

Neptune and Pluto in America, 2020-2023

by Bill Herbst

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In the early years of this decade, the chart for the USA as a nation is undergoing two separate but simultaneous alignments of great symbolic significance.

The first event involves two back-to-back Pluto transits: In 2020 and 2021, Pluto opposes the USA's natal Mercury, which is followed by America's Pluto Return from 2021 through 2023. So, the entire period of this first event is four years, from 2020 through 2023. I've already written a series of four commentaries about the Pluto Return and its implications.

The second event is two overlapping Neptune transits that occur over the three years from 2020 through 2022 — Neptune in the heavens squares the USA's natal Mars while it opposes its own natal position in the birth chart. This activates the natal square between those two planetary symbols in the USA chart, which, along with the Sun-Saturn square, are the two most significant interplanetary aspects in the chart. Both squares are nearly exact, which increases their already major symbolic importance. In addition, they are quite contradictory in their respective interpretations, which indicates and fleshes out much of the complexity and paradoxical nature of the American character — Americans are young and old simultaneously, practical and idealistic, material and spiritual, cautious and wild, defensive and aggressive. All these seeming contradictions coexist in the American character and are frequently in conflict.

Taken together, these four transits align into two paired events that represent a major crossroads in American life, yet another watershed moment of past and future, of who we have been and who we may become, whether for better or worse. Basically, we've arrived again at a reckoning that will be extremely difficult to navigate, like a huge ship passing through a narrow and treacherous strait, and with no maps to improve our chances of safe passage through the turbulent bottleneck. Very real danger exists that the ship might be capsized or ripped open and sink. That metaphor is too literal, though, because the forces that threaten us are mostly not external, but within ourselves. If the ship goes down, it will be because we sink it.

Interpreting the four transits along typical textbook lines — what may happen, where it could happen, and how all that might unfold — is daunting. As astrologers, we're dealing with four of the ten major planets, six of the twelve zodiacal signs, and eight of twelve houses. Well, friends, that's way too much.

Literally hundreds, if not thousands, of possible manifestations can be gleaned from the symbolism of these transits using standard and very basic astrological techniques. So, I'm not going to do that. Instead, I'll discuss the implications of where we are and what we're going through right now, in 2021, and over the two years ahead, from a larger perspective. Basically, I have a single rather simple point to make, although it will take me another page or two to set it up.

Planets in astrology (by which I mean the major bodies of our solar system) are understood by astrologers (not all astrologers probably, but at least by me) as symbolic archetypes for urges or motivations. In a crude simile, they are akin to the different functional systems in a vehicle — the engine, transmission, drive train, fuel delivery and regulation, electrical system, brakes, steering, struts or shock absorbers, frame and body, etc. They're much more than that, but that metaphor is a crude beginning. For instance, the Sun represents the engine of the vehicle. The Moon is cooling/lubrication and transmission — oil, water, anti-freeze, and a set of gears that keeps the engine from working too hard at different speeds. Mercury might be considered as wheels, tires, and steering. Mars is the starter and accelerator. Saturn is the brakes, frame, and body. And so on.

The zodiac of signs shows how these components are built and operate. For instance, the Sun in Aries would be like the engine in a quarter-mile, nitro-fueled dragster, capable of stunning speed, but only for short distances. The Sun in Virgo would be a four-cylinder Honda or Toyota engine, not particularly powerful but extremely efficient, and able to run forever at moderate highway speeds. A Scorpio Sun might be like the engine in an unmarked police car, powerful but hidden. Sun in Capricorn would be a big truck or off-road four-wheel drive engine — not good for high speeds, but great for carrying cargo or climbing hills. And so on.

Houses aren't part of the vehicle at all. They provide GPS maps for where the driver of the vehicle might want to go — to the store for groceries or halfway around the world. Houses tell us the different arenas (both tangible and intangible) where the urges of the planets will most naturally be expressed.

In short, planets tell us WHAT, signs tell us HOW, and houses tell us WHERE.

But back to planets. Part of what differentiates modern astrology from that of earlier epochs is the discovery of the outer planets. Previously, we knew only about bodies we could see in the heavens, those that are relatively close to the Sun. Over the past three centuries, however, we've discovered lots of bodies invisible to the naked eye — literally thousands of them — almost all of which are much further from the Sun. For reasons too complicated to go into here, 20th century person-centered astrology settled on three of these bodies — Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto — which were added to the seven we already knew. Yes, I understand that Pluto has been demoted by astronomers to minor planet status, but its symbolic importance in astrology remains undiminished.

All the outer bodies of our solar system exist in a kind of limbo zone. While they're technically still part of the solar system in orbit around our star, they're so far from the Sun that they're almost as affected by the gravitational pull from the center of our galaxy. If they were a little further away, they'd simply leave the solar system and zoom off toward galactic central. Symbolically, this means that they represent a kind of bridge between the Sun and the Milky Way — like a doorway between whatever solar consciousness means and the infinitely larger perspective of galactic consciousness.

Before we discovered them, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto (and all the other asteroids, comets, and minor planets we've now found) were part of humanity's collective unconscious. Now that we've found them, they're intruding into the conscious dimension of our lives. And yet, they are still beyond the ordinary levels of human awareness, will, and intention. For lack of a better word, they are transformative. At some point in our future evolution (should humanity survive long enough), we might come to understand how to harness or use these motivational energies. For now, however, they remain wild-cards, like jokers in the deck. We understand some about them, but not much. In essence, we are like children playing with matches, fascinated by the powers they bring, but as likely to burn down the house as create something wonderful with them. And the one thing that is painfully obvious about the three outer planets is that they are quite beyond our command. Oh, we employ them, but we don't control the outcomes of how we use them. We try, of course, but we're a long way from understanding how to use these energies without unforeseen consequences, unintended repercussions, and major blowback.

What's happening in America over the four years from 2020 through 2023 is that the two outermost planets — Neptune and Pluto — are as powerful inside us as they ever have been before. That is both a very big deal and a terribly dangerous situation.

At the universal level, Neptune is the return to Oneness, the urge to get back home to Cosmic Central, to reunify everything from the extreme differentiation of the material world. And that's lovely: *We are all One. Om Shanti.*

At the human level, however, Neptune tends to be experienced by us as perfect but unreachable ideals, and too often as compulsive (or even addictive) dreams, fantasies, illusions, escapism, and the complete inability to distinguish reality from non-reality. We are easily fooled by what appears to us to be real but isn't. That caution is echoed by the old saying, "*If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him, for he isn't the true Buddha.*" Sound advice, but not likely to be heeded in western culture, particularly here in America, and most especially not now.

At the universal level, Pluto is the urge (and the means) to destroy what's old and worn-out, so as to clear the decks and pave the way to allow something new and better to get born. It's the death-and-rebirth symbolism of the phoenix rising from its own ashes. And that's wonderful. It's how Nature works to renew itself time and again in the cosmic dance of Destruction and Creation.

At the human level, however, Pluto tends to be experienced as intoxication by and obsession with raw power, with domination, and even with cruelty and lack of care for the suffering of others. For small-minded, immature, and fallible human beings (which includes most of us at times, to one degree or another), the Plutonian urge is too often expressed as *"I got mine, so fuck you."*

Consider nuclear power. Our figuring out how to release the awesome energy of the atom synchronized in time with our discovery of Pluto and was central to its symbolic meaning. Nuclear energy is a double-edged sword — the dragon eating its own tail. As a power source, it yields clean and nearly infinite power. But its radioactivity is deadly. Do we understand how to produce nuclear energy safely? *Yes*. Can we do so? *Apparently not*.

Three-Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima reveal all too plainly that human fallibility cannot be eradicated. And the lack of concern among those in power is deeply embedded. Not only are all the fish in the Pacific Ocean now irradiated because of the Fukushima disaster, but more than one million tons of radioactive water from the meltdown are now being dumped into the Pacific. Corporate and governmental claims that the water has been "treated" and "filtered" to be safe are so bogus as to be laughable. The oceans are the cradle of all life on earth, yet we regard them as a sewer for our toxic waste. Kill the oceans, and it's death with no rebirth.

The difficulties of Neptune and Pluto apply to everyone across the entire political, cultural, and even spiritual spectra. I'm not pointing my finger only at Corporate America or the QAnon folks and the rest of the Right Wing Fever Swamp. Yeah, they're crazy all right, but they're not the only ones. This madness threatens all of us in America — centrists, liberals, progressives, conservatives, libertarians and greens, capitalists and socialists, those who are woke and those who are asleep. Some people in every camp are able to resist or fight off infection better than others, but no one is completely immune to the insanity. This has been a long time in the making, and now it's a juggernaut.

The basic symbolic meanings of Neptune and Pluto are fine. Conceivably, they could help us transform humanity by reducing needless suffering and increasing joy. The problem is that we're not far enough along as a species to use the gifts those archetypes offer in ways that will help us evolve, move forward, and "solve" problems by coming together and letting go of old ways of being.

Is there any chance at all that enough of us might rise to the occasion and get our heads screwed on straight and our hearts open enough to allow civilization to weather the terrible storm we've created? I have my doubts, but we won't know for sure any time soon.

Meanwhile, do the best you can. There's no vaccine for the insanity pandemic. Kindness and compassion for yourself and others may or may not provide much relief, but that's about the only palliative medicine we have.