

The Healing Art of Astrotherapy

For almost forty years now I've been an astrotherapist and licensed clinical social worker. By this I mean that I provide psychotherapy using astrology as my basic orientation. My purpose in writing this article is to show that there is another way to practice astrology besides as a chart reader. I want to reach out especially to younger astrologers and share my experience in working with this blend. Perhaps you too will be drawn to this particular path.

As therapists, we have a *right* to use astrology as our theoretical lens, just as there are a myriad of other theoretical lenses therapists practice from. I'd also like to expand the meaning of what an astrologer is. 'Real astrologers' are not just chart readers. Practicing astrologically informed therapy is real astrology too.

I feel that I was *called* to practice astrology as a psychotherapist. That was my vision and intention right from the beginning of learning astrology. I saw how it could serve the therapeutic venture. My study of astrology helped me heal myself, and I wanted to offer the astrological perspective to others. Later, after I became a therapist, I found it utterly invaluable in client sessions even when I didn't mention a word of astrology. It was an invisible guiding hand.

My particular energy, astrological chart, and nervous system was more suited to being a therapist rather than a chart reader. Perhaps some of you can relate to this also. Certainly, doing chart readings is a valuable service to people. A certain portion of my practice is doing just that, but I find that being a therapist is more of who I am and more satisfying.

With my out of bounds Mars at the MC and ruler of my chart, it seems I was destined to forge a path outside both astrological norms and therapist norms. I often felt alone with this path, as Jung has stated that the path of individuation is often lonely. I felt like I walked in two worlds with neither world offering me quite the validation and belonging that I hoped for. I was definitely an outsider among my therapy colleagues, although I found some place in the Jungian world. I found some credibility and legitimacy in Jung, who did the charts of all his patients, but who did not broadcast his astrological self in many of the circles he moved in. I know how he must have felt... In Liz Green's recent writings on Jung and the Red Book, she states that astrology is at the root of Jung's psychology, but this is still largely unacknowledged by Jungians.

There is a performance element in doing a chart reading for a stranger. The task of the chart reader is a better fit for someone with a strong extroversion track, while I am an introvert. My nervous system and temperament are better suited to the role of therapist. Offering astrologically informed therapy means you are offering your ongoing presence through the lens of astrology. Astrologers talk, and therapists listen. But while there is some truth to this, in astrotherapy there is a large gray area where the boundaries blur between astrology and therapy. It all depends on the needs and constraints of the client, which can change over time. So sometimes I find my work centering more on astrology and at other times more on therapy. We do what we do in the service of their growth.

Just as long term, outer planet transits have more time to cook, change, and challenge us than short acting transits, long term work with clients using astrology affords many opportunities for accompanying them, and offering a depth of connection through changing astrological conditions. I like to offer my listening presence, and read the emotional energy of my client's experience through the lens of astrology in the ongoing therapy process. The beauty and power of astrology is the insight and clarity it offers. That's the rub -- it offers knowledge but not method. Therefore astrotherapists need training in other therapeutic modalities. Here is where we need to walk in two worlds.

Fortunately, there are many therapeutic modalities and theories, and astrology interweaves with all of them. To me astrology is the Wise Mother of them all. She is more powerful in her archetypal domain than creations of the human mind and world. Archetypes are eternal forms in nature, or the objective psyche as Jung termed it. Through astrology our poor weary psyches are relieved of the straightjacket of psychological theories that focus exclusively on an *inner world*. Astrology links our inner world to the larger cosmos. The paradigms of psychotherapy are constantly shifting and in creation, but I'd like to hone in on a few current core concepts in the therapeutic endeavor and how astrology is in resonance with these.

Mirroring and the related concept of empathy are the first two concepts I'd like to address as they relate to the field of astrological counseling. In developmental psychology and attachment theory, mirroring is the idea that we grow a self through the relational impact of our caregivers right from infancy. Many of us struggle to heal from the impact of the faulty mirroring we received, or a lack of real emotional empathy. Astrology allows us to see ourselves in the reflection of a cosmic mirror beyond a limited human world. As astrologers, we become a *cosmically informed empathic companion*, whether we are astrotherapists or chart readers. That is the commonality between the two forms of practice. Good chart reading provides mirroring, and in psychotherapy the concept of mirroring is central to the process. I too avail myself of chart readings by my favorite astrologers, and it is invariably those nuggets of *astrological* mirroring and empathy that is soul nourishing and aids my growth.

Mirroring in therapy shows up in two ways -- in the therapeutic relationship, and in giving the client a sense of 'feeling felt'. Research has shown that it is the quality of the therapeutic relationship, the rapport and connection between client and therapist, that is curative, not the particular theory or modality. Another word for this is *presence*. It is the quality of our relational presence that is the greatest predictor of a successful therapy. We're offering our astrological presence whether as therapists or chart readers.

Many current teachers use the phrase 'feeling felt' to describe the healing function in therapy. It's an ideal we strive for with our clients. By this I mean that inside of me is an accurate experience of the client that I can use to mirror, empathize, and guide the work of therapy. How we hunger for someone to see what is for us! We're all searching for accurate mirrors for our existential state. And in astrology we find a mirror that not only reflects our inner condition, but also links us to nature and the larger cosmos. This transpersonal element is another prominent stream in current psychotherapy and astrology finds a natural fit here too. What an antidote for

our overburdened psyches to place the sole burden of consciousness within ourselves as much of modern psychology does.

Buddhism has made deep inroads into the world of psychotherapy, and is currently where I find resonance as an astrotherapist. Many of the prominent Buddhist teachers have also been practicing psychotherapists. Currently there is an exciting movement within Buddhist psychology on *self compassion*. The research shows that high levels of self compassion are correlated with emotional well being while low levels of self compassion are correlated with loneliness, depression, and anxiety.

Of course, the astrological chart is a wonderful tool for self compassion! Knowledge of our birth charts helps us bring a warm compassion for ourselves that says in essence ‘this is who I am and I don’t need fixing’. Whether as therapists or chart readers, we help people know themselves and befriend their charts, and in so doing it bestows a quality of self compassion quite naturally. We work with our *archetypal facts of life* -- not as fate, but as our path of soul evolution.

There are seminal astrological insights that we astrologers have about ourselves that are important sources of self compassion. I’m sure you can think of many examples from your own chart. For example, my own Cancer Moon being tightly square Neptune gives an extremely high level of sensitivity. So much of my feeling state was what I psychically absorbed without any conscious awareness. Calling a person like myself ‘too sensitive’ is really unhelpful and off the mark. We don’t *get over* our charts, we work with our charts. We have access to a profound level of self compassion through astrology.

Let me give some examples that may help differentiate astrotherapy from chart reading. When we see a client in the midst of transiting Pluto oppose their Sun, we know that a profound change is occurring. An old self and way of life is dying off to make way for a new self and phase of life. Do I sketch out a theme doing a chart reading, or do I as the therapist enter this transformational process as a relational companion for a period of time? A chart reader acts as a catalyst and consultant. If we are reading for someone with this transit, we would articulate some themes they might experience without trying to scare the heck out of them! But if I have a therapy client in the midst of this transit, and I know that their actual history is one of marinating in domestic violence and abuse as a child, then I’m in the trenches with them to work with the painful memories that are unfreezing and surfacing. This is quite different from sketching out a theme in a reading. This is working with trauma. Knowing of the transit helps to hold and contain the rawness of the work in a framework of meaning both for myself and the client.

As a therapist I’ve been privileged to learn astrology very deeply from my clients. As transiting Saturn in Scorpio crossed my client’s Neptune/Asc conjunction, her husband died suddenly in front of her while having a CAT scan. If she had come to me for a chart reading and I saw this transit on the horizon, I might have said something like ‘a new cycle of self- identity is upon you’, and I would attempt to articulate the Scorpio element with its themes of death and rebirth. But the raw intensity of her actual lived experience goes beyond any interpretation I might come up with. To witness the aftermath of this tragic death with her, to walk with her to help her

grieve and submit to a process she did not chose, is a great honor which has changed me too. We can never tell how a transit will manifest. It is a person's *lived experience* where the rubber meets the road in therapy that differentiates astrotherapy from readings.

Oftentimes something has to be suffered in order to heal. And boy, do we hate to go there! For instance, we might see transiting Pluto activating a Moon Chiron opposition, and we know in our hearts and bodies that a season of healing by feeling and honoring some stored pain will be required. If this passage is not ignored or suppressed but allowed to be felt and worked with, a shift can occur where we have the possibility of a new emotional life with greater emotional maturity.

Astrology affords a very particular form of self compassion because we are informed by the archetypal realm. Contrary to what our culture teaches us, compassion for our own suffering is not the same as self pity or self indulgence. The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield spoke of how we can be so overly loyal to our suffering. Ruminating on our suffering and self criticism is not the same as self compassion. Self compassion is bringing in warmth, and a kind regard to our feelings and struggles. Astrology is a powerful therapeutic tool to help us befriend ourselves, to face our karma and evolve. My first mentor said to me that when we work with someone's chart, we're working with their karma, and it can be hard to look at. What a striking and true statement that applies to ourselves also!

The Buddhist teacher Ajahn Chah said there are two kinds of suffering. The suffering that you run away from and yet follows you everywhere, and the suffering that you're willing to turn and face, and in so doing find the liberation of the heart (reference Jack Kornfield Wisdom Hour). Suffering isn't optional in life. We don't have to be ashamed of our suffering. It links us in our common humanity with all beings. But astrology is remarkable in its ability to posit *meaning* in our suffering. Or, consider Jung's oft quoted statement that neurosis is a substitute for legitimate suffering. So let's get on with our legitimate suffering shall we?

The consummate Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron with her five planets and the south node of the Moon in Cancer, has millions of followers around the world because we so desperately need help with our emotional experience. Kindness begins at home. If the oxygen masks drop down, we put our own on first! We learn to allow difficult feelings as part of being human, rather than that something is wrong. We do this as astrological counselors too- in that we help our clients make room for their emotional experience in all its particularity. It is a lifelong process to befriend our charts, and compassion for ourselves is key.

Let me step into another therapeutic modality as it relates to astrology, which is *parts psychology*. Internal Family Systems (IFS), is a hugely popular modality of parts psychology that finds resonance with astrology. I find the language of IFS so evocative. It's basic premise is that we have *parts*, that are sub personalities like inner sacred beings. In a very real sense we are all multiple personalities. Astrology is tailor made for the language of parts. The astrological planets in signs are our set of multiple personalities! I find myself naturally using this language of parts as a therapist as it relates to my client's chart. IFS teaches that all parts are valuable and all parts have good intentions. And the parts are interrelated to each other. How naturally

astrological! So much of good work with astrology is fleshing out different parts, different conflicting needs and polarities- all different dimensions of a person. Astrology's system of planets and signs as *archetypal parts* fits effortlessly with this.

One main goal of IFS therapy is to heal parts that are *exiled*, or in IFS lingo to *unblend* from parts we've become overly identified with that have taken over. Sounds like any powerful energy in our chart, such as a south node of the Moon taking over the psyche. The concept of exiled parts is such a rich metaphor. An exiled part is a psychic wound, or we could say a wounded inner child. Unburdening parts, parts in exile -- the language is so evocative of healing our woundedness, and evolving the planetary energies we have been given. The ultimate goal of IFS therapy is quite spiritual. It is to become 'self led', or to be healed enough, unblended enough from the burdens that these exiles carry, to find a spiritual core and access our guidance. We learn to relate to different parts of our charts by listening to their needs and desires without shame or judgement

I could go on with many other examples, but the reason astrology works so well with psychotherapy is that astrology is a true reflection of the psyche. Our chart is like a seed waiting for the waters of life, empathy and consciousness to help us on our soul's journey. Astrotherapy is born of the idea that you are helping the client to *integrate* and work with the issues the chart describes.

Along the way I've had many failures and unwanted discoveries in doing astrotherapy. Some of my worst failures occurred when a client came for therapy because of my astrological orientation. It seemed that the therapy could never get off the ground because the person was looking for easy answers and to be fixed. They seemed to be placing me in a position of 'well show me what you've got', but they themselves didn't come forward. The therapy relationship derailed before it even began. And paradoxically, some of my best astrotherapy clients have been people who knew nothing of serious astrology, and I introduced them slowly but surely to the model and their chart.

Similarly, I had fantasized that people I did a chart reading for were going to be my perfect clients. At times this was true and a chart client continued with me in therapy which was a real pleasure. However, as my mentor Steven Forrest said, astrology goes very deep very fast! That truth about astrological readings can actually be disturbing to someone seeking a therapist. It was hard for me to realize that with some people there may be a conflict with the conversion from chart reading to therapy client that cannot be easily overcome. The client may need us to *not know* about them until they can reveal themselves at their pace, which allows them to titrate how deep and fast we go into their psychic landscape. That requires letting the client take the lead, with the chart in a supporting role. Ironically, the issue is not that astrology is ineffective, but that it *is too powerful!*

The integration of astrology and psychotherapy has been my seminal work for several decades. This is the way I was called to practice astrology. Let me say again that we don't *transcend* our charts. As we evolve, we embody our charts more consciously and with great compassion for ourselves in this precious human life. As Pema Chodron has stated, 'nothing ever gets solved for

anybody'. I love this statement! There's no need to fix ourselves, but to care for and love ourselves with the life we have. With our astrological lenses on, we can help our clients do this for themselves too.