**Life after the Diploma**

Penny de Abreu

When Stevi asked me to talk to you about Life after the Diploma my thoughts went back to the many years of study before qualifying. So I would like to tell you a little bit about that process too.

Perhaps it’s important to say is that I have a Mars-Saturn conjunction in the 9th house so you won’t be surprised to know that it took me a very long time from starting my studies to receiving the Diploma.

My interest was first sparked by a talk from an astrologer to a group of young mums I belonged to in the 1980s. I was impressed and arranged a reading with her; from that day I was hooked. I attended a local authority evening class for a year with Fiona Griffiths, who was the Faculty head tutor, and she recommended I enrolled on the correspondence course – it wasn’t distance learning by e-mail in those days, all exercises and feedback were sent by post!

I had nearly finished the certificate course when my life fell apart.

At my Uranus opposition my husband was diagnosed with a brain tumour called an astrocytoma. This scared me and my irrational reaction was that this terrible diagnosis was in some way related to my involvement in such a powerful subject. So for a few weeks I put all my books away.

However, I was by then aware of the position of the outer planets and when he started radiotherapy a few weeks post-operatively I knew that transiting Uranus was exactly trine his Sun. I took that as a tiny bit of hope in a very bleak landscape.

Now I think that this strange “co-incidence” was the pointer to my new direction in life. The huge change in our expectations for the future meant I had no time or energy for formal study. But I was able to read and to continue learning by observing how the transits played out in all our charts.

I see the advantage now in being forced to slow down because I read more widely than I might otherwise have done and of course life experience is a powerful teacher.

Since becoming a Distance Learning Tutor I have had a number of students who have had similar experiences and have had to turn their attention away from astrology to whatever crisis was happening in their lives. It felt to me, and some of them, that we were being tested in our commitment to learn.

Eight years after his diagnosis, at the Spring Equinox, my husband died.

I continued to work in the NHS for a year but was exhausted and soon realised that I needed to have a break to come to terms with what had happened and devote my energy to helping my teenage children through what was a difficult time for all of us. So I took six months’ unpaid leave and subsequently decided not to return to my job and to concentrate on something I wanted to do.

The future I had planned had gone and I needed to build a different life. Fortunately its foundations were already in place. So I finished the correspondence course with Fiona and then started at Diploma classes. I took part-time work and six years later I passed the Diploma – 17 year since that first astrological consultation.

The sense of achievement after studying for so long was very special.

I have told you all this because for some of us there isn’t a smooth, trouble-free path to success and I hope that my experience will encourage any of you who are currently finding it hard to balance the demands of life with the desire to study. You may have to take a break from the modules but can continue to read and observe your life through an astrological lens.

I passed the Diploma in 2001 but, true to my Mars-Saturn conjunction, there was a delay before I started using my qualification. I was working long hours to put my son through University so once again everyday life competed with my wish to devote myself to astrology.

During this time I continued to attend a fortnightly interpretation group with Lindsay Radermacher. This was invaluable as it acted as a bridge between being a student and a professional astrologer.

Three years after passing the Diploma my son left University and the job I was doing came to a natural end. At that point I started Distance Learning Tutoring and was brilliantly supported by Diane Marcus-Page who was Head Tutor.

Although I had no previous experience of teaching, I found that I loved the role – making individual relationships with students, many from different cultures, which also appealed to me. I have always enjoyed learning foreign languages and talking to people from other countries and, as you may have realised from my name, I married into a lovely Portuguese family.

I have continued to teach by distance learning, restricting myself to Foundation level because I see myself as an initiator – Sun and Mercury in Aries – and am therefore suited to helping students at the start of their long journey in astrology.

The theme of sparking an interest is also reflected in my client work, most people who come for a reading are curious and interested on an intellectual level rather than needing to understand current problems.

Life after the Diploma and the way we use the qualification draws strongly on our previous experiences. Very few astrologers, certainly when I started studying, viewed it as a full-time career and so we all have the skills and talents we have learned in other jobs. My time in the health service taught me how to relate to and communicate with all sorts of people from local general practitioners, senior medical, nursing and administrative staff to patients going through a traumatic time – my last medical job was in fact in the transplantation service and involved contact with families who had agreed to donation following what was often a sudden and unexpected bereavement.

I have also worked for many years for a journalist and he taught me skills of editing and proof-reading which I have put to good use for the Faculty by checking articles for errors before they become part of the course.

So I have learned a number of different skills over the years which I now use in conjunction with the Diploma.

The highlight of every year, for the Faculty, and for me personally, is Summer School at Oxford. I attended several times as a student and each occasion brought new insights, new knowledge and new friends. Recently I have been lucky enough to teach at Exeter College with Polly Wallace, and every year brings an amazing group of students from all over the world, many of them new to the Faculty. It is a joy and a privilege to work closely with them as we study Module 3.

I am still pursuing new ways of using my Diploma. I have started a group at home for complete beginners consisting of people I have met in social situations. All my friends are used to me talking about astrology and commenting on whatever is going on in the world from an astrological perspective. So I decided that I would like to give these friends a greater understanding of the subject rather than the tit-bits of information they usually get from me.

My goal is to dispel misconceptions about astrology and show them that it can be relevant in their lives. I don’t expect many will decide to study formally. What I would like is for them to be able to understand and speak the language so that they can make connections with what is going on for them and in the world around them.

When I first had my chart read Saturn was in Scorpio so my astrological life has just had a Saturn return. I feel I have become an adult in the astrological world and as such am able to explore my own particular areas of interest. There are a number of these in which I have dabbled but am working to do more intensive research and maybe write or talk about my findings. That is in the future and I won’t be surprised if it takes a long time!

So for me, Life after the Diploma is about enjoying teaching and encouraging students, introducing clients and friends to the magic of astrology and exploring all my research interests.

But, above all, it’s about continuing to learn.