

To See Oneself in Others

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The initial exact square between Uranus and Pluto occurs this month—on June 24th, 2012. That specific day is not particularly significant astrologically in the context of an outer-planet cycle with a 140-year duration, but—considered as a boundary—this month holds great symbolic meaning. June’s event is the first of seven exact back-and-forth passes that will comprise the 90° first-quarter square occurring between Uranus and Pluto from now through March, 2015.

This initial event signifies that our long period of waiting is finally over. We have arrived at the portal through which a Brave New World awaits. Although we can’t yet know how fast, how completely, or in what precise forms the many shocks implied by this transit of the Uranus-Pluto cycle will come down the pike to cause the status quo of business-as-usual to go belly up in a domino-chain cascade of institutional collapse (three years? five years? ten years?), I felt that this month was a fitting time to write a Big Picture commentary to commemorate the occasion by reminding us again what the core challenge of this decade truly is, at least in the ways I understand it.

Because America is now an artificial and ersatz culture that, to some extent, sentimentalizes an imaginary return to times past that never were, we prefer myth—with its sweet reiteration of Currier & Ives prints and Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* cover paintings—to actual history, which is altogether too paradoxical, harsh, and revealing about our failings.

To suggest that the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and our forebears are “sanitized” is only partially correct, but it is certainly true that our sepia-toned movie-set snapshots of the past are more touch-up artistry than memory, more escapist idealizing than true recollection.

The other side to this Luddite longing for a past that never existed is an even more bizarre dream fueled by the techno-consumerist propaganda hologram of television advertising, which deludes us into, if not actually believing, at least “buying” the false promise that by acquiring enough smart phones, flat-screen TVs, and new cars, we can social network ourselves into nirvana, rather than

complete the cycle of total alienation from each other that has been underway in America for the past century.

As long as we stay safely removed from others in the various isolating boxes of our homes, cars, and office cubicles, we'll be safe and happy because our toys will make it so. In fairness, of course, advertising does present us in groups (because happiness with others is part of the dream), but mostly as demographic clones—young people drinking in bars and dancing at parties, suburban families and neighbors united around the holiday barbecue, senior citizens clustered together on picturesque group travel excursions. The only time we see dissimilar individuals gathered together on television is when their potentially conflicting values and beliefs, their biases and fear-based anxieties, are white-washed by the fact that they all work for the same mega-corporation—Southwest Airlines, Mobil/Exxon, GE, Best Buy, etc. In these little advertising dramas, the public relations marketers show us the illusion of happy, committed workers, all of whom wear the same hardhat or logo'ed shirt, to convince a rube public of the saintliness of corporate efforts to support the greater good and make a better world for all, which is about 99% crap.

Escape into either the heartfelt goodness of a simpler past that never was or the social conscience of an equally illusory future that will never be (based as it is on the idea of corporations-as-family, which is as big a lie as I can imagine) are two sides of the same coin: imagining a world where disagreement, conflicting beliefs, fear of others, and domination-by-force as a basic mode of social interaction, government, and commerce (whether in the marketplace of goods or ideas) have all magically vanished. The disconcerting truth is that we are an aggressive species by biology and cultural conditioning.

In those image-based mythic worlds that constitute the current propaganda hologram, we need not struggle to master the most basic and profoundly difficult spiritual achievements to which humankind is forever challenged, namely, **to see oneself in others**, to work together to achieve common ends despite all the forces pulling us apart, and to get along with people in a generally peaceful and nonviolent manner through pragmatic fellowship.

The best guess I can cobble together as I peer out into the fog of the future (along with everyone else, since none of us knows with any certainty what precise shape the future will take), is that for many people, real life over the next century will contain some elements of both mythic mirages. Will we be living in caves, working in the fields from dawn to dusk just to scrape together enough sustenance to survive? I doubt it. But I also doubt the techno-dreams of flying cars or a completely solar-powered planet. I'll bet on some combination of past and future dreams turning out to be true in a crazy-quilt assemblage of parts and

pieces embraced because of availability and necessity. I also believe that our core reality will not be comprised primarily of either fantasy.

For example, any realistic scenario probably includes an increased focus of economics on smaller local communities and on big cities where neighborhoods become centers of commerce and livelihood, plus a decrease in long-distance travel, especially by air. I can conceive that airlines will still exist, but with fewer flights and much more expensive fares. Even in the heyday of global corporate capitalism, airlines were never especially viable as economic engines of profit. From this point on, as fuel costs rise and social unrest increases, air travel for the masses will likely shrink. Same with automobiles and long-distance travel by car. Yes, that will almost certainly still exist in some form, but the costs of running vehicles and maintaining the infrastructure of highways and bridges may grow beyond our collective ability to afford. Of course, we will give up airplanes long before we give up cars, simply because our love affair with the automobile and the personal freedom it implies are so deeply embedded in our psyches. But give it up we will, however gradually and grudgingly. On the other hand, railroads may once again prosper, not so much by choice as by pragmatic necessity.

Still, this commentary is not about how life will look 10, 25, or 50 years ahead. Uranus and Pluto no doubt have some major surprises in store for us in that regard.

No, this commentary is about the major challenges that face us in adapting to whatever shape life takes from here on out—the psychological, social, and even spiritual maturation that the future will almost certainly require from us if humans are to continue as a thriving species on this planet. Those challenges are not paths we will walk down by choice. No, the only reason we will collectively take on the challenges of finding better ways to get along with each other with any serious intention is because we are compelled to do so by harsh circumstance. And, in terms of aspiration and evolution, that is the functional purpose of the 2010s, to make it necessary that we accelerate the process of human maturation beyond its current snail's pace.

Throughout the 10,000-or-so years of civilization, we haven't learned much about civility. Oh sure, we've embraced many supposedly "civilized" features: laws, moral frameworks, rules of behavior, formal rituals, stratified status through often rigidly-defined classes, and ever-changing standards for whatever constitutes social "appropriateness" from one era to the next. But these are all relatively superficial expressions of civility; they don't approach the heart of the matter, which is, as I wrote above, **the ability to see oneself in others**. And not just people we like. No, I mean recognizing facets of oneself in everyone. Humans certainly, but also all the other myriad forms of life that inhabit the earth, including the biosphere itself. The days of our seeing this planet as

nothing more than a large warehouse of lifeless resources to be plumbed as we wish for our own use are coming to an end. The great truth of ecology—that everything is connected to everything else and works in harmony—is likely to be demonstrated with more profound impact than ever before. We will find it necessary to learn that messing with the balance of things (as if balance does not matter) wreaks havoc that sooner or later harms us.

Civilization has too often worked not to foster our empathy with others, but instead, to mask or dress up in nice clothes those fundamental parts of ourselves that are clearly uncivilized—our dark shadow aspects, our back sides: primitive, raw, violent, born of fear and desire. For instance, both sports and capitalism embrace and encourage competition, which is a watered down form of warfare. OK, that's a given. But Bill, these are group endeavors; don't they also encourage cooperation and "togetherness" by promoting team spirit and working as a unit, toward achieving a common goal? Of course, but *only* insofar as that cooperation helps to achieve the end result of competitive victory. The point of the game—whether in sports or in business—remains vanquishing an opponent, defeating the "other." The goal in post-modern corporate capitalism is certainly not equitable sharing of resources or development of cooperation for the greater good, but only to help one's chosen "in-group" defeat the "out-group." No, in its current exaggerated form, capitalism is still us-versus-them empire-building. Perversely, the point of competition is to destroy the competition.

Capitalism is also built on the bedrock of ownership and domination—whatever I have, inherit, or can acquire for myself alone by bringing that resource under my domination and control (whether ethically or not) and then leveraging the power it gives me to build my empire (whether tiny or huge) in the marketplace of commerce. This possessiveness is considered "natural," inevitable, and correct in human nature, and extolled as a great virtue, rather than as the brief phase of childhood development (often called "the terrible twos") where a young child seeks to substantiate, secure, and extend his or her identity by commanding everything and everyone in the surrounding environment. That's what ownership truly is, but culture and commerce don't see it that way. They would happily keep all of us locked into "the terrible twos" forever, rather than helping us outgrow that childish phase of crude domination.

Sadly, socialism and communism ("communalism") in the forms they've been tried seem to work no better. Though they give lip service to sensitivity toward and cooperation with others, they tend to do so through the agency of social pressure—forced conformity of behavior accompanied by implied or real threats of ostracism. Unfortunately, we can't train or force anyone to become more empathic with others, since that quality is not primarily a set of learned behaviors, but rather an inner orientation of the heart, and one that flowers in only the most mature gardens.

I have no naïve expectations that humanity will ever transcend the shadow aspects of so-called "human nature"—the slings and arrows of life can easily cause even the best of us to regress into greed, domination, or even violence. These dysfunctional attitudes wait to pounce on us as reactions to hurt, loss, and fear, spawning alienated emotions such as rage, revenge, or hatred that destroy empathy. Such insensitivity to others occurs both as sporadic reactions and as more permanent, habitual programming. At any given moment on planet Earth, some human beings are acting out the worst impulses of our nature, frequently with other human beings as the targets of their darkest impulses. That is not likely to ever magically go away.

But our approach to and understanding of our shadow can change, and needs to. To model goodness is one thing. To insist on it is something else. Repression of the inevitable serves only to concentrate it. By insisting on goodness, we cause what is commonly called evil to intensify and eventually squeeze out of ourselves through the cracks, as it were. We become what we deny. But since culture and society tend to lobby so hard for our being "good," we tend to find it much easier to see and acknowledge in others rather than in ourselves.

Let me be clear: I'm not suggesting that every human being must become 100% empathically One with Everything Else all the time. It's enough that we get glimpses of that profound connectedness in momentary flashes, but with sufficient frequency and recurring impact to allow us to remember it much during our hard times. Nor am I implying that we can or should try to root out evil in ourselves and others. No, violence in all its many forms will continue to be part of what and who we are, collectively and individually. As it exists now, however, civilization does not help us manage our shadow.

My focus here is on two specific arenas of sharing: families and communities. These two fields of experience will most certainly be of particular importance in the years and decades ahead. Along with relationships between two individuals in pair bonds, families and communities have been cornerstones of human sharing throughout history. The technological advances of the past two centuries, however, have caused mass culture to supplant and even replace these smaller group alignments. Over my lifetime, increased transportation, consumer-based economies, and television have resulted in greater conformity, so that communities have lost much of their regional and local distinctions. This is especially true in America, more so than in any other nation or culture I can think of. What made individual communities different and unique has been at least partially (but often substantially) removed from their core identities by the urgent push to make everything an economic commodity. In a real sense, group identities are no longer determined by the confluence of actual circumstances,

but the distorted memories of what we once were, most often through “branding.”

For example, we no longer have “fishing towns” along our coasts and waterways. What we now have are towns that advertise the *imagery* of fishing—water, seafood, boats, etc.—to attract tourism. Actual fishing is done by far fewer individuals these days, usually because the precipitous decline in numbers of fish in rivers and oceans has largely destroyed fishing as a livelihood. In other towns, the shift occurred because small-boat family fishing was replaced by large trawler-based corporate fishing. As a result, very few individuals in these “fishing towns” actually make their livings by fishing anymore. The boats in the harbor have been outnumbered by shops in the mall that sell fishing gear or memorabilia and by restaurants offering trucked-in fish, since the local catch is reserved for megacorporate use. For the towns themselves, fishing has become an economic abstraction—a myth based on images—rather than a real way of life.

In the years and decades ahead, disintegrating economic and social circumstances are likely to make necessary our giving up at least some, but at times much, of our current alienation—our separateness and apparent individual freedom—however convenient and comfortable those may seem because we’re habituated to them. As the overgrown institutions of culture collapse, we will need to cooperate with others considerably more than we do now, probably in smaller and more local settings that are community-based.

My one significant caveat on this view of what’s likely to unfold is that all bets are off if humanity suffers one or more of the “ultimate” catastrophes over the coming years that people fearfully regard as apocalyptic. By that, I mean some global disaster that wipes out a majority of the human population and/or trashes the surface of the earth on which we depend for sustenance. An event that unleashes massive radiation (through war or accident) could do this, as could a global pandemic or world-wide famine that kills off billions, or a sufficiently large meteor or asteroid slamming into the earth. If we are all wiped out, then maturity becomes a moot point. And if many or most of us are suddenly removed, the necessary evolution of our empathic social skills at the heart of this commentary may be postponed for a very long time to come.

With the exception of nuclear radiation, which is a recent human-made addition to lexicon of apocalypse, the other kinds of catastrophes have a long history of lurking deep in our semi-conscious anxieties. So far in our brief time on this planet, our species has managed to dodge any of those bullets. In my public writing, I’ve chosen mostly to consider these dire possibilities indirectly if at all. And I mention them now only because they are wild cards in the deck that would

alter our future in ways we cannot conceive. I hope that none of those various possibilities comes to pass.

The pragmatic challenge in front of us is to collectively grow up into at least young adulthood and finally leave behind the disturbed adolescence through which we have collectively slogged throughout the past 10,000 years, which saw the onset and development of the kind of civilization now nearing its close.

We need to find better ways to live among and work with other human beings, and in increased harmony with all other life forms on this planet. If we don't (or can't), our future may be, to say the least, not so rosy. Even a partial movement in that direction, however, will increase our chances of creating a future worth having. I don't know what our chances are of the former versus the latter, but I know which one I'd vote for.