

The Astropoetic School of Soul-Discovery

News From The Astropoetic School September 2020

Greetings from The Astropoetic School of Soul Discovery in the Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina, where the misty skies reveal mysteries unfolding at the heart of the storm.

Onto a Vast Plain

Among many of his others, I've always loved the Rilke poem, "Onto a Vast Plain," from his collection *The Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*:

*You are not surprised at the force of the storm –
you have seen it growing.
The trees flee. Their flight
sets the boulevards streaming. And you know:
he whom they flee is the one
you move toward. All your senses
sing him, as you stand at the window.*

*The weeks stood still in summer.
The trees' blood rose. Now you feel
it wants to sink back
into the source of everything. You thought
you could trust that power
when you plucked the fruit:
now it becomes a riddle again
and you again a stranger.*

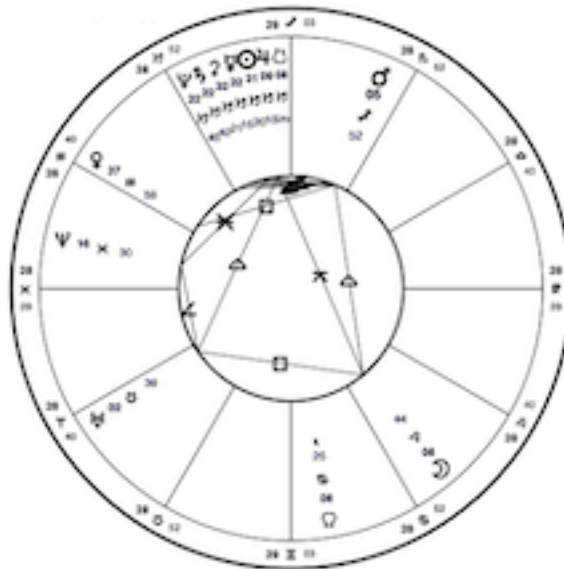
*Summer was like your house: you know
where each thing stood.
Now you must go out into your heart
as onto a vast plain. Now
the immense loneliness begins.*

*The days go numb, the wind
sucks the world from your senses like withered leaves.*

*Through the empty branches the sky remains.
It is what you have.
Be earth now, and evensong.
Be the ground lying under that sky.
Be modest now, like a thing
ripened until it is real,*

*so that he who began it all
can feel you when he reaches for you.*

Aside from working today with a client for whom I felt this poem was relevant, to me the poem speaks of this astrological moment in time when Mars is forming a retrograde station at 29° Aries square to the exact Saturn/Pluto conjunction at 23°, amidst a stellium in Capricorn (aside from Saturn and Pluto, including Ceres, Mercury, Sun, Jupiter and the South Node) on January 13, that set this current pandemic in motion (see the article, "Becoming a Diamond Under Heat and Pressure" in my last newsletter).



Onset of Pandemic

Mars was not part of this original stellium, but joined the fray on March 24, when it was conjunct Pluto for the first time (with Saturn just into Aquarius, about 6° ahead of Pluto at this point). On March 26, the United States was confirmed to be leading the world in confirmed cases and deaths (81,000+ and 1,000 respectively (<https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html>), up to 6,300,000+ confirmed cases and 187,000+ deaths now, less than six months later).

From this point forward, Mars will begin its apparent motion backwards toward this conjunction – which we might envision as the storm in Rilke's poem. Mars will continue retrograde to November 15, when it turns direct. It will conjunct Pluto on December 23 and then Saturn on January 13, 2021 – the one-year anniversary of the original alignment.

At the same time, as of this writing we are also days away from a Jupiter direct station at 18° Capricorn. Jupiter, though originally part of the Capricorn stellium in January, did not form its first exact conjunction to Pluto until April 5 (with Saturn still in early Aquarius, about 6° ahead of Pluto). By April 2, the virus had put nearly 10,000,000 people in the US out of work. By April 14, the International Monetary Fund warned that the global economy was headed for its worst downturn since the Great Depression (<https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html>).

After going direct on September 12, Jupiter will catch up to Pluto on November 5 and then Saturn on December 21.

As an astro-poet, I see a story in the making that oddly parallels Rilke's poem. In his chart, Rilke has a Grand Cross including the same primary planets involved in this current unfolding drama – Saturn, Pluto, Jupiter and Mars, as well as Moon opposing Uranus, bringing heightened sensitivity to the "storm." His natal Mars at 29° Aquarius is exactly sextile this Mars retrograde station.



Rilke's Pandemic-Resonant Grand Cross

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 – 1926) was considered one of the most lyrically intense German-language poets, who sought to reconcile beauty and suffering, life and death, the God of light and the darkness in the world. Born to a military father, Rilke began his formal education in a military academy to which he was ill-suited, and from which he was eventually discharged because of his fragile health. Thus, began the life of an itinerant, unconventional mystic poet, whose God was to be found in nature, as the life force, groping through darkness, only to slowly realize its existence and full potential. Rilke's salvation did not come from religion, which he called "the art of those who are uncreative" (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/rainer-maria-rilke>), but rather from art itself – which was an ongoing exploration of the strange interface between life and the incomprehensible mysteries.

Rilke did not shy away from the horrific, the dark, and the terrible to which humans and gods alike were prone, but rather saw this as the portal to another level of strength for those brave enough to face it. With a Pluto-Saturn square in his natal chart, he understood how diamonds were formed only under heat and pressure, and recognized this to be part of a fierce, divine intelligence hard-wired into this Earth-plane existence.

Among many who took their inspiration from Rilke, was Buddhist, deep thinker and environmental activist, Joanna Macy, who said (<https://www.garrisoninstitute.org/blog/the-force-of-the-storm/>):

There came a time in the middle and late 1970s when the enormity of what I was discovering as an environmental activist—especially about the widespread, long-term, devastating effects of nuclear power and weapons production—broke through my defenses. I struggled simply to take in what was happening to our world, and to sustain the gaze long enough to be of use. Rilke’s unwhining acceptance of the fact that, yes, a world can die, strengthened me in its straightforwardness and lack of self-pity.

I found that many of my colleagues and fellow citizens were silently suffering and suppressing a similar anguish. Buddhist teachings and my Judeo-Christian roots helped me understand this pain for the world. Rilke helped, too.

And referring specifically to lines from “Onto a Vast Plain,” Macy concludes:

Those lines murmured like mantras in my mind. I felt Rilke helping me face this time of terror and promise, as I moved out into the public arena with a form of group work based explicitly on the extent and depth of our social despair.

Now, like Macy, many of us find ourselves “struggling to take in what is happening to our world, and to sustain the gaze long enough to be of use,” seeking to craft a meaningful response to “the extent and depth of our social despair.” In this, as for Macy, Rilke can be our guide.

*You are not surprised at the force of the storm –
you have seen it growing.*

Way before this pandemic overtook us, anyone paying attention could see the various cracks in our system that have been widening since: the woefully inadequate capacity of a medical system based on profit to address a genuine public health issue; the economic and racial disparities that have rendered those least capable of coping with the greatest burden; the crass political opportunism that turns public crisis into a platform for deceitful boasting; the, in many cases, well-deserved fear and loathing of government that makes any kind of coordinated response to the pandemic a potential political liability; the gaping chasms between those who trust in the rigors of science and those who would rather make up their own version of reality, based on what they want to believe is true; the radical divergence and polarization of perspectives that make many household conversations potential battlefields and keep us locked in political gridlock, even in times of crisis; and on and on. None of this is new, but in the perfect storm of this Jupiter-Pluto-Saturn moment in history, the issues that have long plagued us are not writ large, as matters of literal life and death.

*The trees flee. Their flight
sets the boulevards streaming. And you know:
he whom they flee is the one
you move toward. All your senses
sing him, as you stand at the window.*

There is something fascinating about a storm. In 2009, I was living in a cabin in the Ozarks in the middle of an intense derecho, a mile-wide inland hurricane with tornadoes mixed in for good measure, that ripped through the 1000-acre land cooperative where I lived. Before I knew what I was doing, and before my partner at the time could reel me back in, I wandered out into the eerie green light in which the trees were literally fleeing – uprooting and flying through the forest. I watched the rest of the 20-minute storm standing at the window. When it was over, it left hundreds of uprooted trees and downed powerlines in its wake, damage it took us the better part of two years to mend. Miraculously, no one was hurt, and actual property damage was minimal, but I knew nonetheless that God – Rilke’s god – had spoken.

For those of us with eyes to see, I suspect we can see this same god speaking now. Beneath whatever outer carnage there might be, something incomprehensible is happening that will reorder this reality in the way that only a fierce god, working with harsh, but unequivocal divine intelligence, can do. Rilke’s invitation, as I hear it anyway, is to move toward this understanding of what is happening at the very heart of the storm.

*The weeks stood still in summer.
The trees’ blood rose. Now you feel
it wants to sink back
into the source of everything. You thought
you could trust that power
when you plucked the fruit:
now it becomes a riddle again
and you again a stranger.*

Astrologically, the weeks did stand still in summer as, one by one, all the major planets in this stellium went retrograde: Pluto on April 25, Ceres on April 29, Saturn on May 11, Jupiter on May 14, and now Mars on September 9. Retrograde planets, in general, are a turning back, a turning inward, a time out for rethinking, revisiting, re-imagining life, the world, our place in the world. Or in Rilke’s words, it is a time for sinking back into the source of everything, and in that place, remembering what is real, what is true, what would an authentic, meaningful response to the riddle of life look like now.

I have been inundated over the summer with clients attempting to do just that – contemplating major career changes, facing relational impasses that could no longer be ignored, and in general, just trying to figure out where they fit in this brave new world. Many felt like strangers, not just in the world, but in their own lives: How did I get here? And where do I go from here?

All of this, of course, has been exacerbated by the new “normal”: masks, social distancing, stay-at-home orders, loss of employment, kids unable to go back to school, travel plans on hold, people separated from loved ones, life as usual thrown into a tailspin. Nothing that was taken for granted can be any longer. The power behind the storm (however you might conceive of that) is perhaps not the same trustworthy power that grew the fruit on our tree of life in better days. Or is it? What is true? What is real? Where can I put my trust?

*Summer was like your house: you know
where each thing stood.*

*Now you must go out into your heart
as onto a vast plain. Now
the immense loneliness begins.*

The answer of course – or at least the answer that I gave in various ways to each of my clients – is within yourself, your core strength, your core values, your self-knowledge, the ability to deal with whatever life has handed you up until now. In your heart, in the vast plain of your heart, where floodwaters have come and gone, where life's challenges have fertilized your personal field of wisdom, where life's joys have sustained your field of dreams, this is where it all begins, and begins again. This is where the answers lie. This is where you start to move forward slowly once again with a life that has been transformed by what has come into your awareness during this time of sinking back into the source of everything.

Although many have resisted this retrograde summer – by defying health mandates, by taking refuge in the frenzied distraction of social media, by marching in the streets, by binge-watching streaming videos, by whatever the distraction of choice might have been – for those willing to turn toward the one from whom the others flee, that is to say, the Self, this has been, and continues to be, an opportunity in disguise, for self-re-invention.

The price of admission to this opportunity is the willingness to turn from the distracting noise of the world and face “the immense loneliness” – where each soul must journey to its final destination alone. Not many in our culture are prepared to do this, so for many, it is an opportunity lost. For some, no doubt, it has been a luxury that crisis could not afford. But for all, it is the guardian of the threshold to self-transformation and transformation of the world. If you can't be alone on the vast plain of your own heart, your only other choice is to be swept up in the madness of the storm as it floods your vast plain with the flotsam and jetsam of a culture unraveling.

*The days go numb, the wind
sucks the world from your senses like withered leaves.*

What is happening to our world? Theories abound, but does anyone really know. Or is the world we know being sucked from our senses, and beyond our capacity to make sense of it? For whom does the world itself, in so many places, and in so many ways, not feel like withering leaves?

Aside from the pandemic and its dismantling of our way of life; forest fires rage across the west, Australia and the Amazon, as dire warnings about climate change intensify, and the window for addressing it in any meaningful way grows shorter; income disparity has widened to the point where 70% of the world's population now own only 3% of its wealth (<https://borgenproject.org/biggest-issues-in-the-world/>); terrorism has become the new normal in many parts of the world, while government surveillance of citizens increases; political polarization has paralyzed governments in Europe and the US; governments have in general become less accountable to their citizens, and fewer people trust their governments; and the quality of life for many people, even here in the US continues to deteriorate.

The new 2020 Social Progress Index
(<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/opinion/united-states-social-progress.html>)
– which “collects 50 metrics of well-being — nutrition, safety, freedom, the

environment, health, education and more — to measure quality of life” in countries around the world, places the US only 28th (down from 19th in 2011), below countries like Estonia, Czech Republic, Cyprus and Greece. Children in the US now get an education roughly on a par with children in Uzbekistan and Mongolia; our health care is comparable to that of Chile, Jordan and Albania; and we rank 100 out of 163 countries measured in our response to discrimination against minorities. These statistics were all tabulated pre-pandemic, and according to the authors of the index, will surely move the US even farther down the scale.

How you feel about this will inevitably depend upon your political persuasion, your status in life, and perhaps even more fundamentally on when you were born and what historical perspective you can bring to this current moment in history.

Personally, after having lived through the Viet Nam War, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the ongoing wars in the Middle East; the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King; Watergate; the Iran-Contra scandal; the Cold War and MAD strategies of the Reagan Era; the nuclear meltdowns of Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and Fukushima; the Exxon Valdez and Deepwater oil spills; and countless other moments in history that we have survived and stumbled on from, I still can't help but feel the wind sucking the world from my sense like withered leaves.

This is not a world I thought I would live to see in my darkest imagination. To take it all in, however, on the vast plain of an open heart is to encounter the fierce and terrible face of God, not in the Christian sense, but in Rilke's understanding.

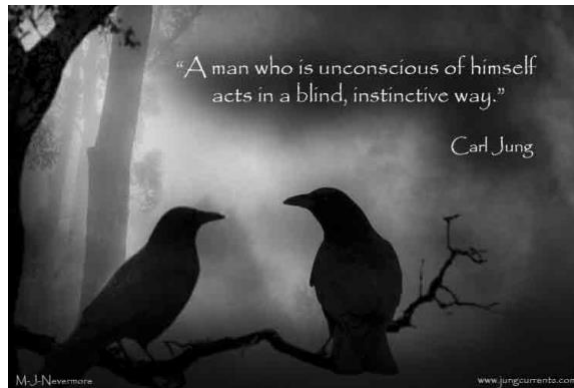
*Through the empty branches the sky remains.
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Be earth now, and evensong.
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Be modest now, like a thing
ripened until it is real,
so that he who began it all
can feel you when he reaches for you.*

Faced with this God, I can only feel modest now. I give thanks every day for the birds singing at our back patio bird feeders, for the mists that still bathe these mountains in wonder, for the love of my partner and others who know me well; for the breath that connects me to the sky; for the ground beneath my feet; and for the fierce intelligence that is ripening me, even when I resist it.

May we all be ripened enough, in the days ahead, to recognize the reaching of this fierce god, for us in our immense loneliness, to be the dark blessing that changes everything from the inside out.

Healing the Shadow

On 3 PM EST, Friday, November 6, I am scheduled to give a lecture at the online conference Breaking Down the Borders, sponsored by the International Academy of Astrology. The conference features 48 speakers from all over the world, and will be live over 3 days from November 6 – 8, 2020.



My lecture is entitled "Healing the Shadow" and is loosely based on an article I wrote for *The Mountain Astrologer* in 2010, but updated for a new audience in a time when the shadow is rampant in our culture and on the world stage:

Astrologers often seek to put a positive spin on our interpretations in order to help our clients feel better about themselves. But as we all know, everything in the birthchart also has its shadow side, and how willing we are to face and transmute the shadow will often determine what the ultimate expression of our astrological potential will be. Jung considered the shadow to be the guardian of the threshold to the process of self-actualization, so it will be important to make friends with all those aspects of ourselves that we have rejected, projected onto others, or simply been unable or unwilling to explore. In this lecture, we will identify where in the birthchart our shadows are most likely to show up, and talk about how to work with these shadow aspects of our personality in order to grow into our wholeness.

You can read more about the conference in general at <https://astrologyconference.org/> and watch a video of Chris Turner, conference organizer, interviewing me about the lecture at <https://vimeo.com/447730305>.

My Offerings

If I can be of help in orienting you to these challenging times, or dealing more specifically with a particular issue, you can schedule a **Consultation** with me at <https://www.astropoetics.com/2011/03/astrological-consultations-with-joe-landwehr.html>.

For those of you who have had a consultation with me and want to go into more depth, I offer a **Chakra Pattern Exploration** – 6 sessions around a particular pattern in your chart, tracing its history through your life, and around possibilities for actualizing the potential in the pattern in a more conscious, creative and empowering way. You can sign up at the same link above - <https://www.astropoetics.com/2011/03/astrological-consultations-with-joe-landwehr.html>. Just scroll down to the section of the page entitled Chakra Pattern Exploration.

If you are interested in learning the language of astrology, not as an abstract exercise, but within the context of your own life experience, I offer a comprehensive

class for beginners. You can start reading about the **Basic Course** here - <https://www.astropoetics.com/approach-to-learning.html>. Then just follow the links to the registration page.

If you are an astrologer, and wish to learn my more advanced system for integrating astrology and the chakra system, you can sign up for my next **Tracking the Soul Webinar Class** here - <https://www.astropoetics.com/tracking-the-soul-the-webinar-series.html>. The class will begin when I have six people interested.

Lastly, if you are looking for a good read, you can check out my **Books** here - https://joelandwehr.typepad.com/ancient_tower_press/book-catalog.html.

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Quotes of the Month

from various sources

In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion.

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*

We must become so alone, so utterly alone, that we withdraw into our innermost self. It is a way of bitter suffering. But then our solitude is overcome, we are no longer alone, for we find that our innermost self is the spirit, that it is God, the indivisible. And suddenly we find ourselves in the midst of the world, yet undisturbed by its multiplicity, for our innermost soul we know ourselves to be one with all being.

Hermann Hesse

Love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you. For those who are near you are far away . . . and this shows that the space around you is beginning to grow vast . . . be happy about your growth, in which of course you can't take anyone with you, and be gentle with those who stay behind . . . believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it.

Ranier Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*