more naked innocence. There is no one to cover for us, no one to let us know what is of value, what is not. We have only our experience, we do not have knowledge. No one does. The territory is uncharted, and we are the pioneers.

