

What goes around comes around

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Once upon a time, in the early days of my astrological journey, my stock answer when asked what Astrology was, or what it meant to me, was simply that “Astrology was the study of the correlation between planetary positions and the human condition”. Time has passed, and while the basic sentiment may not have changed, my words and the emphasis have. To study astrology is to study cycles. The study of planetary cycles is by default the study of life cycles. I guess there is a certain amount of irony in the fact that to many, perhaps even to most, Astrology is seen as a predictive tool, and yet the only thing that is totally predictable — the only part of astrology that can be guaranteed — is the position of the planets. It still fascinates me that no matter how far back or how far forward one chooses to look, planetary positions and interplanetary relationships are documented with clockwork precision — and what’s more it was done a millennium or two before the advent of the computer.

Over the last thirty or so years, perhaps even going back to the 1950s and the birth of the “teenager” the general trend has been to pigeon-hole life into epochs of experience as modern psychology has re-written the “ages” of man.

As above so below — the correlation between the various ages and stages we grow through, are undoubtedly the mirror image of the succession of planetary returns, planetary cycles and part-cycles with uncanny accuracy.

This was really brought home to me recently by the lead stories of two national publications. Canvas, the weekend magazine of the New Zealand Herald had as its lead story *the Quarterlife Crisis – why twenty-somethings are freaking out!* The article goes on to describe this crisis as similar to the “mid life” crisis, but without the wrinkles and nostalgia — the social comment being that qualification, even multiple qualifications, do not necessarily promise job security or professional satisfaction. The word “choice” is well worked; it would seem that the ultimate solution is limiting that choice and taking personal responsibility for the decision and sticking with it. Astrologically speaking the 20s start and finish with Saturn. About age 21 there is the closing square of the first Saturn cycle, then as the late 20s merge with 30 we celebrate or endure the Saturn return. Sandwiched between these Saturnian bookends, in the middle of the decade, we experience the buoyancy of the second Jupiter return and a couple of Mars returns. Perhaps it is the contrast of energies that creates a sense of crisis?

I was preoccupied while writing this article, tracking and documenting the converging planetary cycles that occur between the ages of 50 and 60, when I spotted the second lead story in the same week: *Dame Kiri’s age crisis — the birthday that’s changed my life*. The story may have been cut from the Woman’s Weekly cloth, but the theme was definitely cyclic. It tracked the diva as she moved from one phase of life to the next, and explored not only her feelings and attitude at reaching the milestone of 60, but discussed her future options.

It is always good to see stories like this, it reminds us that Astrology is alive and well and living in the real world. Both the stories mentioned above emphasise the Saturn cycle, they also reinforce the fact that like everything in Astrology nothing stands alone — while each planetary cycle or return has an individual purpose, the greatest impact is when cycles or returns converge.

There are two types of planetary cycles: the **synodic cycle** is the cycle of the relationship between two planets. The most common being the lunation cycle which we can physically watch, as the Sun and the Moon glide through the phases of their cosmic dance. The synodic cycle starts with the conjunction of the two planets, the faster moving planet moves ahead. The opposition represents the culmination of the cycle and a new cycle begins when the faster moving planet closes in behind the slower planet for the next conjunction and a repeat of what has just completed. The duration of a synodic cycle will always be longer than the individual cycle of the faster planet but shorter than the individual cycle of the slower moving planet. Every coupling of planets creates a synodic cycle, but, other than the Sun and the Moon we tend to use synodic cycles between planets from Jupiter out. The Jupiter Saturn synodic cycle is frequently used for money matters, trade and exchange and the stock market. We had a graphic illustration of the influence of the Saturn Pluto synodic cycle during 2001, especially on 9/11 when they opposed each other.

In contrast to the above the other type of planetary cycle — the **longitudinal cycle** involves only one planet. The longitudinal cycle is when a planet travels around the zodiac from any given point and *returns* back to that point. The longitudinal planetary cycle completes when the transiting planet conjuncts itself in the natal chart and a simple transit becomes a **planetary return**. Of course this conjunction of natal and transit means that since birth the planet has completed the 360 degrees of the zodiac; the return to the natal position marks the end of one longitudinal planetary cycle and the beginning of the next.

Why is this so important and why should we consider planetary returns? Firstly as a transiting planet conjuncting its own natal position, a planetary return provides an energy spike, a revitalization, a refresher and a boost not only to the planet that is receiving the return but to all the other points in the chart that it makes natal contact with. This is of course for better and for worse — so not only do you get a boost of trines and sextiles but the squares and opposition also becomes activated. There is a sense of familiarity — a sense of returning “home” — returning to the norm for that particular natal chart.

The second point is the Return chart itself, obviously the faster the planet moves, the more often it returns to its natal position. As we work outwards from the fastest planet (Moon) to the slower planets, the application of the return changes. From the Moon to Mars inclusive we set up a chart for the exact time the planet returns and read it as a stand alone dynamic tool. For these returns we also have the option of using the birthplace or the place where the return actually happens. Return charts are derived from the Natal chart so the boundaries of the nativity will always apply, but return charts are encapsulated pictures, isolated stills of information, and are best read as such. Return charts are an ancient tool in existence long before the school of humanistic astrology. They are meant to be fatalistic, so the delineation is best kept simple, crisp and clean. Not every year is going to be a “good one”. Return charts tell it how it is, not why it is.

Because a return chart is produced from the natal chart, as in all things accuracy of birth time is of paramount importance. The return chart is used as a measure of the period to come, an inaccurate birth time will give an inaccurate return chart and ultimately questionable forecasting.

Solar return: every 365 days on our birthday (or one day either side) the Sun returns exactly to its natal position. Hence the expression “many happy returns of the day”. Revitalization — celebration of self – shows personal focus for the year in question.

Lunar return: every 28 days. The emotional conduit that links points and planets, the emotional messenger – relates to the Solar return in which it is contained. A very short term indicator (28 days) but purely on an emotional or sensitive level. Because of the shortness of this cycle the lunar returns can be read as continuing story. There are 13 lunar returns per solar return.

Mercury return: spikes the mental process, highlights the natal planet and its aspects. Mercury returns to its natal position about once a year but this can vary up to 14 months depending on retrogression. Mercury return charts are rarely used as a stand-alone dynamic tool, but there is no reason why they couldn't be. To Astrologers the retrograde periods of Mercury have far more impact than the return.

Venus return: refines, rebalances and replenishes the natal planet bringing its aspects and house position into focus. The Venus return concentrates on our personal ability to relate and our urge to merge, it is the time when love should be in the air! The frequency of the Venus return is 10-14 months — it is possible to have two consecutive Venus returns within a year.

Mars return: 23½ months. This has a bit more weight to it due to the nature of Mars, and the fact that the period is longer. Two years gives sufficient time to see the benefit of a positive return, or conversely remember the discomfort of a negative one. Mars is our energy, our drive and our directed will, and the return can best be described as a “refueling”. The Mars return seems to affect our external life rather than the internal. Look to Mars returns for direction relating to work, career or other pursuits such as sport, hobbies, etc. From the Moon out this is the first return that is affected by retrogression. Except on the very rare occasion every Mars return will contain a retrograde period. In fact the retrograde period separates the Mars return from the returns above. By its nature the Mars cycle is a cycle of action, therefore retrogression is often reversed action, so when it occurs, how it is handled can impinge on the cycle as a whole and can affect the individual well beyond the two year period of the cycle.

Jupiter/Saturn: Here the emphasize shifts — the cycles are longer, the bite is bigger. Stand alone charts of the return are no longer used as dynamic tools in their own right. The whole is segmented — we start to note intermediary aspects like transiting Saturn squaring Natal Saturn. We start to note if the square is in the opening (before the opposition) or closing (after the opposition) portion of the cycle.

The emphasis of the Jupiter and Saturn returns shift from dynamic to developmental for the individual. It also serves as a bridge between the individual and the collective — how we relate within the group into which we were born and to other groups

A **Jupiter return** occurs every 12 years. The Jupiter cycle is one of growth, and expansion. Each Jupiter return should bring an ever increasing sense of personal wisdom; this may well depend on the natal connection between Saturn and Jupiter — Saturn is the lesson learned and Jupiter the wisdom gained from the lesson. The Jupiter return often promises much more than it delivers — personally I found my early Jupiter returns always brought me something I didn't want which I found hard to dispense with. This may well be the nature of my Jupiter, debilitated by sign, but well placed in the chart; it makes a hard aspect to one luminary while it trines the other, but the telling aspect is the square to Saturn. Jupiter promises me what I want, but it would seem Saturn delivers what I need.

And so we move on to Saturn. The principal behind Saturn returning to its natal position and the planetary returns discussed above is exactly the same, but the essence and the application are very different. This is due in part to the length of Saturn's longitudinal cycle. It is more than double its closest neighbour Jupiter, and there are about 15 Mars returns contained within one Saturn cycle. Nearly 30 years in the making and the fundamental nature of the planet means that the Saturn Return is as much about the travelling as it is about the arriving.

It takes Saturn approximately 29½ years to return to its natal position, so from the moment of birth, Saturn starts its slow and steady journey around the natal chart, arriving back at the starting point some time not too long before the 30th birthday. By its very nature Saturn travels with a mission. It's almost as if he has a compulsion to teach us lessons we don't really want to learn, as he brings us face-to-face with experiences we did not choose to have. As Saturn moves through each House, it strips away the unnecessary, and we learn the basic meaning of that particular area of life. We learn how to make do with less, we learn the value of what we have and how best to utilise it, and what's more, we inherently know that if we don't heed the lesson, then Saturn will be back to walk us through it all over again. By the time Saturn "Returns", it has been through every House and made every possible aspect to every point and planet in the natal chart. At one level or another we have been given every lesson, we have experienced every emotion, and been introduced to every reality.

By nature Saturn is not always "best friend" material. Saturn tends to work in our interest rather than for our pleasure. It errs on the side of what we need rather than what we want.

In the natal chart, Saturn represents the disciplinarian, either internal or external, and symbolises the father or "father figure". Saturn is a hard taskmaster, who offers no free lunches, gives no free rides. All dues must be paid NOW, or paid later — with interest, and believe me Saturn can calculate compound interest on late payments without a calculator. After all, this is the planet of Karma, and "how you sow determines what you will reap". Saturn is the fiend that holds us back when we want to fly and the friend that holds us up when we might fall.

Saturn can rip our illusions apart and yet can crystallise our dreams into reality. Saturn is both the teacher and the lesson to be learned; it is the inherent spark within us that understands and craves structure and form; it is our timekeeper and our insatiable need for safety and security; it sets our boundaries and creates our bonds.

The time of the first Saturn return may be a time of consolidation, a time when you realise that the path you have taken is the right one. If this is so, then the focus will increase

and there will be renewed vigor, together with an air of confidence and acceptance that may have been missing until this point. Or it may be completely the opposite – Saturn returning may represent a junction, a gateway or crossroads — a time to realise that you're not on the right road. Perhaps you've been following in another's footsteps rather than imprinting your own, or perhaps the road is right, but the reason for being on it is wrong.

Whether it is a time of gain or a time of loss, or whether it manifests as a mere bump or a life-bending experience, the first Saturn return is the time to take responsibility for the self. From this point onwards, the buck stops with "me". We are now our own disciplinarian, judge and guide. We stand eyeball to eyeball with our father, either real or mythological, and Astrologically speaking, we are considered to be mature.

As with all things, the nature of the return will depend on the chart as a whole, plus the placement and condition of the natal Saturn. Often the house where Saturn falls represents the area of life most affected at the time of the return – 1st house Saturn equals personal matters – 2nd house Saturn equals financial or material matters etc. Unfortunately from a predictive or counseling perspective this not always the case. Sure, the individual with a 5th house natal Saturn may celebrate the return with the birth of a child while 7th house Saturn both make and break relationships. The 10th house Saturn may regularly make career moves at this time, but conversely, there are probably just as many who don't have Saturn in the 10th who launch their life time career at this time just as many start or finish their family without the assistance of the 5th house Saturn.

The condition of the natal Saturn must be considered, and obviously aspects to Saturn affect how we deal with and assimilate the return. A Saturn that has only hard aspects may be too inaccessible for the individual to really grasp the import of the lesson being delivered, but it will certainly feel the punch. The Saturn that is well serviced by trines and sextiles (especially those to the luminaries) may make the journey easier for the individual, but any aspect to the luminaries is going to make it very personal. Obviously a Saturn dignified by rulership or prominent because of angularity will be strong, and strong may well mean that it is strong enough to withstand a real doozy of blast at the time of the return. Retrogression is another point I must mention, the number of hits by the returning planet on the natal does not always denote severity. I have seen some devastating results from one hit on a direct natal Saturn just as I have seen individuals pass relatively unscathed from three hits on either a retrograde or direct natal Saturn.

Having made its Return, Saturn starts its second journey around the horoscope. It will be similar to the first, in as much that the same planets, points and house are transited. If Saturn's lesson was heeded the first time round, then chances are the second encounter will be less noteworthy, in a mundane sense — but more profound at a deeper, soul level. Somewhere between the ages of 38 and 45 we experience a collection of fairly heavy transits from Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. These transits constitute the "mid-life crisis" and often will coincide with the halfway point of the second Saturn cycle. This can be a testing time but it is also a time when Saturn's principles can be enormously helpful, offering a reality check, a time to take stock of where life is going. This is one time when Saturn's stability can stop the boat from tipping over – even if it does rock a bit.

And so we come to the end of our forties and on to the big FiveO. The 50s see a chain reaction of planetary and cyclic returns that bring about an altered state of mind and a social realignment.

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To be continued . . . the second part of this fascinating, informative and completely compelling article on Saturn was published in the *AFI Journal*, #26, 2004.

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