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Mortality 101:
A Death through the Lens of Astrology
by Andrea Conlon

My father's death was totally expected, and yet it hit me like a tsunami. I could not have anticipated the shock of his death or the profound reverberations that would occur and that are still occurring in me. Not only the loss of my father, but the encounter with my own mortality — really, an encounter with the nature of life itself. How did I reach the ripe old age of 57 without grasping this most basic and fundamental fact? What an education in the school of life: Mortality 101! In the year since my father died, I've made some headway in learning about this important existential truth.

I want to share with you how this spoke to me through the language of astrology, both during my father's decline and at the moment of his last breath. I will discuss the death chart and the transits and progressions for both of us. Astrologers often have these "Aha!" moments when astrology is vividly enacted and the symbolism speaks (screams?) to us. But this *aha* moment was monumental for me. I had a *living experience* of astrology that reinvigorated my relationship with the symbols.

It is so easy to discount astrology when we live in a culture where the astrological worldview is not respected. We cannot avoid being affected by the society in which we live and breathe. But when I experienced this death and the astrological symbolism that surrounded it, something cracked through the heavy weight of our culture's denial of astrology. While I've never overtly denied astrology, and have tried to be a warrior for it, occasionally doubt and insecurity have assailed me, and I've often felt marginalized as an astrologer. Here, at the hour of my father's death, the power and elegance of the symbolism reverberated through me to give me pause — and a renewed faith in the craft to which I have devoted my life.

Our relationships with our parents are both sacred and profane. My own relationship with my father was perhaps typical in the highly conflicted nature of it. I loved him deeply, but he was a mess psychologically and was never able to get the help he needed to heal from a childhood marked by profound losses and trauma. I felt that it was my role in the family to heal and repair my parents. But, alas, this was a job that could not be done by the unwilling participants, let alone by their child.

I had a particular connection and openness to my father's pain and trauma, which I believe is symbolized in my natal chart and which I can only describe as being somehow transmitted to me. The whole concept of the multigenerational transmission of trauma has been so meaningful in my life. One of its most healing and freeing concepts has been to know that some of the most potent complexes and traumas that are alive within *me* have come from a mysterious past that was not part of my own lived experience. These complexes and traumas seem to have been implanted or

transferred from elsewhere. I see them as having come from my parents and likely generations further back, but particularly from my traumatized father. Astrology helped me to understand this multigenerational transmission and, more importantly, to see *myself* as separate from the burden of my family inheritance.

Within astrology, the controversy continues about whether the 4th or 10th house reflects the mother or father. In my case, what has made sense to me is that my 4th-house Cancer Moon, with its powerful square to Neptune, symbolizes the legacy of my father's **unconscious psyche** and my boundaryless emotional openness to his disowned **psyche**. (See **Chart 1**, **wherever.) That complex Cancer Moon in my chart seems to point to my highly emotional bond with my father. Liz Greene has postulated that the 4th house symbolizes the archetypal inheritance from the father.¹ This is a rather paradoxical conceptualization, but one that my life experience has borne out.

My father died at 88 during his third Saturn return in Libra (see **Chart 2**, **), with the multiple layering of Saturn's symbolism in both of our charts. The most significant transit to my father's chart, besides his Saturn return, was that Saturn in Libra was within minutes of arc of an exact opposition to his Sun in Aries. The secondary progressed Sun at 16° Cancer (not shown) was also square natal Saturn! He had been declining steadily for the last year or so, and I was trying to prepare myself for his death. In a way, I even longed for it because he had become so debilitated and depressed in his old age — not the physically vital father I had known. Saturn as the keeper of time seemed to be saying, "Your time is up!" I felt that I was experiencing the enactment of both the myth of Saturn and the myth of the three Fates, where the thread of life gets cut. Aging and death are some of the most profound truths of Saturn. This is Saturn as the Grim Reaper and Father Time. I am reminded of Goya's mythic painting, *Saturn Devouring His Son*, and that we must all face the aging process and the body's demise.

In a parallel fashion, death was pictured in my own chart. I was weathering the long transit of Saturn in Libra through my 7th house, crossing Venus in Libra. I needed to **face** the end of a significant relationship. At the time of my father's death, Saturn had finally come to the exact square of my 4th-house Cancer Moon, which on one level symbolizes him. A difficult maturational process was at hand, one that oppressed and depressed me but that I had to confront. Whatever misguided fantasies I harbored about my father taking care of me, or buffering my own mortality, now had to be shed. This shedding process doesn't happen all at once. My consciousness was shocked and compelled to absorb a truth about our human existence that it had successfully avoided until now.

As an astrologer, I was seeing all these indicators of death unfold in my chart: transiting Saturn square my Moon and transiting Pluto square my Ascendant. The lunar progressions also spoke volumes. The secondary progressed Moon in Leo had just barely crossed natal Pluto, and solar arc Pluto in Libra *exactly* squared my Moon-Jupiter conjunction (charts not shown). Seeing this in the chart, however, is different from experiencing the death of my father as if he were some kind of crazy god in my psyche!

The symbolism raged on, with the interweaving of transiting Saturn and Pluto in my own chart, the “cheery duo” saying in essence that a season of death is upon you.

I had journeyed from my life on the other side of the country to be with my father as he was dying. The symbolism of the death chart was striking in its linkage to both our charts. That Cancer Moon – high in the sky, conjunct the Midheaven at my father’s death, and conjunct my own Moon–Jupiter conjunction – was presiding over his passing while I attended him through his last breaths. The Moon in Cancer squaring Saturn in Libra in the death chart mirrored my own transit. The Ascendant at the moment of death exactly conjoined my father’s natal Saturn!

The deeply primal quality of the death of my father shocked me. I could not have prepared myself for the intensity of grief, despair, and fear that was unleashed. Throughout my life, in a very real way, I had felt as though I was the keeper and nurturer of my father’s soul. I was the receptacle into which his disowned pain and trauma fell.

In the wake of my father’s death, I felt a profound loss of faith in an afterlife. It seemed merely a fragile veneer of belief that peeled off. Astrologers as a group are often spiritually oriented, and many probably believe in reincarnation and past lives. I, too, had subscribed to these beliefs. But this experience of the death of someone so close to me knocked me from my comforting constructs, and I had to confront the naked fact of our mortality. It is only with time and much soul-searching that I have regained some equanimity – but at a deeper level of acceptance of the fragility of life.

So, the questions remain: Can I be awakened by my father’s death? I feel transformed; I am not the same person I was. Can I live more in tune with the true nature of life, not having to turn away from the knowledge that the life cycle is short and that death awaits us all? Can I love my life and the people in it more fully? Can I live in the present moment more completely? And when my time comes, can I let go into the mystery?

Chart Data are confidential, but the sources are: Andrea (birth certificate); her father (his mother’s memory); and the time of her father’s death (Andrea was present and looked at the clock).

Reference

1. See Liz Greene, *The Astrology of Fate*, Red Wheel/Weiser, 1984, ch. 4, “Fate and the Family.”

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CHART CAPTIONS:

All charts use Placidus houses and the Mean Node.

Chart 1: Andrea Conlon

Chart 2: Bi-wheel.

Inner wheel and house cusps: Walt Conlon

Outer wheel: transits at his death