

Saturn Transits

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*Version 1.3 (posted on 26 April 2022)
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[Preface: This essay presumes a basic understanding of astrology as a symbolic system based in part on celestial geometry. If you don't know astrological cycle theory or what a transit is, what follows may not make much sense to you.]

For me as an astrologer, the most important technical elements I track in watching the evolution and unfolding of a personal life journey are Saturn transits. These alignments represent the structural component of our lives, much like the skeleton that gives our bodies shape and form. Saturn transits reveal the predictable but complex long-term schedule for natural change and (we hope) growth that is built into our life-experience.

Other transits modify that schedule — short-term transits from the inner planets Sun, Moon, Mercury, and Venus that correspond to day-to-day shifts, Mars transits that light the fire of action, Jupiter transits that show where expansion can occur, and the more rare and potent outer-planet transits of Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto that disrupt the schedule by introducing “wild-cards” — but Saturn transits show the central and ongoing challenges of building a life, overcoming obstacles, and learning patience in dealing with time.

All transits are best understood and interpreted as phase changes within different cycles, each of which is implicitly contained within the natal chart. Birth charts are a snapshot of a particular moment in time and space, “fixing” the positions of bodies and orientations in the heavens into a permanent mandala. That mandala is like a genetic code for the life-to-come, revealing symbolically the energetic circuitry (resources, habits, paradoxes, etc.) that will play out in the journey from birth to death.

The number of different cycles is determined by the significant fixed points in the natal chart. Younger astrologers tend use more of these points, sometimes filling the birth chart with planets, asteroids, comets, fixed stars, Arabic parts, nodes, etc. Older astrologers tend to use fewer significant points. Why? In my case, I want to keep the number of cycles and transits to the bare minimum, but even that results in overwhelming complexity. For me, the KISS rule applies here — “Keep it Simple, Stupid!”

When I prepare for a session with a client, I compile transit data for 60 different cycles — five moving bodies (Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto) and 12 natal points (ten planets and two angles). I also note selected transits to and

from the asteroid Chiron, but that's the only minor body I use. With each cycle containing multiple activations, that results in a "system" of 644 transits. Some of these are recurring. Jupiter transits repeat every 12 years, Saturn transits every 29. Outer-planet transits do not recur and happen only once in a lifetime, and some of those never activate in a given chart.

In any given year, 12 to 30 cycles from my system will be active in a chart as individual transits. That changes from year to year, and it's different for every chart. Some astrologers interpret each transit individually, and go over them one by one with the client. I don't do that. While I note the most important transits in any given time period and may highlight those in discussion, the overall pattern is more important to me. I try to discern the theme of a given time period and weave that into the conversation with my client.

Most compelling for me are Saturn conjunctions, squares, and oppositions to natal points. While I note Saturn trines, sextiles, and inconjuncts, my focus is on the quarterly phase changes.

I interpret all transits based on standard astrological technique, factoring in their signs, aspects, and house associations in the natal chart, but most important of all is their meaning within an unfolding cycle. For instance, if I see a Saturn square Mars transit, my interpretation will differ markedly based on whether that transit is waxing (first-quarter square at the seven-year mark of the cycle) or waning (last-quarter square at the 22-year point in the cycle).

Out of all the different Saturn cycles, four stand out in the natural hierarchy of importance:

- *Saturn-Sun life-purpose, meaning, and coherence*
- *Saturn-Moon..... emotional needs, habits, and security*
- *Saturn-Meridian ambition, mission, and life in the marketplace*
- *Saturn-Saturn aging and maturation*

Since each cycle has four major transits (at the quarters), these four cycles comprise 16 transits in all. To these, I'd add any Saturn conjunction to one of the other planets (which indicates the beginning of a non-critical but still significant Saturn cycle).

All told, that's 25 Saturn transits that occur every three decades, so the average is roughly one per year. Now, averages don't mean much, because charts are rarely distributed evenly. A given chart might have two or even three critical Saturn transits in a single year, and then none for the next two to three years. Seeing those patterns is part of understanding the process of any person's life.

OK, enough set-up. All that is background for what I want to share in this commentary, which is the experience we go through when we have Saturn transits (which we do pretty much all the time — it's rare in any chart for a given year to have no significant Saturn transits. In fact, it's so rare that it becomes noteworthy if and when it occurs.

What do we experience during a major Saturn transit? Well, that varies, obviously, but what's common for us all is that we're very likely to feel an increased sense of pressure and seriousness in whichever parts of our lives are "activated" by the transit. The majority of Saturn transits are "three-pass" events that occur over ten months, with a direct pass at the beginning, a longer retrograde pass in the middle, and a final direct pass at the end. Even single-pass Saturn transits tend to take almost a year to resolve.

The experience associated with a particular Saturn transit often begins up to six months before the transit is active. We can feel that something's coming down the pike, something important but probably not pleasant. It may not be as obvious as dark clouds on the horizon signaling a storm — more like a shift in the atmospheric pressure that precedes a change in the weather.

Once the first exact pass occurs and the transit is "officially" underway, we're confronted by *a problem we can't solve*. This is usually accompanied by the "hurry up and wait" syndrome. We feel an urgency to make whatever changes seem necessary or required to address whatever arose, but we can't. Our psyche suddenly gets "heavier." We may or may not have a sense of what must be done, but it hardly matters, since we feel stuck. We encounter obstacles from within ourselves, and — at the same time — conditions in our outer, real-life circumstances make the necessary changes seem impossible. For instance, we may possess insufficient resources — money, energy, or time — or face unpleasant responsibilities that must be dealt with before we can move forward. Or the seemingly obvious solutions carry downsides we definitely don't want.

Often, those blocking circumstances occur through experiences we've had before that were previously not a problem, but have now become difficult. The reason for this is that we need to change direction after seven years (the previous quarter of that Saturn cycle), but whatever structures we built or became habituated to in our lives need to be stopped or dismantled before we can make the turn to whatever is next. So, what was once OK no longer is.

Then Saturn goes retrograde and the middle phase of the transit begins. Whatever problems arose during the first pass seem to diminish. They may not go away entirely, but they stop pressing us so hard. This gives our unconscious time to hunt for solutions. The middle phase may last for two to five months, depending on the celestial mathematics of a particular transit.

The downside of the retrograde middle phase is that we may think that the problems are gone, as if by magic. Well, they're not gone. They're ruminating, biding their time, and they'll return in full force when the final direct pass happens at the end of the ten months. The last month or two of a three-pass Saturn transit are the "final exam." That's when we have to address the problems for real, do something, and get it right. In fairness, some long-term developmental challenges will require more than a year to address, but the last pass of a Saturn transit tends to feel climactic.

One specific feeling that often accompanies major Saturn transits is either fear of making a mistake or the vague anxiety that we're somehow screwed from the get-go. Saturn transits are almost never accompanied by an attitude of optimism. Pessimism is the general rule with Saturn transits. If the period of the transit is accompanied by significant Jupiter activity in our charts, we may see opportunities, but even then, taking advantage of them requires both work and patience. What we can reasonably expect is that nothing will be flowing or easy.

Over my 50 years as a working astrologer, I've noticed that people have a marked tendency to get stupid during major Saturn transits. We seem to have trouble seeing and implementing obvious solutions to our Saturn dilemmas, solutions that any reasonable person would choose. Time and again, I've seen this with clients, friends, and myself, and I chalk it up mostly to fear.

The beginning phase of any Saturn cycle (marked by a Saturn conjunction transit) is particularly important, since that's akin to spring planting. Whatever gets "seeded" in one's life at that point is what will grow later. I'd like to say that being conscious at the start of a Saturn cycle makes a big difference in seeding the garden, but that hasn't been my experience. Seemingly insignificant events or unimportant decisions often turn out to have powerful long-term ramifications. No one I've ever met is conscious enough to choose all the seeds that take root in the life-garden. Some other agency — destiny, fate, chance, whatever — is at work here. Where consciousness seems to matter is in recognizing later, but as soon as possible, what's growing in the garden.

I think it safe to say that almost no one "likes" Saturn transits. Some people are temperamentally or circumstantially better suited to handle them, but fun or enjoyment are typically not part of the process. Saturn transits are the hard work of investment that, if we do well and the gods smile, will pay off later, down the road.

At its core, Saturn is the marine drill sergeant, the tough coach, and the strict taskmaster within ourselves who pushes us to do better, and from whom we learn diligence and patience. Saturn reflects the parable of the tortoise and the hare: Slow and steady wins the race. As the I Ching says, perseverance furthers. If something feels easy or like a gift during a major Saturn transit (or a bunch of them all at once...), it's probably a trick. Don't be conned. Read the fine print before making deals with the devil, and then walk away from the deal, because any shortcut will cost you dearly in the long run.

Saturn is my favorite symbol in astrology, despite the harsh fact that I don't like my own Saturn any more than anyone else likes theirs. Our Saturn failures are many, but our Saturn victories are immensely satisfying, in part because they are hard-won.

And by the way, Saturn does not say, never give up. There are phases within each Saturn cycle, particularly the first and second quarters, where we have to

fight and be tough in pushing forward, whether the odds are with or against us, and even if we seem to be losing. There are also times in a Saturn cycle — the last or winter quarter — where letting go is entirely appropriate. That letting go includes past victories as well as past failures.

That's why knowing where we are in a given Saturn cycle is meaningful, so we can tell what's required from us to move forward. And, just to be absolutely clear, one doesn't need astrology to know this. Astrology can sometimes help to enhance our clarity and remind us about the custom-tailored realities of our personal journeys, but being conscious in our lives about what we can change and what we can't is the real challenge.

The one further note I'd add for this commentary is that narcissists need to stop blaming others for their troubles, and neurotics need to be kinder and more gentle toward themselves. Amen.