

Experience and Ethics: Reflections on Synastry

by Brian Clark

Synastry is a natural feature of all astrological work. Inevitably, clients ask a question about their partner: "Are we compatible?" or "Can you look at my partner's chart for me?" Concerned parents seek insight through their child's horoscope so they can better understand their relationship. Or a client wants to know about the transits to a friend's chart to find out what's going on between them. Yet, even before we encounter this inevitable question about the other, synastry is quietly in play in the relationship between us as astrologers and our client or friend — it is present every time we read another person's horoscope.

Early in my career, I was giving an afternoon seminar on the Lunation Cycle, having drawn the eight phases on the blackboard along with some keywords. At the break, one of the participants, who had been correcting me throughout the first session, came up to the board, erased my illustration, and drew a new diagram, announcing that his representation was easier to understand. Taken aback, I muttered, "Where is *your* Mercury?" He replied, "18 degrees of Cancer." I smiled and moved away. Mine is at 18° Libra. I had just experienced a textbook case of synastry — a simple lesson for me about how exasperating my Mercury in air must be at times to those who think in dissimilar ways. An arising acceptance of the situation displaced my feelings of annoyance; it highlighted for me how synastry offers us a lens to see through temperamental differences and, in doing so, how this can lead to tolerance and acceptance in relationship.

Synastry, this cosmic guidebook to interrelationships, is ever present in each relationship, no matter how momentary or long-lasting the interaction. It is not consciously available if we do not have access to another's horoscope; however, the archetypal and temperamental interactions still take place. When preparing the consultation, synastry is immediately accessible and of great value.

Implicit in synastry is how we engage and experience relationship. Although we might not consider this, we are in a type of relationship with the person whose horoscope we are reading or the student we are teaching. No matter how objective, impartial, or nonjudgmental we are, we respond to their personal stories and horoscopic symbols from our own images and experiences. Even if the person whose chart we are reading is not present, the horoscope symbols engage us in our own patterns, prejudices, and narratives. Therefore, one of the first unspoken considerations in reading a chart or in preparing for an astrological consultation is to take into account the synastry between us and our client to see how this may highlight some potential reactions to our client.

Experience has shown me that in preparing for any chart consultation, awareness of difficult inter-aspects between my chart and the client's helps to flag potential areas of concern and complications that might arise between us. It is as if the inter-aspects are the playing field where transference and projection are more liable to surface. Hence, synastry is not just the compilation of astrological techniques for analyzing relationship, but an art — and one that highlights our participation both as astrologer and as personality.

We could reflect on two distinct levels of synastry: One is the correlation between the symbols of the two horoscopes, and the other is the relational bond formed between the astrologer & as the reader of the chart & and the person we are reading for. In other words, there is a relationship between the two charts and also the two people. We can read any horoscope and interpret its symbols, but when we are participating with the person for whom we are reading, a broader, deeper understanding is evoked through the interaction. When we read a horoscope without any relationship with the person who owns the chart, our astrological signatures are still contrasted to theirs, whether we are aware of this or not. This reading is most likely more information-based and less personal. However, when a trusting and interactive relationship develops between astrologer and client, the symbols of the horoscope become more animated and revealing.

In applying the art of synastry to working with couples, groups, or families, we are faced with finding an ethical framework that honors the complexity of the process. Engaging in the act of chart comparison for a couple or the creation of their composite chart brings in another relational dynamic, which is the formation of a triangle and the possible collusion with one of the partners that excludes the other. This is emphasized if we have already consulted with one of the partners and forged an alliance. It can be especially complicated if we are seeing only one partner, yet are working with the horoscopes of both. Unintentionally, we may become complicit with the partner we are seeing. When our own horoscope is taken into account in the context of each of the partners and their composite chart, it can flag many issues for consideration, such as how we feel more aligned with one partner than the other, or where our own relational history might be stirred.

Synastry appreciates the archetypal nature and patterning of relationships, and acknowledges the synergetic force that exists between humans, which is an enormously satisfying area of astrological practice when we find our *right* approach. By *right* approach, I mean setting appropriate boundaries, taking ethics into consideration, cultivating a reflective style, and recognizing the value of learning on the job because it is in the practical application of astrology that we are confronted with the ethical undertones of what we perceive in the horoscope.

A composite chart can exist between us and anyone we choose, but experience has taught me that, while the composite chart is enormously valuable in portraying the dynamics of a relationship, it is only brought to life when these two individuals combine and are committed to the bond. It is a map of a merger and shows possibilities and patterns; when the connection is mutual, then the composite energies become potential opportunities. For this reason, I discuss a composite chart only if both partners are in attendance.

At the beginning of my astrological practice, I was uncomfortable with the pressure clients often placed upon me to discuss their partner's or child's chart when that person was not present. This prompted me to set some boundaries for in_my practice & such as not referring to another's horoscope if they are not present & which I could then communicate to clients. I would explain to the client that relationship dynamics can be gleaned from their own horoscope, pointing out my ethical position of not interpreting another's chart if they are not there. Often the client will respond that their partner has given permission, and I gently reinforce the point that we would be making assumptions without the other person's right of reply.

Of course, with children this is different, as the power dynamic is altered. In a way, I do feel that I am colluding with the parent in reading the child's chart, but our intentions are unified in care and support of the child. After the child reaches age 15 (the first Saturn opposition), I explain that I would like both the parent and the adolescent to be present. I usually see the adolescent for 60 minutes and then invite the parent into the room for the last 15 minutes. Just getting the teenager to the appointment has enormous consequences, and though I have met walls of resistance, even ridicule, I have always enjoyed seeing the young person's fascination with what and how the symbols reveal themselves.

I began reading friends' charts back in 1973, but it was not until 1978 that I began charging fees for consultations. My early experiences were eye-openers — highly instructive. Sharing them now feels akin to watching an old black-and-white film. While we now have more awareness and availability of techniques, presentation, and counseling skills, we still face the task of forging our own way to interpret charts, discovering our own beliefs, and creating our own practice. And this is possible only through the practical experience of reading horoscopes.

One client, "Bonnie," had consulted with me several times between 1978 and 1980. Neptune was about to transit her Venus in Sagittarius. We talked about its symbolic possibilities, especially the idea of falling in love, which was of great interest to her. But I also warned her about the idealization, deception, and illusions that often accompany falling in love under a Neptunian spell.

As it turned out, Bonnie did meet a man and fall in love. Our next appointment focused on her big news and his interest in marriage. But since my forewarning was still reverberating, she thought it best to wait for two years to see if they were still in love when the glow of the transit waned. In the meantime, the partner came to me for a consultation, and a triangle eventuated: me, Bonnie, and her suitor "Gordon." When Bonnie spoke to me about Gordie, she was glowing and idealistic, but I also knew that she would have spoken warmly to him about me. He knew I had heard her confessions and secrets, but we managed the consultation as best we could. He came to the consultation for her, not for himself.

Two years passed, and they both asked me to choose their wedding date. May, early afternoon, and outdoors were the parameters, so there was not a lot of choice, but we settled on a date. I was invited to the ceremony, since Bonnie believed that I had played an important role on the way to their wedding. I accepted.

I awoke the morning of the wedding, and it was pouring rain. I thought of the wedding being outside and felt responsible for not getting the date or the weather right. I felt sick, wanted to cancel, but manned up and got ready to go. Just before I got into my car, the rain let up. As I approached the venue, the sun came out and it was beautiful. The grass sparkled in the sunlight, the air was fresh, and the smells were pleasantly intense. The wedding took place in a gazebo. As the guests spilled out onto the lawns, Bonnie mingled amongst us, looking exquisite and radiant, her dress trailing behind on the glittering grass. Bonnie and the sun were glowing. Many remarked what a beautiful and perfect day it was. To which Bonnie replied, "My astrologer chose the time."

We are always working with the gods, and that day they were especially kind. Did I mention that Bonnie's Venus is on my Descendant, so I was having a Neptune transit, too?

In the late 1980s, my partner in life and astrology, Glennys, and I began our synastry sessions on couples counseling by using a two-therapist model. We decided we would see couples together, each one of us consulting with one of the partners first. Over time, our approach has evolved. But at the beginning, with the natal charts, transits, and progressions, the synastry grid, and composite chart in hand, we sat down with our first couple. We had not yet moved into the Chiron Centre and were still seeing clients at home. Our first appointment was with a cross-cultural, passionate young couple who could not agree in whose country they should settle. About 30 minutes into the session, the male half of the relationship blew up and stormed out of the consulting room through our house into the backyard. I decided I should try to find him while Glennys stayed with the female partner, who was now sobbing. I found him behind the shed at the back of our garden. I coaxed him back inside, and we finished the session. They made a few more appointments, but their relationship did not last. Oh ô Glennys and I are also a cross-national couple!

We modified our approach after that: a minimum of three sessions over a period of a few weeks, one partner to see Glennys, the other to consult with me, and then all four of us to engage in a mutual session. We hoped to prevent creating any triangles but what we could not avoid was the nature and patterns of Glennys and my relationship. So much is gleaned through the natal charts, the inter-aspects, and the composite charts that we found ourselves having to be succinct, stripping the archetypal image to the bare bones and progressing through it slowly. Synastry has been helpful in assisting couples to separate, deal with kids, manage family feuds, communicate better, conceive, handle the grief of a loved one's death, respect each other ô the list is endless. Sometimes the clarification of different values or living styles for each partner has made all the difference.

As I look back at the couples who have engaged with us in this process I've found that working with my partner, using synastry, has proved to be richly rewarding for everyone involved. Not all couples wanted this approach, so I also offered one-to-one synastry in my own practice. I use the three-session strategy of seeing each partner first, then both together. The agenda for the combined session organically emerges from the individual sessions. If a client's partner does not want to participate, then I will use only the client's chart to discuss the relationship from the client's perspective.

I attempt to maintain the boundaries and ethical standards that have evolved but, as in life, there are always exceptions. Clients often bring along their mother's, child's, or partner's horoscope and present it to me. While the inter-aspects or the composite chart might assist the client in understanding their relationship, I am on the alert to how I can use this information in respect of the other, always coming back to the client, and not discussing the absent person. Mostly I just explain that we will be looking at the client's horoscope only.

Recently, I read the horoscope for a long-term client who is divorced but had just entered a new relationship. She brought both his chart and her ex's. This is a common scenario and one fraught with the potential to compare, judge, and focus on the other rather than the client. No surprise

that the ex and the current partner's charts have strong similarities that enmesh with my client's. I could see this, but rather than entering into a dialogue about that, I concentrated on the client and her chart. Ultimately, the synastry is embedded in *her* horoscope. If the new partner wishes to make an appointment at a later date, I will see him, and then the three of us can meet to discuss their relationship. Since my client and I have already an established relationship, he probably will not. I imagine the one triangle (he, she, and the ex) is enough.

I feel that experience will mould the way we do synastry. There are many wonderful techniques, but theory cedes to practice. When considering how to conduct synastry sessions, you may want to reflect on how to maintain an ethical perspective when only one partner is present.

In order to participate more fully with the dynamic of synastry, you could also reflect on your own experiences of and attitudes to relationship by considering the following:

- É Any personal prejudices you may carry about relationship.

- É How your familial and personal experiences shaped your attitudes towards relating.

- É Beliefs, ideals, and disappointments that you carry about relationship.

- É How comfortable you feel exploring intimate and personal details with others.

- É Your relationship comfort zones. What biases do you bring into the session? What issues are 'loaded' for you, in terms of relationships?

Ultimately, it is our experience, our knowing, and our horoscopic 'eyes' that will identify how we practice this remarkable art of synastry.

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