

Self-Educating the Modern Astrologer

(Adapted from "How and Why to Learn Astrology", May 2013)

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Most people do not want to learn and practice astrology because they see money falling from the sky or because they want to show their loved ones how successful they are in the world. Pursuing astrology is more like answering a call than making a reasoned decision. Astrology provides a path of personal development, a way to be of value to others, and a way to understand the world differently. Working with astrology also requires a mind that can combine the factual and the intuitive, the symbolic and the personal and situational – it is not for everybody.

For the prospective astrology student, this essay indicates what may be ahead for him or her. For the experienced astrology teacher, how do we adjust to today's students and circumstances? How does one best learn astrology in the modern world?

At first glance learning astrology looks easy, almost effortless. One can obtain astrological charts and learn about astrology through the internet, there's a large amount of information available and much of it is free. There are many email and social media astrology forums and newsletters, giving a variety of astrologers and approaches to follow. Many astrology classes ("webinars") and courses are offered online, and this has brought student astrologers from all over the world in touch with each other.

We forget how new all this is. Most astrologers of the last generation remember their first astrology classes, everyone gathered in somebody's living room around an easel, led by a professional astrologer teaching from experience, a few books, and his or her previous training. In addition to being in a group of peers and often making friendships among classmates, a new student would also read books written by famous astrologers and maybe meet some of them at conferences. A generation ago most astrologers and their students were part of local groups and larger organizations, some of whom developed competency exams and professional guidelines. Professional astrologers supplemented their work with clients and students with being active in a professional community.

The situation is different now. Although many astrologers have close friendships with other astrologers, as professionals they mainly communicate through e-mail forums and social media, often arranged narrowly according to specialty. Email

and social media forums can be dominated by a few individuals who have more time and energy than intelligence or good will. A well-developed and visually appealing website can disguise the poor quality of its information. There are fewer local groups and conferences than a generation ago. Large organizations have diminished in membership and influence. These are all results of our contemporary world that tends toward interconnected isolation.

Instead of following the person from whom you first learned astrology as the deciding factor in your use of astrology, you are now exposed to a variety of approaches that are not always compatible with each other. The new student needs to approach astrology differently than in the past. For those with a critical mind and an independent spirit this has brought new opportunities. A critical mind, creative intellect, and a love for the human are now important qualities for someone learning and subsequently practicing astrology.

Sometimes it's a voice from the past that gives perspective and I have found Ralph Waldo Emerson's early essays to be very useful to our present concerns.

In 1837 he gave an address called "The American Scholar" at Harvard. The "American" that Emerson promoted was one full of possibility and new beginnings, potentially liberated from the encrusted traditionalism and institutional conflict that had pervaded Europe in the centuries up to his time. Emerson's vision of the "Scholar" was not necessarily the academic but the educated person who develops his or her own mind and ideas from a personal foundation. Both his description of "American" and "Scholar" include those of who have endeavored to learn and practice astrology.



understanding.

Emerson talks of three influences on this newfound American Scholar: *nature, books, and action*. All three influences also apply to the best influences on the person learning astrology. We will apply these criteria to the surrounding sky and its

signification, the importance of astrology's traditions and its surrounding intellectual culture, and astrology as an interpretative tradition that is about human life.

Nature

In "The American Scholar", Emerson stresses that to learn well we must utilize our own direct experience, for how else do we begin to develop a mind of our own? This brings us to the natural world and perceiving things directly. For astrologers this means beginning by looking at the surrounding sky and its patterns.

When we examine the natural world, we find that the form we discover in nature reflects what we find in the human mind, our natural bent toward pattern, symmetry, and rhythm. This is the second part of the "natural world" of the astrologer.

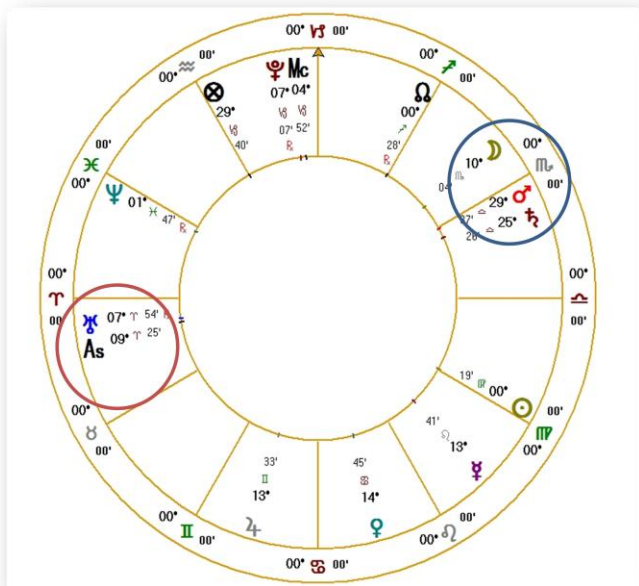
Here's how Emerson begins his discussion of nature: *"Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows. Every day, men and women, conversing, beholding and beholden. The scholar is he of all men for whom this spectacle most engages. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning to itself."*

Because of our impoverished modern perception of the night, seeing the skies is no easy task. For many years I began astrology classes with the "Chart of the Moment" and, weather and season permitting, we went outdoors, asking where in the sky are the planets, how does the view of the skies compare with the astrological chart of these same skies? Today I ask students to look for planets and phases of the Moon in the sky and compare that with what their computers show them. This is foundational material that, if we pass through too quickly at the beginning, will place us at a disadvantage

later – our astrology will feel conceptual, remote from reality, weak.

Let's look on a randomly chosen previous sky to see how differently the visible bodies in the sky are depicted. This will tell us as much about ourselves as about the sky.

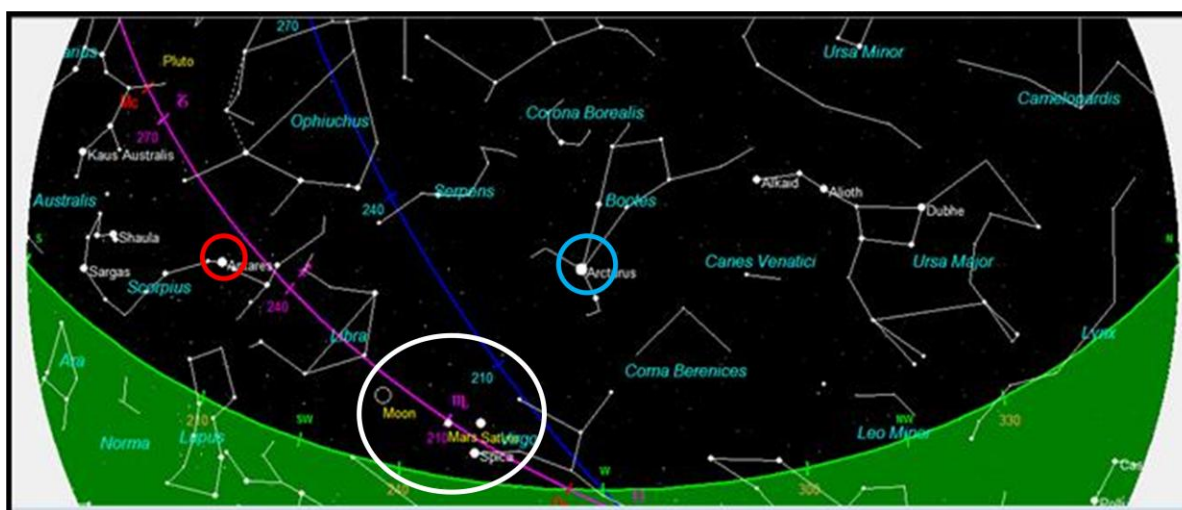
Here's a conventional astrological chart from the *Solar Fire*



astrology software program. Mars and Saturn are together in Libra and the Moon is in Scorpio. These heavenly bodies would appear in the sky in the west after sunset.

This chart does not differentiate between what is seen and unseen: Uranus, invisible to the naked eye, appears just as brightly as the Moon. This portrait of the heavens corresponds to some appearances of the sky but focuses on placements within zodiac signs.

Now here's a look at part of the same sky from the *Starlight* program that emphasizes constellations and the fixed stars and how we measure their positions relative to the earth.



In the white circle we see that the Mars-Saturn conjunction is with a fixed star called Spica. If you look to their left you could see the fixed star Antares, the “Heart of the Scorpion” (red circle) and above the fixed star Arcturus (blue circle), an important star to early navigators. Over time we could see the planets in different positions but the constellations in the sky retain their form.

Starlight also shows us how we locate stars and planets but in a different way. The blue line is the *celestial equator* that corresponds to the equator on earth; the purple line is the *ecliptic*, the apparent path of the Sun and planets that divides into the twelve signs of the Zodiac. These two lines come close to each other near the line of the horizon. The blue and purple lines coming together at 0° Libra and opposite is 0° Aries; when these two lines are farthest away from each other, they are close to 0° Cancer or 0° Capricorn in the zodiac. This is how we get the quarters of the tropical zodiac, the seasons of the year.

This chart has more of the sky's appearance than the chart from *Solar Fire* but nonetheless contains a level of abstraction. Stars and planets appear of more uniform brightness and of course we can't find blue and purple lines drawn in the sky. Yet this chart also displays the human genius for marking patterns within the appearances of the sky, finding order and harmony within the flow of appearances.

Here is another look at part of the same sky, now from a standard astronomy software program. It is closer yet to what we might actually see in the sky – except for the constellation lines and labels, of course.

We see the three planets along with the fixed stars nearby. We also see the correct phase of the Moon: its appearance is in crescent shape. (We should also be able to deduce that the Moon's phase by noting the distance of the Moon from the Sun in the zodiac.)



We can also look for other planets as they appear in the sky. When a planet is opposite the Sun from the Earth's perspective, it is at its brightest. If you are up before sunrise, what planets rise before the Sun? What planets are in the West after the Sun has set? If we are going to understand the astrological Moon and the planets and stars and their symbolism, we better go outside night after night and have a look.

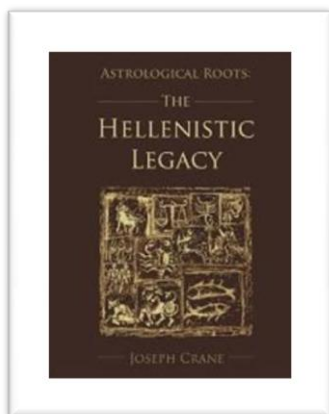
Here's the second part of Emerson's discussion of "Nature." He continues, *"Therein [nature] resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he can never find, -- so entire, so boundless."* He discusses the human penchant for classification and concludes, *"But what is classification but the perceiving that these objects are not chaotic, and they are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind?"* The regularity

and orderliness of nature, its measurability, also tell us about ourselves; order found in the natural world and in ourselves may imply a metaphysical backdrop to both.

The three diagrams above illustrate not just the nature of the surrounding sky but different ways in which the mind may approach them: from the viewpoint of the zodiac surrounding a particular place on earth, from the celestial equator and ecliptic, from the constellations of stars.

The organization of astrology's symbols is largely derived from symmetries, simple relationships between numbers, and from groupings of different symbols as akin or different from one another. Taken all together, astrology's schematic has a beauty and a profundity that allows us to understand our world and our lives not as a series of random events but as containing its own order and harmony.

Like learning the major and minor scales to study and play music, astrology's organization is equally as important to the astrologer as keys and scales are to the musician. As the musician making music from keys and scales, the astrologer builds from simple relationships to uncover the variety of people and situations we encounter in our lives.



Beginning students need to learn how the astrological signs divide into elements and modes and how signs relate to each other to help form the major aspects. They learn the traditional rulerships and planetary dignities and debilities, for they tell us much about how planets manifest in the signs of the zodiac. One also needs to thoroughly understand the

quadrant angles and twelve houses and the how planets influence one another through their natures, their placements in the astrological chart, and their aspect relationships.

What of the zodiac itself? It is crucial to explore differences between the sidereal zodiac and the tropical zodiac, for they have entirely different reference points. Part of the great appeal of the tropical zodiac is its correlation with the cycles of light and darkness on the earth and how those form pattern of glorious symmetries. They allow us to find for our clients a rhythm and pattern within life situations they may find baffling.

Books

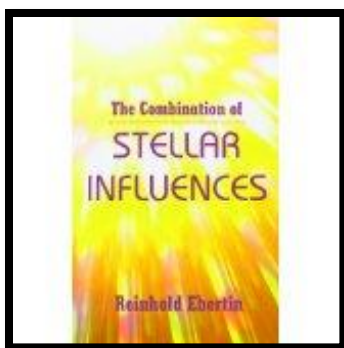
On this topic Emerson says, *“Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use?...They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and be made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul.”* If our books take us away from our own process of understanding, then it’s better to watch TV or hang out on Facebook.

One drawback of our modern pluralistic culture is that we don’t have a *paideia*, a common tradition of knowledge that we all draw upon. The Greeks were immersed in Homer; educated medieval people knew the church fathers and Virgil; Lincoln’s generation knew Shakespeare and the King James Bible. Although all these eras would recognize our entertainment-oriented celebrity culture, they would also wonder where the serious mind goes. Because a common basis of knowledge, a *paideia*, is lacking in our culture in general, it is also lacking within the astrological community.

Consequently, most of us can read more and read better.

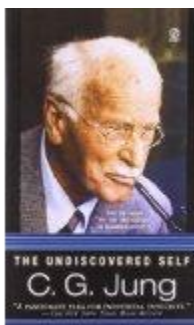
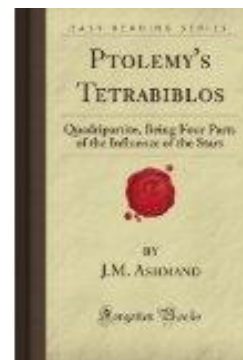
Let’s begin with works written by astrologers. It is important to read astrology books and other texts broadly. One needn’t agree with everything to gain from a good astrology textbook. It’s useful to read from astrological traditions that have a different approach from yours. For example, I doubt I will ever practice astrology as presented in the works of Alice Bailey or her modern followers, yet I appreciate its thoroughgoing and visionary nature and there is much I can learn from it. At the other end are the works of Reinhold Ebertin and those of the Hamburg School who now call themselves practitioners of “Symmetrical Astrology”. There’s also the astrology from China and India. Learning about them helps dust the cobwebs from the brain.

Sometimes I find the most helpful kind of astrology books to be the “cookbooks” – those comprising short summaries planet, sign, house, and aspect delineations -- and those that contain many example charts and interpretations. These books too, as Emerson would say, can be among the best of things or the worst of things for us. If we use them for inspiration, to get under the proverbial hood of how a good astrologer thinks, they are beneficial: by proxy they allow the wisdom from our own creative minds to emerge.



“Cookbooks” range from 4th century Firmicus Maternis to 20th century works by Reinhold Ebertin and Rob Hand. To look over the shoulder of a great astrologer at

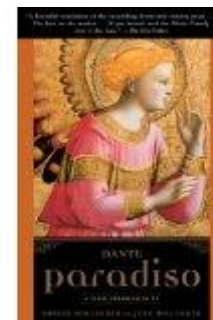
work, there's Vettius Valens from the Second Century or William Lilly from the Seventeenth. For works on different ways to understand astrology we can go from the systematic Ptolemy or Dane Rudhyar's modern psychological and spiritual vision or modern authors on astrology as divination such as Geoffrey Cornelius.



What about books *not* about astrology?

Since so much of our reading these days is clicking and scrolling, readers often fail to recognize the *contemplative* value of certain books: they allow us to assess and apply insights that enlarge our sense of ourselves and our world. There is much value in those books that must be read slowly, even with a pad of paper alongside, for these are the ones that we best remember and that can change our lives.

It is important for teachers and students alike not to leave behind their previous education in history, art, literature, psychology, philosophy, or science. In different ways these different disciplines inform our understanding of astrology's structures and applications to our lives. Loyalty to our intellectual background helps promote our independence of mind. In this way we become not, as Emerson might say, "Astrologers", but "People Who Do Astrology."



Action

Emerson was not interested in the scholar as recluse, one who tries to avoid the inclusion of life circumstances; instead it is through life circumstances that wisdom is ultimately attained and manifests in the world. *"Without [action], thought can never ripen into truth... Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind... Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not."*

Astrology is not just an interesting thing to study but is an *applied* art, applied to people. We study and practice astrology to better understand ourselves and our worlds and to help others. Everybody starts studying astrology by studying themselves, and this is as it should be. I also ask students to collect charts of at least ten people they know personally – Aunt Sally, one's partner or room-mate, contemporary or historical

people of familiarity or interest. This keeps one's focus personal and immediate but without lapsing into an exclusive focus on oneself, promoting one's potential helpfulness to others.

I work to help students ask questions of a natal chart or the chart of an event. A first step, even before looking at a person's chart, is to determine what we would like to know from the chart. Character and the soul's longings are important matters for astrologers to consider as they manifest in the situations of our lives, especially when things become difficult or uncertain. Most peoples' lives focus on the vicissitudes of love and work and this is often a good place to start with them. From there we can talk about the burdens of one's life and one's unique life purpose.

Role and Responsibilities

In his 1837 talk Emerson presented Nature, Books, and Action as influences on the American Scholar, but he was only half-done. The second half of his talk is concerned with the *duties* of the American Scholar, a word I have changed to "roles" and "responsibilities". The second half of his address, meant to inspire the group of young men present at his talk, focuses too much on triumphalist heroism for my taste. Yet Emerson presents some ideas that are important to share.

One's duty as an American Scholar, Emerson tells us, is *"to cheer, to raise, and to guide [people] by showing them facts amidst appearances. He plies the slow, unhonored, unpaid task of observation."* Emerson then cites the work of William Herschel, the discoverer of Uranus, as an example. Emerson contrasts the tedious task of separating reality from appearance with the cheap thrills and general ignorance of popular material culture and *"the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism"*. "Man Thinking" will be set apart not only from popular society and its opinions but those of the seemingly educated and cultured.

By losing one's chance at conventional status he or she gains something more important – *"that he [or she] has seen something truly"*. Emerson continues, *"He then learns, that in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds."* Perhaps when astrologers go too "mainstream", they lose some of these abilities.

By going within fearlessly and freely, the person discovers what is common to all of us and maybe to the cosmos itself. Emerson talks about "self-trust", the basic confidence in one's own ability to ascertain truth, and with that the elements of freedom

and bravery. (He develops some of these concepts further in his later essay “Self-Reliance”.)

Emerson’s full address easily fills an hour. You can find “The American Scholar” online or in the library – it’s a good read. Much of it applies to the modern astrologer, his or her best influences and most important responsibilities.

Conclusion

To learn astrology there is a lot to learn but the payoff for the required patience and persistence is great. There’s the excitement of challenging oneself and accomplishing something that asks much of you. Learning and practicing astrology will help you unleash your native intuitive abilities that become easily forgotten in our modern distracted world. You will regain a new kind of thinking and way of life in which we are truly at home in our worlds. You become acquainted with part of our culture’s wisdom tradition that yields insight into oneself, others, and events in the world. Finally, astrology allows us special access to a non-materialistic dimension of our experience that is sometimes called “spiritual” or “numinous”. For many this is a deeply personal experience, one that does not require faith in received religious doctrines or charismatic individuals. In my mind these benefits all make learning astrology an enterprise well worth the effort.