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## Reflections of an Astrotherapist

*By Andrea Conlon*

In this article I want to share some of my experiences and thoughts about using astrology within the context of psychotherapy. My background is that I have an almost 40 year association with astrology, and about 25 with psychotherapy. So you see, I first started with astrology but further down the road decided to become a therapist. I did that to come up with an application of astrology that worked better for me than the single session model, although a portion of my practice is doing chart readings. Perhaps some of you are also wondering if this is the right path for you. Both psychological and evolutionary astrology inform my work, and so I'm a hybrid astrologer. I wouldn't want to live without either of these streams in modern astrology. In a nutshell, I use astrology to help me understand my clients, while I use psychotherapy to help my clients integrate those understandings into their lives. Astrology has a profound application to therapy because it gives us insight into how and when the psyche is under development. When birthchart structures are impacted by transits and progressions, we have insight into how a person is challenged to become more conscious.

I'm going to discuss how I do and don't use astrology in my practice, and I'll give you case examples. It is so tricky to speak in depth about people I work with, so please regard my examples as just a taste of how astrology informs my work.

Once astrology grabs you, it becomes a powerfully marking force in life. Given how astrology is viewed in our culture, we become outsiders on the fringe of the psycho-spiritual landscape. We share a common language that has a power and texture that we can *feel*, and it's hard to understand that the mainstream doesn't feel the same resonance with it that we do.

Astrology helps us make sense of our existence. It validates our lived experience, and that brings relief. It clarifies things that have been unformulated and unarticulated, making our experience more tolerable and more digestible, all the while bringing in myth, poetry and meaning to our lives. We use astrology to help us contain and understand our own personal suffering in a way that no human being can do for us. Astrology helps us articulate the "unthought known" (1). This is a term I'm borrowing

from the analyst Christopher Bollas, which means the things we intuit but are not quite conscious of; what we have somehow always known inside of us, but never consciously thought.

And one of the important values of astrology is to put into words these inchoate feelings. Astrology has an enormous capacity to mirror our existential dilemma. It gives us conscious awareness of our psychic landscape, of both our resources as well as our difficult issues, and thus it helps us live with more self-acceptance and less resistance to who we are. For me as a therapist, *the chart is an empathic entry point into my client's inner world*. How often have we as astrologers experienced the relief of recognition in our clients when we put something into words that they knew about themselves, but never had anyone quite recognize, validate and articulate for them.

Astrology and psychotherapy share this common ground in trying to cultivate in our clients a capacity to accept themselves and what they are experiencing. So often what we say to our clients in so many words is "Don't fight it", and then we describe the energy and process they are not to fight, but are to work with consciously.

Recently, a chart client, in the thick of transiting Pluto exactly square her Sun, said to me, "I'm anxious!" My response was, "If you weren't anxious, you would either not be alive and feeling, or you'd be some kind of ascended master." There was such a pulse of change and transformation going on for her, as well as downright ego pulverization. Does the ego like this? No, not really. I think we get anxious about a process like this. This was the larger context she needed to hear, which felt reassuring and gave her an orientation and the encouragement to face and work with this challenging cycle. As her astrologer, I could give her a context and send her on her way to work with the energy in whatever way she chooses. In contrast, if I was working with her as her therapist, I could go further. I would have the opportunity to help her midwife this death/rebirth process. It's the difference between identifying a pattern as an astrologer, and actually working with the pattern as a therapist.

I would venture to say that many of us feel that we are in virtual psychotherapy with astrology as we live our birthcharts, and as we follow our transits and progressions over a lifetime. The beauty of astrology is that it allows for this private kind of self-reflection that we can do all on our own.

As modern astrology evolves, there are a growing number of astrologers who are also trained as therapists. This is what I want to address with you, how astrology can be used as one's theoretical model in doing therapy, much as Jung drew on astrology in his own clinical work with patients. Jung was the first modern psychotherapist to integrate astrology into his work. We know this because he did the chart of every one of his patients. And we have several sources that corroborate this.

In fact, Liz Greene recently gave a seminar on the astrological references in the Red Book. She made the bold assertion that Jung's whole psychology arose out of astrology, and that the Red Book proves this! The depth of Jung's reliance on astrology is the great secret embedded in Jungian psychology – we astrologers know this, while most Jungian analysts don't really want to acknowledge this. This is still and may always be a controversial piece of Jung's legacy.

The mental health world is very diverse, and getting more diverse all the time. Shouldn't there be a place for a practitioner whose theoretical model is astrology? After all, the original meaning of psychology was knowledge of the soul, and astrology resonates so beautifully with that. For example, a therapist may want to work outside of the mainstream mental health world with its emphasis on stigmatizing diagnoses. Or, an astrologer may want to work within a looser, broader frame than the one in which astrology is generally practiced. In my case, it freed me up to work in a different way than the single session model.

However, in all my years of working with the integration of astrology and psychotherapy, one of my conclusions is that in certain ways this combination doesn't work all that well. For example, it generally doesn't work well to teach someone astrology in the context of their ongoing therapy when the person doesn't already know the language. Astrology and therapy are different modalities -- more different than I wanted them to be. And so my initial dream and inspiration of combining astrology and therapy unraveled. But in the unraveling, I've come to the realization that I cannot do therapy without astrology. It is *the* theoretical model that I use, and it is the ultimate authority that guides how I work with people. For me, the chart provides an empathic entry point into the psychic landscape of the person I am working with.

In spite of the difficulties of combining astrology and psychotherapy, it is possible and can be very fruitful. You just have to take some care.

One of the problems in combining the two is that we astrologers think we know things about ourselves and others, and we do, but only partially, on an archetypal level. Knowing someone on an archetypal level through their chart does not tell us about someone's particular lived experience, which is the all-important element in therapy. Here is where the shadow of astrology comes in, and it can become a kind of fundamentalist religion, where we think we know *everything* and it all fits so neatly into our system. And sometimes it's our clients who push us in this direction. What a burden it is to be scripted into a role of playing god -- to see all and know all -- when we really don't. Many years ago, I attended a talk by an astrologer and therapist from Colorado, who stated that one of the problems with astrology is an attempt to slay the mystery of life. I believe that he was describing the shadow of astrology and a kind of astrological hubris.

How reassuring and transforming it is to have a living experience that the universe is ensouled with meaning, and that our individual life reflects the larger cosmic order. Perhaps that is the defining philosophical orientation and common ground that we share as astrologers. I've already mentioned the shadow side in thinking that we know and see more than we actually do for a particular person. But an even more important issue is thinking *that identifying a pattern is a substitute for the working through of that pattern.*

While gaining insight about an astrological pattern in our chart can really boost our self-awareness, insight alone does not erase the difficulties in the pattern. And while we may wish for that to be the case, it is a false hope. That is work of another order and magnitude that may even be a life's work. It is sad but true that you cannot eliminate an emotional pattern, or a complex, or whatever you want to call it, simply by disliking it, or wishing it would leave your life.

It may surprise you that many people come into therapy thinking that the therapist is going to help get rid of unwanted feeling states, when actually the work is to help them bear to get *closer* to these feeling states and to get underneath the defenses which prevent feeling. It is such difficult work for us to feel. We would rather get diseases than feel, it is so threatening and such a burden! Instead, we organize our lives around not feeling painful emotions. To feel our pain and vulnerability means we are not in control. And I think that as a collective we are not very developed or evolved emotionally because we are so concerned about being in control. There is not much

support in the culture to work with our emotional beings, and a lot of strong messages to go unconscious in the face of our pain and helplessness.

People come to astrologers and therapists for generally the same thing, for help with life crises, but the methods of the two are very different. There is tremendous pressure put on astrologers to know things with certainty and to have quick answers.

For example, I recently did a one hour chart reading where, unbeknownst to me, I was expected to fix a complex family crisis. In this case, a teenage son was using drugs and lying about it to his parents. Afterwards, my client was unhappy with the session because I couldn't come up with an answer -- in that one hour session -- that would solve the family's problem and relieve her pain.

This is a glaring example of a common dynamic -- people who have the fantasy that the knowledge of astrology will make them OK, *without them having to do any work!* As if I had a magic wand that could produce the result. This was an extreme example of somebody who believes there is an answer that will give them harmony without having to do any work. The fantasy goes like this, that something -- astrology? -- will fix things so that life doesn't bring these problems. Well it isn't astrology or therapy, because both systems point to the fact that inner work needs to be done.

My last thought about this session is that I doubt that a therapist would be put under this same pressure. It would be unusual for someone to expect a therapist to solve this kind of problem in one session, although to be sure therapy clients also have the fantasy of getting fixed.

In psychotherapy there is more of a tradition of adopting an attitude of not understanding too quickly and not drawing conclusions, of hanging out in ambiguity and holding the space for your clients to discover what is true for themselves. But, if people come to me as a therapist knowing that I incorporate astrology in the work, they can derail this process and pressure me to go into an all-knowing place and deliver answers. For example, some want the astrology, but don't want to do the work of therapy. And in this situation I've had to tell them that astrology is one of my tools, but I won't be reading their chart during the session. In my experience it just doesn't work well.

As I've said before, astrology can give the illusion that because we can identify and articulate a pattern in the chart, that it is solved. But let's examine this: think of one of the most difficult aspects in your own chart. Does knowing astrology take away the pain of living with the aspect? Does it make your life effortless? I don't think so. It is a relief to name and understand something, but our difficult aspects are our life's work.

How freeing it is as a therapist to not be pressured to understand too quickly, to not come up with an interpretation, but instead to follow, track, and feel into how a person is living their chart over time. More and more I have respect for the underlying ambiguity and mystery that is our human life. This is a different mode of being with people which contrasts with the knowing place that astrologers come from, or are pressured to come from. This is the crux of the problem with the integration of astrology and psychotherapy that is troubling.

Now on the other hand, when I wear my astrologer hat and do a reading, there is a freedom and immediacy that I find exciting. I can say some things quite directly to a person from that astrologically informed place that I think could be helpful. The role of astrologer requires us to be authorities as interpreters of the symbols. When we wield our astrological sword, it is the nature of the system to have a strong idea of who the person is. It is very difficult for astrologers not to tell someone who they are. And of course, part of what is healing about astrology is discovering who you are within this system. In contrast, as a therapist you are more of a partner. You're in the trenches with them. A unifying principle is that, whether we are an astrologer or therapist, we are feeling into the person's life energy, and this is a powerful form of empathy to offer someone.

The most fundamental feature of using astrology as a therapist is how it provides a holding and containing function even without any overt use of astrology with the client. The client's chart holds *me* as the therapist, just as I am figuratively holding and containing the client. This is the bedrock of how I use astrology in therapy. To have a person's chart, even only a solar chart, can operate as an omen giver which I would not want to live without. I am using the chart to track themes and empathically resonate with my client. Using astrology as a therapist allows me to listen and speak with a certain depth and insight by having someone's birthchart in mind.

Here is one example. "Bob" came to me not knowing that I am an astrologer. While I did not ask him for his birth data, I did have the date of his birth so I did a solar chart. One day early in our work together I happened to glance at his chart. Now, I had looked at his chart before, but this morning I saw that his Sun and Neptune were in square in Leo and Scorpio. I thought, 'How did I miss seeing that before'? That was the very session that he began talking about his young life with his violent and abusive alcoholic father who then abandoned the family. He began to take me through the doorway of his childhood trauma in that session. I noted to myself the synchronicity of my finally *seeing* the aspect just before the session where he entered that piece of his life with me.

We can say many things about the Sun square Neptune, but what was most important in working with Bob was how his particular Sun/Neptune square played out in his life. Within an archetypal framework there is room for enormous ambiguity and variability. The Leo/Scorpio nature of his aspect gave it a particularly passionate and violent tone. We continued to circle around this theme as it came up for him and as he could tolerate it. When you use astrology in therapy, it is not about the grand sweeping interpretation where many themes might be identified and laid out as in a chart reading. Instead, you are typically working with just small bits of the chart that are charged with trauma, like this example shows.

Another way the chart provided guidance about "Bob" was through the use of the nodal axis. Since we're dealing with a solar chart, this is at a very simple level: south node Sagittarius, north node Gemini. The south node in Sag indicates an old issue around religion or a belief system that needs to be shed so the person can open to new ideas and perspectives through the north node in Gemini. "Bob" was raised as a Jehovah's Witness but at some point he broke away from them and experienced being shunned. Seeing that nodal axis and hearing about this part of his history guided my words and language. I was able to validate his path with great confidence -- that having the capacity to question his religion was an important part of his development. He was right on track with his soul's path of questioning religious dogma. Astrology, in contrast to most forms of psychotherapy, understands something trying to unfold in the soul, and I find the nodal axis particularly relevant here.

When a client comes to me who knows and understands astrology, I can use it explicitly as a shared language. However, with someone who doesn't know the language, I'm

more wary of using astrology explicitly in therapy. Typically, it doesn't work very well and it blocks the process for the reasons I've already discussed. But occasionally someone comes to me with such a burning desire to learn about their chart and incorporate it into their therapy, that it has felt creative and useful for me to teach them about their chart by linking themes in the chart to the issues they are bringing in.

That was the case with "Ann" who came to me because of my astrological orientation. She came to me in the throes of her boyfriend leaving her. Let me tell you about two distinct themes in her chart. First, Sun and Mercury are in Leo conjunct the ascendant. She also has a 12<sup>th</sup> house Cancer Moon. The chart gave us a language and metaphor to discuss a significant theme in her life and relationship. I might title this chart: "The danger of looking too good". What I mean by this is that the brightness and sheer power of these Leo planets on the ascendant gave her the capacity to appear strong and invincible, with a kind of bulletproof happy disposition that she herself was identified with. But her 12<sup>th</sup> house Cancer Moon told a different story. Its story was that of a girl who was raised by a severely alcoholic mother with whom she hadn't communicated in over 20 years. How this seemed to play out in her last relationship was that her boyfriend was attracted to the fun loving, bright, independent, and competent person she appeared to be, but when the more vulnerable side of her with emotional needs and wounds showed up, he didn't want that and left her. After a month or so of working together, Ann informed me that she was drinking a bottle of wine a night. No one would ever have guessed because she looked so good and competent.

We discussed how her Cancer Moon needed to be brought into her next relationship, needs and all. What a relief it was to honor and validate this extremely sensitive part of her. Her task was to listen to this part of herself, and allow its expression and needs.

Knowing about her 12<sup>th</sup> house Cancer Moon brought dignity, and validated a part of her she vaguely knew about, but feared and disliked. This is where astrology is so valuable, because when we see a symbol on a piece of paper, the system of astrology becomes an objective tool and mirror, rather than yet another person's biased or potentially distorted view of us. We didn't *need* astrology for her to integrate her Cancer Moon and gain consciousness of her emotional sensitivity and needs, but it quickly provided the critical insight that helped us focus on this dynamic.



One reason that I find astrology such a beautiful theoretical model to use in psychotherapy is that the planetary and zodiacal archetypes are non-pathologizing. Astrology is an antidote to traditional mental health's obsession with diagnosing and labeling people, which I think is downright destructive. I believe that the pathology model that the mental health field is saddled with is an artifact of the patriarchal mindset. Astrology gives us space to navigate beyond that limiting paradigm.

Here's an illustration. Think of a chart of a person with *five* planets in Scorpio, plus Scorpio rising! One of the simplest statements we could make about this chart is that it is a chart of emotional extremes. Now, a main feature of the diagnosis of borderline personality disorder (BPD) is emotional reactivity and instability. We can see the obvious overlap between a chart with five planets in Scorpio and this key feature of BPD. But let me ask you this: Is it pathological for the person living *this* chart to be an emotionally extreme person? No, it is not. The natural moods of the person living this chart would have a kind of volcanic intensity to them. But it is pathologizing and even demeaning to be diagnosed with borderline personality. It seems to me that our culture tends to pathologize extreme feeling states!

I know the person with this chart and, while going through a contentious divorce, her husband threw in her face that she is a borderline personality. As a person trying to help her, I would much rather work with her in the context of astrology to normalize, understand, and bring meaning to her essential nature, rather than work within a system that labels her borderline. How can that possibly help her sense of herself? And yes, the work of her life would be to learn to live with and manage being such an intensely emotional person, especially in a culture that is so quick to pathologize this quality. The beauty of astrology is that we are not telling people they have a Scorpio disorder, or a Capricorn disorder, or whatever. This distinction is critical.

At this point I'm going to shift focus. Up until now I've discussed how I use astrology in therapy. Now I'd like to focus on some guiding concepts in psychotherapy as well as the unique demands that doing therapy places on you. To choose to be a therapist, you have to be drawn to engage very directly with human suffering. That's because for therapeutic change to occur there has to be a deep emotional connection. This is what is meant by an attachment relationship in therapy.

In discerning whether becoming a therapist is right for you, an important question to answer for yourself is: how much attachment can I bear? Because when we work with people long term as a therapist, we are working within an attachment relationship. Toward the end of her life, one of my important mentors, who was my original model for working with this integration, decided that working as a single session astrologer really fit her personality better. She came to realize that she was too impatient to work with people in therapy, and circle around and around the same themes as people need to do in therapy.

Psychotherapy is a treatment that facilitates transformation through relationship. It is relationship that heals, whether it is the intimacy of marriage, close friendship, or psychotherapy. It is the attachment relationship that provides the anchor to then move toward what is difficult. So when I work with a client, this relational context is primary and the astrological information, while important, is secondary.

Attachment theory has recently gained much attention and prominence in the world of psychotherapy. It also has a great deal of scientific, neurobiological research behind it, if that sort of thing speaks to you. Attachment in the narrowest sense refers to the biologically driven need for the mother and baby to bond. But John Bowlby, a foundational figure in attachment theory, says that attachment is also an ongoing human need throughout life, rather than a childlike dependency need that we outgrow. How this connects to therapy is that patterns of attachment are malleable and can be changed, and that our early emotional injuries are most likely to be healed in an attachment relationship. The therapist can become a new attachment figure where fresh patterns of attachment can develop. These relationships are the context within which we learn to regulate emotions and where psychological development occurs.

At the center of being human, and at the center of relationships, is the regulation and dysregulation of emotional life. Astrology's profound mirroring capacity helps us to bear and to regulate our emotional life and reactivity.

Let me give an example of this. I worked with a woman briefly in therapy. In our last session I shared some information on a current cycle she was in, which was a transit of Neptune oppose the Sun. I described how this was a process of her ego boundaries opening up, and that she might be feeling lost and even discouraged. While transiting Neptune oppose the Sun is not a very ego enhancing time, it is a good time for spiritual

growth and reflection, and for creative work. This person has *seven* (!) planets in Virgo and was having all kinds of employment problems. As she sat across from me, she was vibrating with nervous agitation, as you can imagine you might see with someone with seven planets in Virgo. As I spoke about the transit, describing the energy and themes, I watched her calm down and her body settle and relax. And then she said, "This is so good to hear because that's what I'm feeling". The astrological interpretation reached inside of her and calmed the primal self within her. I think that whether we use astrology in therapy or in single session readings, we see this all the time. But as a therapist we have the opportunity to work in more depth by working longer term. By offering a containing relationship on an ongoing basis, we are facilitating the capacity to regulate and digest emotional material.

To me, the best of psychoanalytic theory focuses on the inevitable distressing emotions of our human life. There's no way around it and it's not pathological, it's just the way it is. Michael Eigen, a contemporary analyst, powerfully articulates this fact. He says that the baby part of us lives on in the adult. He states, "I believe the scream of infancy never stops. It is part of our beings all life long. We never stop hearing, if only in whispers, a screaming self." (2) He advocates letting our feeling storms speak, letting them have their say, without pressing the eject button too quickly.

Psychotherapy has a special resonance with the Moon, particularly in regards to attachment theory and our emotional life. Of course psychotherapy is not the sole province of the Moon, but the attachment relationship it pictures is the foundation of our personhood. I quote from the book *Attachment in Psychotherapy*, "Our first relationships of attachment provide the original blueprint of the mind." (3) *That is a Moon statement!*

The Moon's sign and aspects give us the archetypal flavor of our attachment issues, typically with our mother. But I have a problem about the way this is usually handled! The Moon's aspects cannot tell us if the mother was a good or bad mother. I believe that to be a damaging fallacy. Let's get out of this simplistic paradigm that if you have hard Moon aspects, you had bad mothering, or that you are a bad mother if your own child's chart contains hard Moon aspects. You cannot determine the exact capacities of the mother from the Moon's aspects. You only get the flavor of the archetypal attachment issues as they have come down through the mother's line.

I've been pondering this issue for many years now and I fear that astrology has inherited from the psychoanalytic model the blanket notion that our mothers are solely to blame for our existential angst. We have to be able to offer our clients who have hard Moon aspects something more than an indictment of their mothers. Some of the psychological astrology literature has the same flavor as Object Relations theory, where all roads seem to lead to maternal failure! Our human emotional woundedness is much more complex than what we lay at the feet of personal mothers. We do have to grieve and work through these primal relationships, but no parent can possibly get it right all the time.

To one degree or another we all bear the attachment trauma of unmet dependency needs. Simply to be an embodied human is traumatic. We come into this life alone, in utter and abject dependency. And we have to face life's uncertainty with its potential to lose those we love and are attached to at any moment.

For a final example, I'd like to show how I used astrology to frame the beginning therapy work using the current transits. "Ella" came to me in early March when Uranus was in early degrees of Aires and Pluto was in early degrees of Capricorn. Within a few sessions, I had her birth data and discovered to my amazement that her moon is at early degrees of Aires and Mars at early degrees of Capricorn. So picture an Aires Moon square Mars in Capricorn, with the Uranus/ Pluto square hitting it off. This is high voltage dramatic stuff! Ella was virtually exploding in my office with intense emotions. Her face contorted with expressions of agony. By the fourth session I said something like: "You are going through a period where your feelings have an intensity to them that you cannot hold back. Maybe it's like a geyser erupting, or like a raging fire! Let's try to make space in our work for this intensity to be known and understood. The theme is about change, and the release of pent up anger. The critical factor is how you work with it. But the message is clear that you can no longer hold these feelings back." My words and dramatic metaphors seemed to comfort her and mirror her felt experience.

So in conclusion, I use astrology with every client. I can't give you a method or a formula because it all depends on the needs of the client; with some clients it is foreground and with others it is background. I use astrology as a therapist in spite of it being a difficult and pioneering path. There is a cost in isolation in living on the fringe with astrology. *And*, the combination of astrology and psychotherapy necessitates

living with a paradox, because they are different modalities. But on the other hand, I could not live without astrology in doing therapy. In all my years of studying various theories of psychotherapy, I've never encountered one as illuminating as astrology. The power to name something has great value. Astrology helps us do that more accurately, more poetically, and more powerfully than any system I have encountered. *The chart is a powerful, empathic entry point for me as a therapist.* With every person I work with, there are underlying astrological stories and structures that I have very much in mind. For me it is the language of astrology more than any other theory that reaches in to find images and words for the unthought known.

1. Bollas, Christopher, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the **Unthought Known***, Columbia University Press, 1987
2. Eigen, Michael, *Emotional Storm*, Wesleyan University Press, 2005, p. 1.
3. Wallin, David J., *Attachment in Psychotherapy*, The Guilford Press, 2007, p. 84.