

## **Calm Seas Make Poor Sailors**

Worry is a misuse of imagination. Astrology on the other hand, is a near perfect use of imagination

We have this amazing discipline - this practise of applied imagination. And it is as abundant and limitless and renewing and full of potential as imagination can be. Maybe sometimes we need reminding not to enclose ourselves or our clients in too small a container.

Here's poet David Whyte on difficult times:

*When your eyes are tired the world is tired also*

*When your vision has gone, no part of the world can find you*

*It's time to go into the dark where the night has eyes to recognise its own*

*There you can be sure you are not beyond love*

Actually, this talk has quite a lot of stuff like that in it. And relatively little obvious astrology. But it has been written with a mind turned towards anyone living through a hard time. And to absent friends, I'm thinking especially of Martin over in Canada.

Originally, of course I just thought oh no oh god what am I going to say.....And so I took refuge in the title at first .... breaking it down. I was lucky enough to have Sue Tompkins

as my very first astrology teacher back in adult ed classes at the fag end of the 80's, before I'd ever heard of the Faculty. I have her to thank for my love of the subject, and the Diploma I went on to study for. Anyway, I remember when Sue wanted to examine something, she always used to oil the wheels of thought with a bit of definition. Peel it back to the core. Get a little etymological.

So our theme - 'A Tool for Navigating Difficult Times' ..... And now I'm trying hard to forget Lindsay last year, saying how she hates it when people refer to astrology as a tool.....

Anyway - Tool – means instrument or implement and comes from the old English *tawian* which means *prepare* – so a tool is something that helps us prepare ourselves.

*Preparation* is key to all sorts of things. The whole process of identifying and gathering what we might need. Laying the groundwork. Being ready and able to make the best of a situation. The old scouts motto be prepared! Dyb dyb dyb and all that. Which I learned is an acronym for do your best. (And the response We'll dob dob dob - do our best). Definitely.

Navigate – from *navis*: *ship* and *agere*: *to drive* Steering our ship - the metaphor of ocean voyage is a good one for tough times – there's an Australian psychologist Robyn Vickers-Willis who likens the mid-life journey to that of migrants leaving their home country for a new land. Mid life transits are quite something. The early adopter Pluto square in

recent times, though not forever. But always, the Neptune square itself, the Uranus opposite itself. That stuff, at 40, 41, 42. Joined by our first Jupiter opposite itself since the good old Saturn return. Then closing Saturn opposite Saturn around 44. Big deals, all. But I actually think the metaphor of a long sea voyage can illuminate any major transition.

I chose to call my talk *calm seas make poor sailors* and I suppose the core meaning of that proverb is unless we have some kind of difficulty or challenge, unless things are hard and stormy sometimes, then we won't be able to develop sufficiently, we won't grown into the truest and best version of ourselves.

Difficult – literally means away from (dis) what is easy (facile) Which of course brings to mind Hard Aspects! The idea of the knife and the whetstone, the grit and the oyster and so on.

Difficulty can be like being in training - it gets us to our optimal weight and fitness. If we look at the kind of thing a Cycling Olympian endures on a daily basis, just to be able to be their best – the passing out, the throwing up, the exhaustion and agony. They learn to love the pain..... it's getting them somewhere. Agony can be the ground of our creative generativity. It's a kind of birth – and there is no birth without pain.

So - adversity has the capacity to make us become who we could be. Yes, it's Saturn. Yes it's hard and it takes time and

it's heavy and it weighs on us. But it's lead into gold. It's carbon into diamond. Sand into glass. Lump of clay into china cup. Dried chick pea into hummous. We need the alchemy, we need to be compressed, to be melted, to be spun and fired or boiled and blitzed.

History has many examples of people undergoing terrible circumstances who emerge wiser, or deeper, grown larger despite being torn apart. People who gave themselves to the world through their ordeals and whose lives correspondingly echo beyond their own personal boundaries. Think Anne Frank, think Nelson Mandela, think Vincent Van Gogh think Victor Frankl, think numberless unknown unsung people who have risen to understanding. To compassion and dignity and creative strength despite their suffering or brutalisation. Even if we never have to face the worst that life can throw at us, nevertheless, trying to know ourselves thanks to our natal chart and its unfolding patterns, means that we can grow and expand and polish the stone of our own existence until it shines enough to shed some light.

The other thing about hard times is that they are pretty much vital to gratitude and appreciation. If we have only been happy, contented, satisfied then we have no idea of the full landscape of life, the simple truth of the world and what it is or can be. So we have no way to viscerally understand our blessings.

But if we have spent a season in hell, then when we emerge, oh the sweetness of fresh air! The heartbreaking beauty of the blue sky. And the miracle of being free to walk over green grass again.

I once passed a telephone exchange box which had been painted over with some words which really hit me. Turns out they were written a long time ago as a haiku by Kobayashi Issa who was born in 1763:

This world of ours —  
Standing on the roof of hell  
Gazing at flowers.

That elegant graffiti was around the corner from a friend's house. Her mother died as I was writing this piece. On the Pisces New Moon after a long hard painful month.

As the song goes, you don't know what you've got til it's gone.....but I think if you practise rehearsing what your life *would* be like without the things you love and take for granted – your partner, your mates, your ability to walk, your opposable thumb, your memory, then they can all seem a little more precious, if only for a moment. Life is short and if we *could* actually embrace appreciating it right now we might lose some of our routine dissatisfaction. Some of our everyday misery. Sometimes it takes loss and pain barging in, for us to change our perspective.

Most of us don't like change. Not really. Most of us wouldn't sign up for the experience of having the rug pulled out from

under us. Even if it did reveal a secret trap door. Maybe especially not if it revealed a secret trap door. What the f's lurking down there?

But however we feel about the notion of change, almost nobody wants pain. Yet pain could be thought of as a signal that something needs attention. And as someone else put it: Pain is fuel we burn for our voyage.

Voyage....navigation.....our charts really can and *do* help us to steer, help us to find a way through. They provide a rudder but they are also the map *and* the compass. And they give us a container, a framework. They can help us to get a sense of the boundary of things, as well as to glimpse the paradox of limitless potential.

But you know, we only have the luxury of contemplation and art and culture and science - all this wealth of intellectual endeavour and creative output thanks to the fact that *we are not running away from being eaten by wild animals*. We are not fleeing a burning house and we are not being bombed or washed away, or any number of other immediate things which would mean we could only act to try and survive.

Which sort of focuses your perspective. When survival is not threatened immediately (and let's face it – there are still a lot of people round the globe where this isn't so) then we have time and space to deal with other things. Hurrah! So maybe let's start with the basics.

I often return to the elements. Their simplicity, their profundity. How can use this brilliant subject of ours.....

I thought – well, we can approach astrology in an **earth** type way.... employing timing, framework, useful parameters. Tangible stuff. Practicality. When will this awful time end? Let's see: May. And then it will return again in November ha ha.

We can approach it through the way of **fire**.....meaning - heart. Vision. Belief. Philosophy. This is a subject centred on symbol making. We can set light to things. See possibilities beyond. Reach towards the intangible for faith, for hope.

We can approach it of course through **air** – all these lovely maps and words and concepts. All our curiosity and desire to communicate....making sense of things with our rationality, discussion. The usefulness of objectivity, distance and perspective.

And we can approach through **water** – compassion and soul. Being connected. Tenderness. Awareness of vulnerability. Coming together. Being alongside another in silence. Feeling our way through.

But whatever we use, whatever skills we have, sooner or later, if we live in this word, we are initiated into *the heartbreak in the heart of things*. That's a line written in 1916 by Wilfrid Wilson Gibson and ends his short poem

entitled Lament. Martin alerted to me the relevance of Wilson's astrology, pointing out his Mercury = Venus = Chiron = Neptune. He's a Sun Libra and has Mercury cnj Venus in Virgo, both sesquiquadrate the Chiron Neptune cnj of the times. And that Mercury Venus is opposite Saturn in Pisces. The whole picture gives literal voice to the heartbreak in the heart of things. (2<sup>nd</sup> October 1878)

There is no way to be fully alive and not get your heart broken. By a lover, a friend, a parent, by your own child. By the awful truth and beauty and random cruelty of life itself. If you seek a path without heartbreak your search will be fruitless and long. And if the path you steer is always away from pain then you will never get to truly live. That's the thing. It's OK to be afraid. Everyone's afraid. Courage is about putting heart into your life, not lack of fear.

Encouragement is about sharing wholeheartedness. And wholeheartedness is the secret antidote to exhaustion, to the feeling that you can't go on. Find what you love. At least, reach out to it.

Doctors tell us that a disease has 3 aspects – what it is composed of, what effects it has on the patient in question and then perhaps most importantly, how the individual diagnosed actually deals with it. If we look at difficult times as somehow being inflicted on us, then clearly how we deal with them is as significant as what we are suffering.



So when there are external circumstances over which we have no control, we can - at least - control how we carry ourselves through them. How we allow ourselves to be worked upon, changed and made more who we can be. Nobody sitting in this room has had a life without suffering. Things like illness, divorce, loss, depression, abuse, bereavement - hands up anyone who has never been close to any of that. And when the house has been razed to the ground, once the fires have been extinguished, when the soot and the sodden ashes and the mess and the devastation have been tackled, some time afterwards, weeks or months or years or a lifetime we can finally say 'Now I see the shape of something good in this. I see what grew out of it. I see something that can be called beneficial'. Like a forest that has been scorched and grows anew, or a seed that burst open only after the flames warmed it, new life and new possibility are waiting.

This is not some Pollyanna thing. This is not some look on the bright side platitude. I do not mean to imply that we should plaster a brave face on it and smile. Everything that is alive will sometimes falter and fail. Only things that are alive can die. And as humans, we are gifted and cursed with the knowledge of this.

More poetry – this time Wendell Berry and

*The Peace of Wild Things:*

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

We know that heart of the chart is the Sun. Who are you? Who might you be if you let your heart be broken by this world? Every seed destroys its container. You know what the man said - *Your pain is the breaking of the shell that contains your understanding.* Grief is the price we pay for love. Pain is the price we pay for being human. For being able to care and to feel and to open ourselves to this life and its wonderful possibilities.

This craft is a gift. It allows us a magical glimpse of the world, a way to live with heart and heartbreak, knowing it's not just

us. That we are a part of this whole thing. So why not be generous? Take risks. Give of yourself. Find what counts to you and share it, give it away. I can pretty much guarantee it will make you happier.

*Kierkegaard said The most common form of despair is not being who you are*

Fancy a bit of Joseph Campbell? Who could say no?

Whatever happens to us we can find a purpose within it – In his words, *our own meaning IS the meaning. Being alive is the meaning. Your life is the fruit of your own doing. The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are. Find the joy and the joy will burn out the pain.*

Yet there we often are with our own chart, endlessly catastrophising. Oh god oh god I've got Pluto coming up to my IC my dad will die and my house will be destroyed and the ground beneath my feet will be bulldozed into oblivion and I will no longer be on the roof of hell I will be twisting in the fires and and.....

Actually, as I was telling Sue Farebrother the other day, I once used the metaphor of the bulldozer with a young client who had an upcoming Pluto transit conj IC. She went pale and said yes, actually the only home she had ever known was literally going to be demolished in the near future.

She was quite upset about it, so I refrained from punching the air.

There's that example of a client in Caroline Casey's book who relates having a good old clearout during a Pluto transit. Taking a load of stuff to the dry cleaners and then going off for the day. As they drove home past the cleaners later on, they saw that the place had burned down to the ground. Which gave rise to the reflection *'maybe this clearout needs to be a bit more thorough'*

It's eggs and omelettes, you know. Difficult times for the egg, but no omelettes otherwise. As John Moriarty writes: *if nature can handle the destruction and reconstruction of a caterpillar into a butterfly, why shouldn't we surrender and trust that it can handle what is happening to me?*

But anyway. Don't scare people, eh? Do not terrorize the native with fear of a harsh judgement or something like that. And we ought to know enough to not dump rubbish on our clients, hmm? But we need to remember it in our own charts too. I've actually got Pluto stationing on my IC right now and at the time of writing I can say I am LOVING IT. Feeling intensely alive, intensely connected. My home? Well, there was my step son and his girlfriend staying for a while, returned from 3 years away. So that felt big. And yes, workmen are drilling like bastards every morning, renovating the kitchens in the block. I'm more involved with my family than has been the case at times in the past. And yes, my

Mum sold up her place and recently moved countries to go and live with my sister and her family, which is major. Both parents pretty old now. I'm doing a lot of talking with my Dad about his funeral (he loves it – maybe that's his natal Pluto Rising yeah, squaring Sun and Venus. Moon Capricorn exactly sextile Mercury Pisces. Could be.) Anyway, we keep having conversations about him being dead and he keeps on being very much alive. He never imagined living til 80. Yes I am a funeral celebrant and yes I volunteer with a charity called Down to Earth which deals with death and dying and bereavement. I am spending some time in a nursing home currently, sitting next to a lady who is on her way out. And then going to visit an old man full of life whose wife died recently. All of this can be understood alongside Pluto transiting my Capricorn IC. Not to mention going through what is called The Change.

So.....I was thinking about the posh word for difficulty, that I kept encountering – adversity - and of course it comes from the same root as adversary or adverse meaning opposing.

And as astrologers we know a secret about opposition - that it is a search for integration, a quest to unite seemingly disparate principles. And that opposites contain the seeds of togetherness, complementarity. The opposition is the aspect most connected to relationship, relatedness. We can say we stand opposed, but the very opposition unites us. The whole projection thing – our adversaries and our partners, our opposites provide a mirror. Adverse literally means facing,

turned toward. What are we facing into? What do we see in the mirror? Interesting how the mirror of adversity, according to so many great minds, shows our true self.

*Adversity has ever been considered the state in which a man most easily becomes acquainted with himself.* As Samuel Johnson put it.

And Before him Horace: *Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents, which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant.*

And before him, Epicurus : *You do not develop courage by being happy in your relationships every day. You develop it by surviving difficult times and challenging adversity.....The greater difficulty, the more glory in surmounting it. Skillful pilots gain their reputation from storms and tempests.*

But OK – say someone has come for a consultation and they are in our living room and they are having a terrible time with life. They are not enjoying the brilliance and beauty and singular mindblowing perfection of this extraordinary one off miracle of existence. AT ALL. They are having a rubbish time. They are hurting. So they need gentleness and understanding and listening and assistance and as much compassion and truth and comfort and clarity as we can deliver.

Don't leap on their chart to try and explain it away – don't gloss over what they are telling you while you scan your laptop for evidence. Listen. Pay attention. Look at them. Stay with it. Don't make someone's pain into something

fascinating and perfect for you – however apposite their Pluto Moon transit may be, try and remember that it's cruel to say things without thinking about how they can sound, how it might feel, what the implications are.

I've been reading *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala which is her memoir about losing her two young boys, her husband and her parents in the Sri Lankan Tsunami. I'm not sure that any amount of astrological consultation could have been equal to that. And I think it's very important that we remember not to astro-rationalise someone's pain. I was once told, by a well known pro astrologer at a time when I was very sad and vulnerable about being childless: 'Your infertility makes perfect sense to me' Imagine. Lucky for him this was over the phone because I think I would have lamped him. Instead I just closed down. Drank my way through the rest of his self satisfied yadder and sentenced him to death in the kangaroo court of my head.

Of course, we mustn't get stuck in some delusion that we can *HELP* people – it's patronising and arrogant and actually very *UN*helpful to think we can wave some astrological magic wand and make it all better. But actually what I think *DOES* help people is not pretending to be able to take away their pain. Not underestimating how hard a time they are having. Listening. Reflecting back how difficult it sounds, how awful it is. You can't make someone able to conceive and nor can astrology. But you can say that sounds rough. Not 'you don't

know how lucky you are' not 'my kids give me hell' not 'why don't you adopt?' or 'if you haven't tried ivf you can't really want them' not even 'this too will pass' - even if it's true - and not a million other stupid things. Simply: that sounds painful. You have heard what you have been told and you are reflecting back and you are allowing their feelings.

Wilde's beautiful De Profundis was written towards the end of his imprisonment in the aftermath of Pluto over his MC, Neptune transiting cnj his 10<sup>th</sup> house Saturn and square itself, Uranus opposite Uranus – all the midlife stuff and then some.

*It contains these lines 'The final mystery is oneself. When one has weighed the sun in balance and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens star by star, there still remains oneself. Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?'*

We know, as practitioners that the chart has an amazing range, a scope and a depth that can astound and delight and keeps us constantly in love with our craft and the endless illumination it can yield.

And we know of course, that Neptune transits can herald loss and Uranus transits can reflect shocks and disruptions and Pluto transits can bulldoze our house - but when you are sitting in front of someone who is living this out, don't allow the brilliance of astrology to blind you to someone's feelings. It's not an intellectual game. It's not about it making perfect sense to you. If we honour our craft we can employ it with



sensitivity, respect, care. We can gently hold the mirror of astrology and allow our clients to see themselves. Being seen and being heard are rare enough. And finding that there's someone trustworthy, who can add their steady hand to the tiller, or at least sit and talk through with us the route we are on, with all its potential and possibility, can be very healing.

If we are doing our job as well as possible, then we can talk about the voyage. Before it starts there are decisions about what to take. And maybe who. What do you leave behind? There is the process of saying goodbye. And then the voyage itself. It can take a long time to get to where you want to be. And during the trip you may be overcome with listlessness. Imagine lying on your bunk as the ocean flows beneath you, leaving a slowly disappearing wake. You don't want to move, you don't want to do anything. You are done. And on other days, maybe there are the 10 foot waves and there you are, heaving into a bucket, wishing you were dead. But sooner or later, the urge comes to get up on deck. If only because you are bored sick of your stupid bunk-ridden self. And there is the expanse, there is the horizon. The wide open possibility. The sun on the water. The big sky. You smell land ahead. You know that a new home awaits. You begin to get excited. You begin to imagine how it could be. And eventually there you are, at the shore, ready to step out.

A final poem and then I'm done – this is *Mameen* by David Whyte:

*Be infinitesimal under that sky, a creature  
even the sailing hawk misses, a wraith  
among the rocks where the mist parts slowly.  
Recall the way mere mortals are overwhelmed  
by circumstance, how great reputations  
dissolve with infirmity and how you,  
in particular, live a hairsbreadth from losing  
everyone you hold dear.*

*Then, look back down the path as if seeing  
your past and then south over the hazy blue  
coast as if present to a wide future.  
Remember the way you are all possibilities  
you can see and how you live best  
as an appreciator of horizons,  
whether you reach them or not.  
Admit that once you have got up  
from your chair and opened the door,  
once you have walked out into the clean air  
toward that edge and taken the path up high  
beyond the ordinary, you have become  
the privileged and the pilgrim,  
the one who will tell the story  
and the one, coming back  
from the mountain,  
who helped to make it.*

