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The Marriage of Astrology and Psychotherapy

by Andrea Conlon

I think most astrologers have an intuitive sense of the value astrology could bring to psychotherapy. We know when we do readings that we are encouraging self awareness and soul growth. We see the broad outlines of the evolutionary work for a person. Doesn't it seem as though the astrological perspective could be useful in psychotherapy? It seems like such a natural marriage. In this article I intend to compare and contrast the two disciplines, discussing some of the ways they work together and don't work so well together. Then I will present several examples to show how I use astrology as a psychotherapist.

Those of us who have endured some form of psychotherapy can probably relate to the thought 'I wish my therapist knew astrology so they could understand me better, I'd like them to see me through the lens of astrology', or 'if my therapist understood this (fill in an appropriate planet) transit I'm going through, they'd see why I'm falling apart right now'. We would like a therapist to speak *our* language! Most of us have no trouble grasping the link between astrology and psychotherapy because in our own study of astrology what proved to be so valuable was the discovery of profound insights about ourselves that were helpful and healing. It is then a short leap to seeing its potential value as a tool in an on-going psychotherapeutic context. In fact, it's hard to understand *why* the mental health field doesn't use this incredible tool. Except that we know how astrology is viewed in our culture, don't we?

If I had written on this a few years back, it would have been easier and less ambiguous to write about. I would have said, "This marriage is a match made in heaven and I know exactly how to do it". Now I feel less certain about the fit between these two streams because I'm more aware of some of the real problems in doing this combination. So I'll be taking some time with how the integration has worked for me and some of the ways it seems to clash. I think marriage is a good metaphor here. Like most marriages, sometimes it works well and sometimes not. Sometimes these two entities are in such harmony with each other and sometimes they need to go off by themselves for awhile.

There is some truth to the cliché that astrologers talk and therapists listen. Let's examine that more closely, starting with astrology. What astrological theory suggests is that the birthchart shows in a nutshell what a person has to go through to become a more evolved consciousness. I like to think of the birthchart as a prescription handed to us from the archetypal realm. The birthchart is the medicine we are taking in this life. Astrology links us to a larger intelligence beyond the simplistic model that psychology can get stuck in, where our existential plight is reduced to what happened in our early development. Astrology brings in the transcendent, where we are initiated into a sense of belonging in the universe. But how do we actually work with clients? We are in the role of imparting information, interpreting the archetypal dimension that guides and gives a context for how to navigate life more consciously. In the typical session, we explain what we see, we outline the potentials and pitfalls, and then we say good-bye. For the astrologer, it is over. But for the client, the reading can have a profound impact. It can shake a person up and make them feel ungrounded. The natural process would seem to require taking the next step of working through this material. But that is precisely the point when our session ends, and we're onto the next client.

In contrast, psychotherapy works in a different and slower way. The therapist provides guidance and containment for the client. The client learns to navigate difficult areas of life by facing them and struggling with them. The therapist's work is not so much interpreting the will of the gods by providing information, as it is walking alongside someone as a midwife for the purpose of furthering growth which is stuck somewhere. This process can take many sessions or many years.

So here we have two disciplines that are devoted to personal growth, yet they go about it in very different ways. It is the difference between identifying broad themes and patterns, as is done in astrology, versus actually helping someone work through these areas in psychotherapy. Of course, each discipline meets with different challenges. The astrologer knows that the client's situation is so much more than can be addressed in a single session. And that the working through of things still lies ahead, outside the scope of the chart reading. On the other hand, the psychotherapist works in a messier world, pursuing an open-ended inquiry which has no clear end and which depends on the client's active participation.

Giving chart readings is challenging and heroic work and will always have value for people. As Steven Forrest has said, "You know, doing a chart reading is an ordeal." I found that admission so relieving and honest coming from such a masterful chart reader! It's obviously not easy work, which is why so many people who study astrology never make the leap to doing professional readings. Although the fact of astrology's position in the public's mind doesn't help either.

It is just as hard being a psychotherapist, though in a different way, in getting right down in the trenches with the client and their distress. Yet there is hope in the fact that, while these two disciplines are so different, they are still pursuing the same goal of growth in consciousness and healing. Perhaps each can contribute something to the other.

What Astrology Offers

So how does astrology integrate with psychotherapy? This work is still in its infancy. There aren't that many people doing it and there are practically no models for those of us who are doing it.

Jung was the first pioneer to reconnect psychology with astrology. He made that wonderful statement that astrology contains the sum of all the psychological knowledge from antiquity. What a remarkable statement! We know that he used astrology with his patients, and yet he didn't leave behind any traces of his methodology. *How* exactly did he work with his patient's charts in analysis? No one is sure. We know that Jung used the birth chart to "...find clues to the core of psychological truth..." (from Jung's letter to Freud in 1911). And we know that Jung worked with astrology for 40 years before he published his work on synchronicity in 1950, which was Jung's term that explained the way astrology worked- without having to come out and say that astrology worked. But that's about all we know about his use of astrology. We shouldn't feel slighted about this, however, because Jung also didn't leave much methodology about any aspect of his clinical work. Still, Jung's stature as a creative genius and brilliant thinker lends credibility to this integration and encouragement to those who attempt it. The fact that he *respected* and used astrology means so much to us and our field.

What can astrology contribute to this integration? The most important idea is that the universe is meaningful and resonates with the individual human soul. This is the philosophical underpinning of astrology, summed up in the phrase "as above, so below". In contrast, traditional psychotherapy tends to ignore the spiritual side of life. Astrology embraces this concept of wholeness and meaning

as foundational, yet still allows for the client's own spiritual beliefs. The introduction of this context allows a larger scope of things to help shape the therapy.

Closely related to this is that astrology is not a pathology-based system. You may be surprised, or perhaps appalled, to know to what extent traditional psychology is oriented around pathology. Many psychological tests and books on diagnosis and treatment are oriented around this one fact. The DSM-IV, the basic diagnostic text which characterizes a client's psychological state, has hundreds of categories of pathology *but not even one category of wellness*. When something is as pervasive as this pathology orientation is, it is too easy to let it dominate the whole, and it generally does. In contrast, the planetary archetypes are inherently non-pathologizing. Each birthchart contains magic and mystery, potentials and trials. I think it is our job as astrologers to see beauty in every birthchart.

But for me, the single session model is both harder and less satisfying than working longer term, because just as I've laid out the themes and made a connection with the person, they're gone, and I feel like 'now the work has only just begun'. The psychotherapist in me wants to find out what the impact of my reading is on them and wants to actually help them work with what's been identified in the reading.

The Contribution of Psychotherapy

Now I'd like to share with you some of the broad concepts from the world of psychotherapy that I've found helpful in doing this integration. The first thing that psychotherapy offers is the concept of ongoing and focused work with the psyche. I believe this is critical because the fulfillment of the birthchart is only realized through active engagement with its potentials.

The other thing that psychotherapy brings is the idea of containment. I mentioned the word containment earlier. In psychotherapy, containment is where the therapist provides a safe place for the client to explore and grapple with his or her life. It involves privacy, deep trust, empathic listening, and reflection. These are not the kinds of things easily attained in a single astrological session. Containment is a very lunar word because it relates to the nurturing matrix like the astrological Moon. The model of containment comes from the mother-infant relationship and honors the idea that on one level we are working with early attachment and the primal layer of our being.

I mentioned listening as part of what gives containment. This listening is an extremely important act by the therapist. It is not a passive activity; it is not just reflecting back to the client what has been said; and it's not "just nurturing" in the sense of only providing comfort. The therapist is fully engaged with the client – words, expressions, gestures, the whole message coming from the client. This is not only on the conscious level but extends to the unconscious level. The therapist is immersed in all these things. They are felt and then articulated as needed by the therapist. This is what I mean by containment.

Astrological readings are also a form of containment, from a cosmological perspective, that is extremely valuable. When our chart is interpreted, we are held within the orderly workings of the cosmos, within a context of meaning. But psychotherapy offers containment much more actively, more ongoingly and on a different level than astrology to address areas of suffering and arrested development.

Development is intimately connected to dependence. D.W. Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst, wrote poetically about human development and dependence. He coined the phrase the 'fact of dependence'. He even called it 'the awful fact of dependence'. What he meant by this is that humans are born so incredibly vulnerable, so enormously dependent. There is no other mammal that remains dependent so long. And there is no way as humans that we can escape this fact of dependence, just as there is no way to escape the inevitable facts of loss and death. In psychotherapy, the therapist provides containment so that a certain dependence can occur, allowing the client's psyche to emerge.

I have heard and sensed in some astrologers that dependence, particularly the dependence that occurs in psychotherapy or even astrology, is something to be avoided. I think this mirrors our culture's view of dependence - that strong and independent is good, dependence and vulnerability is bad and to be avoided. Yet, no matter how much we learn about astrology or science or anything really, there will never be a substitute for the human need to be compassionately heard and understood and a safe place in which to be vulnerable. And right now psychotherapy is one of the few forms for these encounters.

The Value of Dependence

Of course, in talking about dependence and the feeling side of life we are talking about the astrological Moon and lunar consciousness. Our materialistic culture is so wounded and out of touch with this dimension of life that I believe to one extent or another we are all suffering. I'm sure I'm not the first to comment that

psychotherapy makes a sad statement on the lunar function in our culture, with massive numbers of people trying to heal this primal layer of our being in 50-minute sessions.

To me the crux of therapy is that our places of arrested development keep arising in our experience until we can consciously live through them, that is, until we can feel these areas, integrate them, and thereby grow through them. This is precisely where I am excited by the integration of astrology with psychotherapy, where the astrologer who is interested in and trained in both areas can assist with the process of working through what the chart identifies is needed. An astrological reading, no matter how insightful, has the danger of remaining just an interesting story about ourselves and our potentials that goes no further than that. It's what we *do* with the reading that counts.

The working through of our places of arrested development is difficult and painful. In order for these partially lived experiences to no longer dominate our lives, we have to move toward them and feel them. But to a great extent our lives are organized around keeping these difficult experiences at bay. Much of our energy and life force is bound up in these defense systems and so our development becomes stuck. For, what we haven't lived will return in some form, either as a recurring pattern or some more intense disturbance.

Again I'd like to take inspiration from Jung in his famous statement that "Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering." What he is suggesting here, I think, is that legitimate suffering is going through the painful experiences that are necessary for our development. And that it's something we have to learn. Isn't that an interesting and alien thought, to think of suffering as something to be learned! Exactly what we resist and turn away from. In fact, our superficial culture does everything in its power to distract us from this truth. Our culture seems to have the idea that we are failing when we experience pain and difficulty, as if it can all be avoided. How does this apply to psychotherapy? When it goes well, psychotherapy provides a containing relationship so that defenses can loosen up and these sealed-off areas can be felt into. Growth only occurs when we are vulnerable. Psychotherapy is one socially sanctioned place where we can learn how to suffer.

I firmly believe that psychology's emergence in the zeitgeist at the end of the 19th century is one aspect of the reemergence of the divine feminine. Psychology's theories around the early attachment relationship teach us about how the vulnerable, dependent human mind is formed. Might that have come into being

because humanity *needed* to make conscious contact with the utter vulnerability in which we are cast into this life? I think that this awareness of vulnerability is just what we need to contact so that we can evolve out of violence. Obviously the message hasn't penetrated yet. I see psychology broadly as a return of the feeling function in the collective consciousness.

What psychology in practice does not seem to account for is just how wounded this feeling function is in the collective. Developmental theories seem to focus on the failure of mothers in particular and parents in general. There seems to be a real punitive orientation in much of the developmental literature which is very blaming of maternal failure. And yet how can we give what is unformed, unawakened, or damaged in ourselves? I think there has been an element of this in psychological astrology also, where this punitive language has transferred. That is, the kinds of interpretations that say the Moon in Capricorn means that your mother didn't want you or some equally negative conclusion. There is no compassion for the state of the mother, as though she consciously and volitionally put the Moon in Capricorn or whatever difficult configuration is in the chart of the child.

Integrating Astrology with Psychotherapy

I said earlier that I felt there was a bias in astrologers that dependence is to be avoided as a kind of bad thing- as if we could or should avoid it. In contrast, the bias in many psychotherapies is their *confinement* in early development. That is, that they see all problems in terms of early development. Here's where astrology can come in as a kind of higher authority to articulate the archetypal nature of whatever is going on developmentally. We learn through astrology that whatever is going on in our development has a larger sweep or a deeper motion than what our parents did to us. We have a sense of something trying to unfold in the soul and what our soul tasks are. The potential beauty of the combination of astrology and psychotherapy is how they interact synergistically to enhance each other.

One particular example of this integration that I find fascinating and valuable comes from Liz Greene - that themes from the ancestral past are revealed in the birthchart. It is the idea that the family psyche is a large part of the chart to be worked with. Actually, I think this is kind of a shamanic perspective that indigenous people ascribe to. It is 'the power of the ancestors' that we have a glimpse of in many chart configurations. It is the idea that my Moon/Pluto or my Sun/Neptune aspect points backwards in time to the deep family psyche. A Sun/Neptune aspect, for instance, points to a spiritual issue in the father's line.

The person who bears a Sun/Neptune aspect must work with Neptune's mystical impulse and live it more consciously than perhaps the father was able to.

This is a notion that I personally have found extremely liberating, that what I thought were 'my issues' are actually embedded in a family psyche that I inherited, and am a part of, and am working to redeem. That to me is an important aspect of karma, that we are born into family systems that contain huge portions of our psychic work. I'm interested in how trauma or any psycho-spiritual issue is transmitted through family lineages and how we see that in the chart.

When some of our deepest traumas and troubled areas are viewed in this context, it creates some space and breathing room. Our problems are often more than our own personal issues. This is a transpersonal perspective. I believe that the influence of our ancestors is much stronger than we are generally aware of. By working on ourselves in whatever way we do, we transform the pattern, burn the karma, redeem the ancestors.

But as I mentioned earlier, sometimes the combination of astrology and psychotherapy doesn't work as well as my initial inspiration would have it. In fact, as my skills as a psychotherapist grow I'm finding more glitches and areas of conflict. The crux of the dilemma is that astrology describes someone on the archetypal level while psychotherapy is a process of self-discovery that gives space for a person to find their own answers.

And while astrology gives us a roadmap, it does not negate the fact that we all swim in a mysterious ambiguity. The chart articulates a path. It outlines our resources and challenges in this life. It gives some direction, but we must still feel our way through the ambiguity which none of us escape, *even astrologers*. That's the shadow side of astrology, to think that we can see everything. The edge I'm working with is that the chart is a profound tool, and yet ultimately I have no answers for people nor can I see *exactly* who they are from the chart.

So, how can we work with this basic difference between astrology and psychotherapy? How can we maintain the necessity of active self-discovery with the insights available through the birthchart?

In practice I have found it can be a block to bring in the chart too soon in the therapy process. It can derail the process, interrupt the flow of my client emerging, and put me in the role of the expert rather than allowing them to

discover themselves. The danger in acting the expert is that the client may passively want to be fed astrological insights rather than actively engage in the process of self searching. In chart readings the client is in a more passive role with the astrologer as interpreter. But psychotherapy clients need to be more active participants, with the therapist in a less overtly active role.

So how do I actually use astrology in my therapy sessions? In my case examples I'll show some of the specific ways I use astrology. However, at this point let me summarize some of the basic ways I use it.

The easiest way to integrate the chart in therapy is to have it for my frame of reference without using it explicitly with the client. Here it can lend a depth of insight to how I listen to my client, as though the chart is whispering a running commentary. *The client's birthchart holds and contains me.* But the problem with this is that I am not allowing the person to benefit directly by the tool of astrology, only indirectly.

Another method of using the birthchart is to use it openly with the client. This requires a certain type of client; obviously one who is open to astrology. With this method, the themes contained in the chart can be discussed openly instead of being used covertly. This has the potential of benefiting the client more directly.

But I'm very much in process with the integration. I don't have the answers and the form of it neatly worked out but I am committed to this integration *because I know how valuable and profound the insights of astrology are.* Using the chart in therapy can facilitate dialogue and empathic understanding but it needs to do so without telling someone who they are in a rigid way. Otherwise the chart can seriously impinge on the heart of what is valuable about psychotherapy- which is that it is a process of self discovery.

Conclusion

Using astrology in psychotherapy is a particular application of astrology. It has great promise but it's only in its infancy. For astrologers, I feel it's good to have another way of working besides a single session model, for those of us who are drawn to it. The biggest advantage to using psychotherapy with astrology is that it provides a way to offer more active containment and a way to work through natal chart patterns and transits and progressions. The single session model does not.

There is no magic formula for combining astrology and psychotherapy. It's a work in progress that differs with each client. The edge I'm working on is to let the boundaries blur between the two disciplines. Is it psychotherapy or is it

astrology? As Rilke said, "...have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves...Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually...live your way into the answers."

Chart examples:

I've chosen these charts because they represent some of the different ways I've used astrology in my work. To protect confidentiality I'm keeping personal information to a minimum. In all cases, I've selected just one feature, one transit or natal aspect, to show how I integrated the chart into the therapy.

(Client #1)

This client had no prior experience with serious astrology and yet she was able to make use of the language. She came to me in total crisis having just been served divorce papers by her husband. Note the position of transiting Uranus, the harbinger of change and disruption at the seventh cusp! Here I disclosed to her rather quickly that I used astrology in my work and asked if she would be open to us considering what was going on in her chart. She was intrigued and given her strong spiritual orientation was very open to using her chart. I explained the meaning of transiting Uranus at the 7th cusp and linked it to her marriage. I interpreted that something needed to change in the marriage and if she was not able to consciously engage with the process of change, then change could come to her anyway through her partner. When I articulated this dynamic, she was able to make use of it because she was able to recognize her own internal desire to end the marriage which previously she had not been able to do. She was being 'liberated' from her marriage against her conscious will! How many of us have been liberated, Uranian fashion, from something that needed to change in our lives but that we resisted?

As we worked to explore the marriage, what came out was just what a terrible state it had been in for years. It was a battle zone. Fairly quickly she said, "He's really done me a favor by leaving". So the Uranus transit accomplished for her what she was not able to do herself - to end a destructive marriage.

Where astrology really shines as a therapeutic tool is when people are in crisis, as we see in a situation like this. I believe that using astrology with this person confirmed her own inner knowing that the marriage needed to end. One could argue that you don't need astrology here, the therapist could work with the premise that a part of her *knew* the marriage needed to end and just work with that, which is true enough. But with astrology we were able to focus on this issue

as a soul task at this time. It was having the synchronistic connection articulated through astrology that made sense to her that she was able to make use of.

(Client #2)

This is the chart of a woman who came to me for a reading and decided to continue in therapy with me. She did 11 additional sessions beyond the reading, which is a relatively short time in therapy, but then decided to do marital counseling because her issue was her marriage - whether to end it or try to put it back together. Note the transiting Saturn/Uranus opposition and how its aspecting her chart. Throw in a second Saturn return also! This woman is in such a critical time of change and transition.

For me this experience exemplified how when we only do a reading, it is possible to not really touch the messy depths of how the person is hurting. I laid out themes in the reading which were resonating and very meaningful to her, *but it was only in the next session of me shifting gears into a more listening mode that she came forward with the depth of her turmoil about her 30 year marriage.*

Here the chart reading was a good *introduction* to deeper work and really digging into an issue. She said that it felt like I saw into her without her needing to tell me all about herself, and that it felt like we had a base that put us ahead of a therapist not using astrology.

I'd like to add though that it doesn't always work that way. She wasn't threatened by the level of insight and 'seeing into' her that astrology gives. It felt good to her and she was ready for it. But for many people the astrologer seeing into them in a reading can feel threatening and too vulnerable for them to then shift gears and do their emotional work with the astrologer. Many people need to develop a relationship more slowly with their therapist and be more in control of how much is seen and revealed.

(Client #3)

Here is the chart of a man I worked with for a long time. He was drawn to work with me *because* of my astrological orientation. He was taking medication for depression and identified with being a depressed person. I think he felt the stigma and shame of that. One of the most helpful things I told him about his chart was that perhaps what our culture labels 'depression' was actually quite normal for him. This was tremendously relieving for him to hear! Astrologically, what I'm singling out is his Scorpio Moon, square Pluto. We could pick out

other features of the chart that back up the theme of depression, but let's just stay with the Scorpio Moon square Pluto.

This is a delicate issue because you don't want to tell someone that they have the chart of a depressed person. But you do want to get underneath the cultural bias that tries to bring everyone's mood to some predetermined standard of normal, where anything that deviates from this is pathological and in need of medication. As if no one should ever have a bad day. We worked with his depression as being a necessary part of his inner life, leading to wholeness.

What he learned from his chart is a greater tolerance for his particular emotional nature and not to regard it as pathological. He had to learn to tolerate what its like to live with a Scorpio Moon square Pluto, that his feelings can be raw and intense, that he is naturally moody, that living with stormy depths is part of having a Scorpio Moon and so normal for him. The direct use of the chart helped him *accept himself* because it resonated deeply with his own experience.

Chart Data are confidential, but the sources are as follows: Chart #1 uses data from a birth certificate (AA rating); Chart #2 birth time from mother (A rating); Chart #3 uses data from a birth certificate (AA rating).

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