

Descent into Yin Time

An archetypal astrological view of COVID-19

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“While I thought I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die.”

--Leonardo da Vinci

There is an old saying that there are no atheists in foxholes because in a time of crisis people transcend their customary beliefs to find comfort and answers. During these remarkable times, perhaps some will find solace in an archetypal astrological explanation of the COVID-19 crisis—even if it is outside of their normal purview.

As I write this in early May of 2020, people across the globe are having widely differing experiences of the virus. To point out the expanding unfairness of the distribution of suffering is the role of journalists and critics at large. Archetypal thinkers have a different task.

A brief introduction to archetypal astrology

Archetypal thinking finds common ground in shared psychological experiences. Archetypal astrology, which imagines the planets as representations of such experiences, helps explain global events by satisfying the human need for pattern and meaning. Their orderly movement across the sky helps us understand what happens to us, giving us structure in a messy world. A simple example is the sun and moon, which have been the basis for calendars since the beginning of measured time.

Astrology holds that what is above is also below. If we can understand the movements of the planets we can make sense of life on earth. To paraphrase Nietzsche, “We can take any ‘what’ if we know ‘why’.” Archetypal astrology, which regards the planets as archetypes, can give us a meaningful collective ‘why.’ Simply put, to make sense of the current global crisis we can look to the current sky.

We experience celestial patterns on earth in two distinct ways. There is personal experience, or how patterns in the sky highlight our natal personality patterns, and there is the collective, revealed in a zeitgeist that displays itself in fashion, design, artistic expressions, and even in styles of language. Both personal and collective shifts in the sky can indicate easy or difficult experience here on earth. For instance, an archetypal astrologer may recognize a time period as expansive, optimistic and bountiful. If I know this as an individual, I can then choose to align my life accordingly by starting a new business venture, taking a faraway trip, or returning to school. In an expansive time, optimism will rule: economies will boom, imagination will flow, and hopes will be high. Some celestial patterns indicate relentless transformation and change from which, so it seems, there is just no escape.

Archetypal forecasting and qualities of time

Astrologers look at celestial patterns even before they occur and ask what might be expected on earth under a future sky. This is not about predicting future events. Rather, this is *archetypal forecasting*. The

dominating archetypes that shape the future zeitgeist are recognizable, yet their manifestation in our lives remain potentials. Archetypal forecasting is not event-specific. Rather, it is extraordinarily *quality specific*. This means that astrologers can have a keen sense of the *kind of time* that is ahead, what the future zeitgeist looks like.

When planets that historically correlate with difficulties form ominous patterns, astrologers take note. This is particularly the case when we see connections between Saturn (the Strategist) and Pluto (the Transformer).¹ Saturn in astrology represents archetypal structures, underlying principles and rules, collectively accepted truths and laws and the status quo. At its finest, we find in Saturn mastery through discipline and by attaining goals. At its worst, Saturn can show us narrow-minded reactionary dogma. Pluto, seen through archetypal lenses, represents the cycle of life, transformation symbolized by legendary Phoenix, who arises from her own ashes, and deep reconciliation with our mortality. At its finest, we find a capacity to be completely transformed and reborn and at its worst totalitarian power, resistance to change and fear of death.

In January 2020 Saturn and Pluto conjoined in the sky. This significant alignment continues to shape both our personal lives and the collective zeitgeist. Pluto and Saturn have been dancing their patterns since the beginning of time.² Richard Tarnas, who has studied these patterns and cycles in their historical context, notes their grim nature.³ In the last 100 years, the first and second World Wars and 9/11, all events that changed the world, have occurred synchronously with Saturn/Pluto patterns.

The current Saturn/Pluto pattern began in January of 2008 when Pluto moved into Saturn's sign of Capricorn. This zodiacal sign is notably representative of practical earthy structures, including housing, business and economies. What followed in 2008 was a financial collapse of global markets, mostly financial and housing. Though we saw the beginning of this Pluto/Saturn cycle in 2008 as a foreshadowing of events to come, 2020 is dominated by the Pluto/Saturn conjunction. What is the quality of the time that is upon us?

"Bullshit doesn't survive a Pluto transit"

Pluto's alignment with Saturn deconstructs, destroys and then transforms all Saturnine structures. This is so because Pluto is the most powerful archetype in astrology and anything that aligns with this archetype is changed with no possibility of going back to old ways. Pluto reminds us of finality: there is no coming back from death, although there is the possibility of rebirth.

As a practicing astrologer for over four decades, I can report that when Pluto's celestial movements align with a client's personal astrological birth chart (such alignments are called Pluto transits and happen very individually according to one's natal astrological chart) the client inevitably changes forever. Personal Pluto transits leave us raw, exposed and turned inside-out, but what emerges is an authentic self without pretenses. My clients know me for saying, "Bullshit doesn't survive a Pluto transit." While their experiences were often hellish, clients who knew what they were dealing with suffered less. Nietzsche's "knowing why" profoundly helped them live through the "what".

Early in 2020 Pluto and Saturn aligned and the coronavirus epidemic exploded worldwide. The global financial markets collapsed to depression-era levels with paper losses in the trillions. The fallout is very real and practical in the physical world where countless businesses continue to close permanently, leaving behind shattered dreams and ruined lives. In the early days of the pandemic, the Washington

Post called it “a relentless destroyer of brick-and-mortar businesses.”⁴ The healthcare system, another Saturn structure that is both an idea and a physical system, is barely holding together, especially in populated areas. The federal government, also both an idea and a physical system, seems non-existent at this time. Internally, in our psyches, things are not much different. Our personal lives too are being reshaped by what seem like external forces.

From order to disorder

Not all structures are physical. Saturn also represents *time*, *order* and *focus*. Those things that structure our daily lives, that give us routine – children going off to school, train schedules to heed, office hours to keep, meal times and so on – all these have vanished, leaving many forlorn existing in a daze of timelessness. Particularly disturbing to many are the complete lack of reliable timelines that would indicate “when this thing might be over” and at the same time being literally locked up in lock-down. The structures of our lives, the scaffolding of our everyday routines, have dissolved. This is what Pluto does best.

The deepest fear is the fragmentation of our inner lives. We no longer have it together, we lose control of ourselves, we are overwhelmed by chaos—and we fear losing our soul. The rules that held us are like barrel hoops made of steel that dissolve under Pluto’s immense power. Such frightening events typically only occur through life-changing events like trauma, falling in love, divorce and the death of a loved one—events that propel many people into depth analysis. These are the moments when, as James Hillman writes, “the monotheism of consciousness is no longer able to deny the existence of fragmentary autonomous systems and no longer able to deal with our actual psychic state”.⁵ We learn that we multiple and complex inside, not singular and together. We have many inner voices: we can talk to ourselves, argue with ourselves, drive ourselves crazy and laugh at ourselves. What spills out, thanks to a lack of a unifying “self” holding it together, is the realization of our rich inner multiplicity.

The gift of multiplicity

Multiplicity is a great gift. Pluto, by dissolving Saturn’s tight grip, also sets us free. Once we recognize that we have multiple archetypal voices within, we open an ancient treasure chest of powerful tools. This is what is meant with Pluto as the Healer, the Transformer and the butterfly that emerges from the cocoon. We recognize that if we step into Pluto and accept the gifts, we can be transformed for the better. We can accept the unknowing. We can sit in the dark and derive healing from our deepest solitude.

Pluto is the slowest planet in the sky and Pluto has its own timing. When Pluto is working its way through us, we become the proverbial frog that does not jump out of the pot on the stove when the water is heated slowly. We realize only gradually that we are in Pluto’s domain, an inescapable world. Then it hits us: we have nightmares and get frightened and as we recognize the death within and around us, we go through various stages of grief as we mourn the collective loss of souls and a world that no longer exists.

Descent and the richness of Pluto

The word “descent” as in descending and “going down” are unpopular in the modern world. We come down with a virus, we fall from grace, we spiral downward, ships and planes sink and go down in disasters, we warn of slippery slopes, are put six feet under, and going to hell is the final descent. Such

downward direction contrasts with what we consider good: climbing the corporate ladder, being the top of one's class, the top dog, lifting one's spirit, flying high, being above it all, and of course the final ascent to heaven. It is fair to say that western culture overall abhors descent and sees ascent as a heroic triumph.

As the Ruler of the Underworld, Pluto *is* descent, as he is the archetypal guardian of those who have descended. Poets and other artists hang out in Pluto's world, for they have learned that in the deep womb of mother earth herself lie the rich seeds of creativity. As Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us,

It is not only in the rose...
But in the darkest, meanest things
There always, always something sings.

According to archetypal astrological thinking, Pluto is part of everyone's inner menagerie all the time. We are peopled inside by ten different characters, reflected in the planets, and Pluto is one of them. Yet culturally, and consequently personally, this part of us is usually shunned. We fear going into Pluto's world, the underworld, because it is naturally associated with death. Especially at this time in the pandemic, with well over 200,000 lives lost to COVID-19 worldwide, such fear is understandable. Literal death is often horrific, tragic, and senseless. And most of us get deeply disturbed when faced with our own mortality that now could lurk behind every facemask we encounter.

True, there is worldwide, gory death with Pluto. But Pluto is far more than literal death. Beyond loss of life, Pluto speaks of the cycle of life. We recognize this cycle in nature, for instance, in the death that happens every fall when the leaves drop from trees to become compost for new shoots in the Spring.

There is no skipping the fourth act

When we collectively shun going down into the unknown, we are avoiding the natural order that includes death and rebirth. There is a reason why dark forests and frightening night journeys feature in so many fairy tales. Yet the darkest hours of our lives offer gifts and lessons. For those who trust the dark, there is depth, meaning and wisdom to be gained. In every Shakespeare play there is a fourth act where the story bottoms out, things seem hopeless, and there is no obvious way out. This descent is a critical, necessary part of the story. There are no shortcuts around such times because they must be fully experienced and endured.

When facing dark times, the world wants to circumvent its fourth act and leap directly from act three to act five. But speaking of what comes after this Pluto/Saturn alignment is not the point at all. Focusing on reopening the world, on getting back to "business as usual" is skipping ahead in the story. While understandable, such thinking is missing the point: this planetary alignment is a realignment for humanity, an historical moment. Sure, being in the dark about our future is counter to the human drive that seeks hope and light and life. Yet, being in the dark is just as real. And as the yin/yang symbol so aptly suggests, darkness, indeed blackness, is half of reality – or it should be for a balanced and full life.

In this collective time of shutting down many are forced to descend into ourselves. This is happening quite literally with hundreds of millions of people shut-in, sheltering in place, and physically disconnected from what are typically life-affirming activities. We have collectively been sent to our rooms to have a think and many of us fall apart. In fact, the lock down may be similar to the first few

weeks of lock-up when a new prisoner realizes that there is no escape. Many fight this by obsessively connecting with the outside world; some even reject and circumvent the restrictions. Yet in the wee hours of the night even the most rebellious realize, *I am descending into myself. The activities that have kept me from this, the business of everyday life, the responsibilities, my existential drive to survive, collective pressures to succeed, all energy has turned inward and I am now only facing myself.*

We are not in control here. We don't lead in this dance, rather Pluto dances us.

At this time of a gradual re-opening of parts of the world, we find countless calls to “hang in there” until things become normal again. Business as usual will eventually return and this will soon be just a bad memory, merely a speed bump on the road to inevitable progress and the unstoppable triumph of the human spirit. “Think positive” about what comes after the pandemic, such messages say, when things go back to normal. Yet this is an archetypal faux-pas, and it does not give the Saturn/Pluto alignment the respect it deserves. It is archetypally not possible to return to normal.

Yin time: Responding “in the manner of”

As an archetypal coach I am frequently asked how a person should best respond to any kind of descent, whether in this COVID-19 crisis or during my clients' personal upheavals. My response has remained constant for decades: “You do the gods or the gods do you!” By this I mean that when we cooperate with what is naturally occurring instead of fighting what is arising, we obtain Nietzsche's calming sense of the “why” even in the most desperate situations.

“Doing the gods” means responding to our circumstances in the manner of the activated archetype. Pluto, being dark, moist, internal and black—all yin qualities—demands a yin response. To understand the difference between yin and yang, imagine this: Yang is walking in a line, going somewhere, but all we can see is the back of the person ahead of us. Yin is standing in a circle, connected and relating, yet we are not going anywhere. We need both. The masculine, yang, forward moving, driving and external parts of us and the feminine, yin, nesting, reflecting and internal ones.

Pluto connects us with our internal, deepest, feminine yin capacities. As is painfully obvious to many now, we are in yin time, a feminine time, which Van Praag says is characterized by receiving, listening, synthesis, tenderness, intuition, willingness, caring for, eco-oriented, surrender, soft, patience, and relationship-oriented.⁶ Pluto has already forced us into the yin of nesting, caring, and surrendering. Since archetypal thinking requires subtlety, reflection, imagination, and gentleness, yin territory is its natural place as well.

With Pluto particularly active in the sky, our inner Pluto resonates and is awakened, as though a particular tuning fork was struck in the heavens and we are collectively humming along. Pluto is challenging us to discover and express our *yin function*—our personal feminine capacity to feel and to grieve: for the many dead, for the old way of life, and for the shattered dreams in the rubble of a world turned upside-down.⁷

Sinking in order to thrive

Leon Wieseltier once wrote,

“There are circumstances that must shatter you; and if you are not shattered, then you have not understood your circumstances. In such circumstances, it is a failure for your heart not to break.

And it is pointless to put up a fight, for a fight will blind you to the opportunity that has been presented by your misfortune. Do you wish to persevere pridefully in the old life? Of course you do: the old life was a good life. But it is no longer available to you. It has been carried away, irreversibly. So there is only one thing to be done. Transformation must be met with transformation. Where there was the old life, let there be the new life. Do not persevere. Dignify the shock. Sink, so as to rise.”⁸

By sinking, we can also thrive. Find Pluto in the compost that is rich, full of new life and creative seeds. Witness the extraordinary beauty of spontaneous acts of kindness, generosity, creativity and humor that have emerged worldwide as a response to death and suffering. Artists are pulling deep from within themselves, and humanity seems to be, too.

Let us be where we are. Really be there. We cannot become pregnant if we already are pregnant. Pluto is nature’s way of clearing the space.

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1. For those wondering if Pluto is still a planet, see <http://www.laurencehillman.com/resources/articles/is-pluto-still-a-planet>
 2. Even though Pluto was not discovered until 1930, Pluto’s resonance in the world has been there since the beginning of time in the same way that gravity has existed even before we know what it was or how to measure it.
 3. Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
 4. *Washington Post*, 3/21/20 The new coronavirus economy: A gigantic experiment reshaping how we work and live. Online edition <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/03/21/economy-change-lifestyle-coronavirus/>
 5. James Hillman, *Pan and the Nightmare* (New York: Spring Publications, 1972).
 6. Erik Van Praag, *Spiritual Leadership: Wisdom for Work, Wisdom for Life* (New York: Paraview, 2004).
 7. For a deeper dive into the term *yin function*, see *Reading the Yin Function in Male CEOs: Exploring the Efficacy of Archetypal Astrology*, dissertation by Laurence Hillman.
 8. Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish* (New York: Knopf, 1998)