

# HERMES

## *Patron of the Sibling*

*'The god Hermes' relationship to his older brother Apollo is a key to understanding a competitive and acquisitive aspect of the archetype.'*<sup>24</sup>

- Jean Shinoda Bolen

### From Envy to Equality: Transmuting Sibling Rivalry



Hermes was determined to claim a place amongst the Olympians. He was the son of Zeus, the supreme ruler of the Olympian corporation and in order for Hermes to gain his position he saw his older brother, Apollo, as the obstacle. After detailing to his mother his ambition to become one of the immortals, his sibling rivalry towards his half-brother becomes apparent:

As for honours,  
I'm going to get in on the same ones  
that are sacred to Apollo.  
And if my father won't stand for it,  
I'll still try,  
I'm capable certainly,  
to be thief number one.<sup>25</sup>

At this point in the myth Hermes is not yet one day old and his intense competition with his brother is evident. This is a pattern that seems to be part of sibling fate ó to struggle for equality with and against the sibling. Sharing the same god as parent, Hermes, an embodiment of the younger son, sets about to win an equal place with his brother and his other Olympian sibs, in the eyes of his father.

Hermes enters a family which already contains older sibs. This position is often likely to constellate envy, as the younger feels a power imbalance between himself and the elder sibling/s. An elder sibling may be more prone to jealousy, while the younger is prone to envy.<sup>26</sup> Jealousy results from love betrayed, when love is transferred to another or we suspect that we are being displaced by a rival who steals the love we have known. It is ignited when a younger sibling usurps our place and seduces our parents' love and affections away from us, placing us in a triangular relationship. But envy is didactic and power based. In the sibling system, it is the younger who is envious of the elder's position and possessions. Hermes is in an inferior position, while Apollo is in the position where he may feel betrayed by his father's new love for his clever new child.

Envy and jealousy are normal human emotions that find themselves constellated in the family. Certainly this would be true with the introduction of a new sibling into the system. But the extent to which the emotions are pathological or become complexes depends upon the atmosphere of the

family, the parental maturity in identifying and deflecting the complex, as well as ancestors' unanswered questions that are now part of the familial fate.<sup>27</sup>

Hermes, the younger son, orients himself towards the sibling Apollo, not the father Zeus, in his quest for equality. It is by stealing the cattle sacred to Apollo that Hermes attempts to be noticed, envious perhaps of his brother's possessions and very aware of the possessions that are most important to Apollo. The images of cattle, cows and bulls are symbols woven throughout the myths of siblings. Cattle became the contentious issue between the two sets of twins in the Gemini myth. The symbol is multi-dimensional: here it could represent the envy of another's valuables and the sibling experiences of ownership and sharing of resources. Another time it could represent the primal feelings underlying the relationship, or the fertility inherent in it. For the sibling relationship is a fertile relationship, where creativity is sown and harvested, as well as a relationship that influences our values and self-esteem. Astrologically, we are in the sphere of Taurus, the sign preceding Gemini, which symbolizes ownership. As the sign that precedes Gemini, it could also speak of where the complexes of the sibling constellation are safely buried. What are the cattle that Hermes feels compelled to steal?

While these brothers did not share the same womb, they shared the same paternal seed. Neither brother is the exclusive creation of his father; therefore their father's realm is to be divided equally amongst the brethren. How this is accomplished is dependent on the sibling position; for Hermes as the younger feels he must steal from his brother, and Apollo, the elder, feels he must defend his territory from the usurper, furious that he has lost exclusivity to his father and his resources. Apollo is now forced to share the familial resources.

The orientation of the sibling system to the hierarchy of the parent demands equality with the other members of this system. What a task for the parent! ó to ensure a sense of equality and fairness presides. Complicating this task, feelings of competition, rivalry, anger and outrage are awakened when we realize that we must share the greatest possession of all ó our parents. Sharing with our siblings our parents' resources, in both their life and death, will constellate the feelings of jealousy and envy around them. And for Apollo, the solar god, to share the father will not be easy.

Hermes' association with thievery and trickery are clearly illustrated in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes with the abduction of his brother's prize possessions. This behaviour is inherent in the sibling system. Part of the Hermes/Mercury archetype and the third house is to experience lying, cheating, gossiping and teasing amongst the siblings in our search to be recognized and separate. To chastise these expressions would contribute to impeding a natural evolution and growth of equality amongst the sibs. Hermes and Apollo's father, Zeus, is not involved at this stage and, like many parents, oblivious to the machinations that are being played out amongst his children. But as a father his justice, fairness and insight will be called upon to resolve the squabble soon enough!

After Hermes absconds with his brother's herd of cattle and cleverly conceals it in a cave, he takes two of the cows and sacrifices them to the gods.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Hermes cut up twelve pieces to sacrifice to each god, perhaps as a self-motivated ritual of entry into the family. Once again it was two of his brother's cattle that were sacrificed in his invocation to belong. The older sibling often feels he has sacrificed something of value for a younger sibling. Apollo eventually finds out that his cattle are missing and tracks Hermes down. He is enraged at Hermes for the theft. Hermes, already a master thief, is now a master at lying, using all the innocence that a baby can in declaring that he is completely free of guilt ó how could he possibly have committed the theft Apollo is accusing him of, he was born just *yesterday*! Name calling, lying, cheating, stealing and blaming are all part of sibling survival.

While it appears Hermes must take from the elder to feel equal, the story also tells us that the younger Hermes has a gift for his brother ó a lyre. Before Hermes had set out to steal Apollo's cattle, he encountered a turtle outside the cave. Inspired by its fluorescent shell, he decided to fashion an instrument that would create a harmonious and beautiful sound. And so on the first day of his life, Hermes creates the lyre which is the instrument his brother Apollo becomes associated with in myth. It is the younger thieving brother who supplies this part of his integral identity.

Finally, Hermes shows Apollo where the cattle are. He has made his statement of equality. The brothers now have the potential to form a good relationship. On the sibling level, we learn to share power and resource. This is one of the initiations of the sibling system in that its members are called to belong in a communal way, sharing the familial resources and power. In functional sibling relationships, the power imbalance due to age, physical size, intelligence or parental influence is eventually replaced by a spirit of co-operation, exchange and fraternal love. The sibling system is a microcosm of social structures in the world and it is here we learn for ourselves how to find an equal place in the world. Hermes, while he always will be in second position to his elder brother, none the less finds his a place of equality. He is different from his brother but equal to him, unlike their relationship to Zeus, the parent, where there is power imbalance and inequality.

One of the roles Hermes is assigned is his role as *psychopomp*, the only recognized messenger to the realm of Hades. In becoming the messenger to Hades he also becomes the god who guides the soul across the boundary separating life from death. He becomes the god of liminal space. Hermes as guardian of the sibling sphere also brings the role of *psychopomp* to this realm. It is the sibling who often is the guide of souls in our early years. Older siblings help the younger ones across important thresholds. Younger sibs are influenced by the way the older sibs have crossed the thresholds of change in their lives. In our younger years it is our sibs who are witness to the rapid developments in our lives, and often among the first witnesses to important rites of passage in childhood.

Apollo and Hermes give us the archetypal story of brotherly rivalry transmuted into fraternal love. While they are both sons of a powerful father, Zeus assigns them enough autonomy to address one another as equals. He creates the atmosphere for the potential rivals to become equals. They commence their relationship with competition, rivalry, theft, rage and lies, but end up in an exchange of valuable aspects of themselves. Each adds to the other. While they are often seen as gods of the left hemisphere, they also share shamanistic roles. Hermes is the boundary-crosser and the guide of souls into the Underworld. Apollo presides over the arenas of divination and healing. Together they share a similar direction in life, orientated towards the order of life that was so important to their father. They are now equals and custodians of their own private realms. Envy and jealousy have found their complementary sides of power and love through their sibling relationship.



Hermes, as the patron of the sibling, is most evident through the aspects to Mercury in the horoscope. Planets aspecting Mercury will bring their archetypal influence into the sphere of sibling relationship.

## Mercurial aspects

The sibling experience is influenced by the planets that aspect Mercury. As a messenger, Mercury often allows full expression to the planet that it aspects. The aspecting planet's essence will colour the sibling relationship, often quite literally. Traditional astrology categorizes aspects by their degree of ease or difficulty. In reality this is not so easy, for the harmony or difficulty of an aspect is influenced by a disparate group of factors ranging from the family atmosphere to an individual's level of consciousness. Astrologically, the inherent nature of the planets involved in the aspect is important, whether they are antagonistic, supportive or ambivalent. Perhaps we could suggest that the traditionally 'easy' aspects of the trine and sextile offer us more choice of expression. The tension of the aspect is lowered and therefore there is less chance that the energy will become a complex. However, this is dependent on many variables. While more difficult aspects of the square and quincunx unite psychologically incompatible elements, their difficult union may have been eased in a supportive and understanding family atmosphere. Each aspect must be personalized.

### *Mercury/Sun Aspects*

In a geocentric horoscope Mercury can only be separated from the Sun by a maximum of 28 degrees, therefore its only major aspect to the Sun is a conjunction. There are two types of conjunction between Mercury and the Sun. The superior conjunction happens when Mercury is direct and on the far side of the Sun from the Earth's vantage point. The inferior conjunction occurs when Mercury is retrograde and between the Earth and the Sun. Mercury in its retrograde phase suggests an intensification of the sibling issues. With Mercury and the Sun conjunct, a fusion or *confusion* between the sibling, generally brother and father may occur. There may be issues of favouritism or feeling overshadowed by the sibling. Like Hermes and Apollo, there may be a fraternal contest for father's approval and recognition.

### *Mercury/Venus Aspects*

Venus and Mercury are also contained within a confined arc of 76 degrees and their major aspects to each other are the conjunction and the sextile. These planets in aspect may point to feminine themes in the sibling system, and how the sibling was influenced by the feminine attitudes in the family, which may have been carried by a sister. For instance with Mercury and Venus conjunct the sister may be the representative of the familial attitudes towards the ancestral feminine. This aspect perhaps describes the influence of the familial attitudes towards the feminine on the siblings. Themes of value, self-esteem, sharing and equality are also important.

### *Mercury/Moon Aspects*

Themes of caring and nurturing between siblings are important when Mercury aspects the Moon, often pointing to an older, protective sibling, or a younger sibling we took care of. There may be confusion or lack of boundary between the parenting and sibling roles. Communication of the feelings becomes important, and in the more positive aspects the siblings have been able to mutually communicate their love and concern for each other. Our siblings influence all patterns of communication, sharing ideas and learning. We may still remember the emotional impact of our siblings' lying, name-calling or gossiping. With this aspect we would interpret the silence between our siblings to try to comprehend the feelings trapped beneath the lack of communication. This

could crystallize into a pattern of articulating our friends or partner's feelings. The ability to express feelings is an important aspect of relationship, first learned in association with our siblings.

### ***Mercury/Mars Aspects***

Mercury's aspects to Mars suggest that independence, competition and adventure may have been experienced with our siblings. A model of a champion or someone to emulate could be projected on to a sibling. On the one hand, this aspect suggests an image of a supportive and encouraging brother figure; on the other, it could point to a bullying and dominating sibling. The more difficult aspects may stress rivalry, unhealthy competition and perhaps brutality. Power in the sibling system is phallic centered and the biggest and strongest may wield their power in an aggressive manner. Either way, the sibling plays the role of initiator, prompting independence and the pursuit of individual goals.

### ***Mercury/Jupiter Aspects***

Jupiter's Mercury contacts suggest a broad exchange of ideas and ideals with a sister or brother who may have been our teacher or guide. The sibling is a socializing agent who may lead us beyond the family's beliefs and morals. We may have shared a variety of experiences with our siblings or been inspired by their quest for meaning in life. The dark face of this wiser sibling image could be an arrogant or inflated sibling who is prejudiced, dictatorial and overbearing. Within the sibling system we may have experienced a wide set of experiences that helped formulate our philosophy on life.

### ***Mercury/Saturn Aspects***

Saturn often symbolizes an older or only sibling. In aspect to Mercury it may speak of the duty and responsibility we associate with the sibling and therefore the other equals we relate to. Within the sibling system we may develop autonomy, setting appropriate boundaries between our siblings and ourselves. This aspect could lead to the formation of stable and enduring relationships. However, it also suggests that there may be feelings of aloneness or separateness from the other siblings, the boundaries now becoming barriers that separate us from the others. This aspect also suggests the sibling may have been in the role of teacher, authority or parent to the other sibs. Negatively, the image of the depressed, patronizing or rejecting sibling could be constellated.

### ***Mercury/Chiron Aspects***

Chiron in aspect to Mercury brings the themes of mentoring, wounding and healing into the realm of the sibling. This may imply that the sibling fostered our spiritual development, encouraging the heroic spirit. However, it equally suggests the sibling as an agent of wounding, perhaps through the medium of name calling, abandonment or rejection. With this aspect we may feel alienated or separated from our siblings, as if exiled from our community of peers. Literally, this image could suggest a sibling that is physically or mentally handicapped, an adopted sibling or the separation from the sibling through death or a schism in the family.

### ***Mercury/Uranus Aspects***

Uranus may bring its sense of individuality and freedom to the sibling system when it aspects Mercury. With siblings, and later friends and partners, we seek a sense of freedom, adventure and

experimentation. The sibling may have been our first image of independence and individuality, acting as a freedom fighter and rebel. However, the sibling may also have been distant, aloof or cold. In its negative manifestation we have the image of the sibling who may have been disengaged from us, non-committal, even cruel. With these planets in aspect, we seek our individuality within the group and perhaps have to forge our own sense of independence first with the sibling.

### ***Mercury/Neptune Aspects***

Creativity, magic and enchantment are part of Neptune's domain. In aspect to Mercury we wanted to share this imaginal and fantastic realm with the sibling. However, we may also have idealized the sibling as a refuge from the difficulties of growing up, fusing together to avoid the pain. On the one hand, this aspect may suggest the compassionate and devoted sibling; on the other, it suggests the deceptive or addictive one. We may have first learned to sacrifice our sense of identity in our relationship with the sibling, surrendering our self in either the idealization or the protection of the sibling. This could suggest a sibling who was ill or troubled and rendered us invisible. We urged to be close and share the wonder of the internal world with the sibling but may, ironically, have felt estranged, so that the sibling relationship constantly carried an unlived potential.

### ***Mercury/Pluto Aspects***

Pluto's domain is the nether world and its aspects to Mercury imply that the sibling may be the vehicle that exposes this world to us. This could suggest the sharing of a deep and indelible bond with the sibling, a sense of intimacy and trust. However, the other polarity brings us in contact with feelings of betrayal and emotional control with the sibling. The sharing of resources, power and love are important issues in the sibling system which, when not exchanged equally, may ignite into an explosive situation. Secrets are part of Pluto's territory, and in aspect to Mercury these secrets involve the siblings. Pluto's encounter with death may also be part of this aspect, encountering a sense of loss or grief through the sibling. In the sibling system we first encounter the confrontation with honesty, trust and the powerful impact of feelings.