

Astrology has a name for the inchoate territory where everything dissolves into the primal waters. It is called the 12th house.

CONTEMPLATING THE 12TH HOUSE

An Optimist's Take on Self-Undoing

by Anne Whitaker

A tiny frog, barely half an inch long, flopped, dead, on the tip of a teaspoon as I gently lowered it toward the plug hole of my kitchen sink. Soon, I'd turn on the tap. Its fragile little body, already liquefying, would be washed down the drain.

Yesterday, it had been leaping around, full of life, inside the plastic refrigerator box in which I had created a little aquarium with water, moss, and stones. The tadpoles which I had brought home a few weeks previously had all survived. My satisfaction and pleasure at having achieved this, however, was tempered by the growing knowledge that my delightful new pets would soon have to be returned to their original habitat.

But this little fellow would never go home.

That small incident, which occurred more than 40 years ago, offered such a poignant illustration of the fleeting fragility of life that it has never left my memory. There are times when something tiny and transient can illustrate much larger truths. The constant dance between form and formlessness, being and non-being, order and chaos, occurs in all epochs and at all levels.

Humans have created a range of paradigms and metaphors, from ancient myths to modern cosmology, within which to explore this dialectic. Our ancient Babylonian forebears envisaged the beginning of the world as a battle to the death between the great sea-serpent Ti'amat and her son, the Underworld god Marduk. He vanquished her, creating Heaven and Earth from her divided corpse. Meanwhile, the grapple goes on.

Astrology has its own language for this struggle, speaking through the polarity of Saturn and Neptune. Saturn at its core represents the drive to take form; Neptune's teleology is that of dissolution.

For example, the unglamorous wrestle, which we all go through from time to time to act effectively in the face of a bout of profound inertia, is a tiny manifestation of that polarity. There are times when it just seems easier to give up, lie on the sofa with a good book, and have a long snooze.

But where do we go when we sleep? Where do we go when we give up the fight? Where do we go when we drift, allowing fantasy to take over? Where do we go when we die? Where do we go when we give up struggling

within Saturn's realm and allow Neptune's flow to take us over? Astrology has a name for this inchoate territory where everything dissolves into the primal waters.

It is called the 12th house.

Meltdown

I have six planets in Leo — five of them in the 12th house — with Virgo rising. (See **Chart**, p. 34.) My entire life has been spent wrestling with the profound contradictions contained within that astrological description. Starting in 2001, a long series of transiting Neptune oppositions to the Leo planets, and a shorter but more disruptive period of transiting Uranus oppositions also through my 6th house, were backed up by the progressed Moon crossing a natal 12th-house Saturn-Pluto conjunction in August 2001, at the same time that the Saturn-Pluto opposition of 2001-02 sextiled and trined it. All of this symbolised an energy meltdown and a need for almost total withdrawal from the world for a very long time.

At the end of 2001, after dealing with a severe, prolonged family crisis in tandem with a busy career, I collapsed, barely able to get out of bed for the first

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six months of 2002. During 2002–08, I spent much of my life — out of necessity, my energy being perilously low — on activities that required little physical output or contact with the wider world. I look back on that period now as a very productive time of writing, reading, contemplation ... and rest.

There are so many ways in which I could write about that profound and at times terrifying “night sea journey.”¹ The whole seven years are recorded in detail in diaries, notebooks, and an imagery journal, none of which may ever see the light of day. Keeping a record, along with the loving support I was fortunate to have, was a significant part of what kept me sane. Of necessity, this account takes only one thread from the weave.

The main route through my life’s difficulties of whatever kind has always been to set a goal which would hopefully bring me to a place of greater balance, with greater understanding of where I stood in relation to the Big Picture. This understanding, however, has always been retrospective, sometimes with *decades* of hindsight involved!

True to form, as soon as I realised that I was cast adrift with no landmarks in sight, I had to find a project to get me through the loss of much of life as I knew it; I had to try to make some sense of what had happened — and why. The rest of this article describes briefly what that project was and where it took me, a process of profound relevance to my astrological self. A very lengthy time of immersion in the secret sea that is the 12th house provided me with an opportunity to understand more deeply what the 12th house is, what being a 12th-house person means, and how to live in a more creatively balanced way with this house’s challenges and extreme contradictions.

I hope that, by sharing an account of one dimension of my *night sea journey*, I can help other 12th-house people to see their relationship with that

complex, mysterious place in space in a clearer and more constructive light.

Deeper Understanding

During the 2002–06 period in particular, I felt strongly motivated to use the enforced gift of unrestricted time to give free rein to my long-term interest in the overlaps between religion, mysticism, myth, symbolism, science, and the paranormal. In essence, I have long felt that all those lenses are focused on phenomena arising from the same underlying Ground.

I also set myself a writing project to accompany this inner journey. From the summer of 1970 until the autumn of 1999, I had had a series of sporadic paranormal episodes, ranging from prophetic dreams to seeing ghosts to premonitions, mediumship, poltergeist phenomena, telepathy, etc. All of these had appeared unbidden, whilst on the surface I was leading a pretty reasonable, responsible, grounded life. They were unwelcome and unwanted. Mostly, I told no one. As an open-minded sceptic and rationalist, I was also rather offended that they should have appeared to me at all!

So, in 2002, I decided to pull together all these experiences, since many had been recorded in notebooks or diaries at the time, and others could be confirmed in location and date

from my husband’s diaries from 1980 onwards. I also decided to set them as best I could in a context of rational analysis, drawing on the insights of open-minded contemporary scientists. The objective was to make peace with my “other” side, an inheritance from my maternal great-grandmother’s dubious gift: the “Second Sight.”² In the process of doing so, I was also unexpectedly led to a deeper level of understanding of the 12th house.

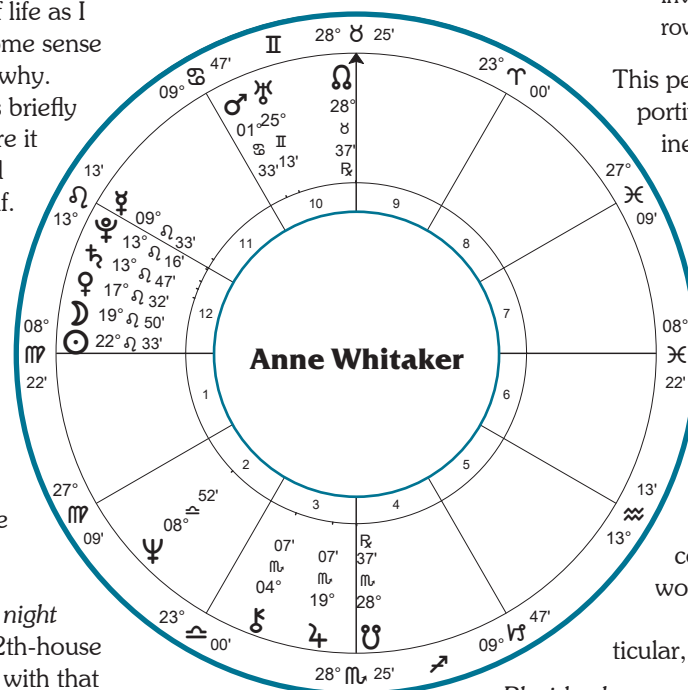
To contextualise this writing project, I looked back at core texts and commentaries arising from the great religions — re-reading more than once psychologist William James’ brilliant *Varieties of Religious Experience*. James’ considered view of experiences occurring outside “normal” parameters is as follows:

The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in ... the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow “scientific” bounds.³

This perspective was profoundly supportive of my own conventionally inexplicable experiences.

I also returned to what the scientists had to say, finding some wonderful works such as David Abrams’ *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Russell Targ and Jane Kutra’s *Miracles of Mind*, and Brian Swimme’s *The Secret Heart of the Cosmos*, whose poetic vision of a unified cosmos I found marvelously inspiring, educative, and supportive of many of my own conclusions regarding the kind of world we live in.

With Swimme’s help in particular, I have grasped not only in my



Placidus houses, True Node

head but in my heart the notion of the vast sea of energy which constitutes the whole of existence, the quantum vacuum of physics, from which particles that we cannot see flash constantly in and out of existence. In my imagination, these take the form of diamond sparks — appearing, disappearing, reappearing like fireflies in and out of the “dazzling darkness.”⁴ As Swimme puts it:

The ground of the universe then is an empty fullness, a fecund nothingness ... The base of the universe seethes with creativity, so much so that physicists refer to the universe’s ground state as “space-time foam.”⁵

The Pull of Dissolution

Through a very long period of varied reading and reflection, I have gradually come to understand more clearly how matter arises out of the universal energy sea, and returns from form to energy again. This process is enacted always, within and beyond time, at every level, from the invisible depths of all life on Earth to the birth and death of galaxies, universes, and multiverses.⁶ We are part of the universal process; our whole being participates, whether we know it or not.

It has also taken me some time to comprehend that the apparently solid material world we perceive through our five senses is not the world which quan-

tum physics has revealed. Our limited perceptual apparatus creates material “reality” from energy and a sprinkling of stardust.

Reflecting on the insights offered by quantum physics has also provided me with a form of proof that the boundaries between “real” and “imaginary” are arbitrary and artificial — something that my own intermittent, uncomfortable, and unsought paranormal experiences over a long period of time had led me to believe was the case anyway.

I also find it very powerful to contemplate the apparent ratio of matter to energy in the universe — 4% matter, 23% dark matter, 73% dark energy — and to consider that the pull on matter to break down and become energy again is constant at every level, from the minute (*us*) to the vast (*supernovas*).

All in all, I have come to the conclusion that the place of dissolution ...

*where all forms disperse, and flash
back into life again
where boundaries are impossible to
draw
where our experiences dissolve into
our collective, tribal, familial, and
personal past
where the seeds of the future lie
where “reality” and “imagination”
overlap
where paranormal experience takes
place*

*where religion and myth’s “sacred
time” resides
which myth describes
which the collective unconscious
evokes
which can be perceived as God,
Goddess, the Void, Brahman, the
Zero Point Field*

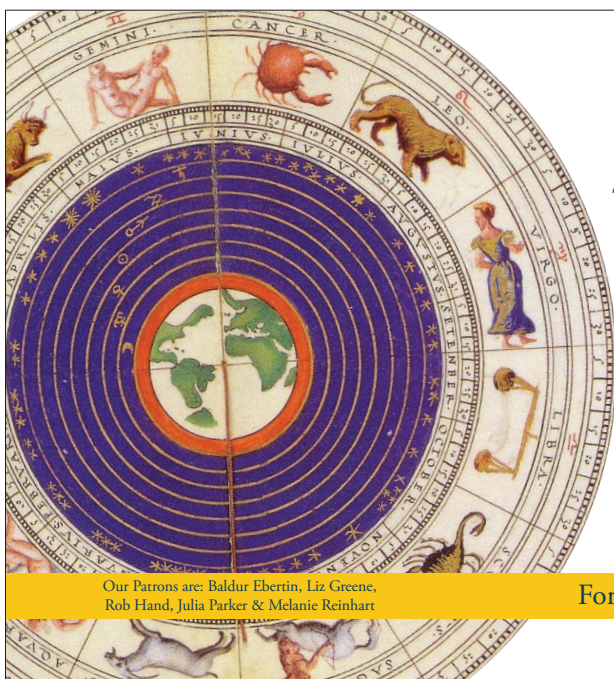
... is that which astrologers call the 12th house.

12th-House People in Essence

From my journal notes (20 June 2007):

Feeling of my returning fire co-existing with clear awareness of ever-present underlying vulnerability ... particle poised to flip back to the wave ... we are all vulnerable as creatures of this Earth. Mostly we do our best to shield ourselves from this awareness. Personally I find it liberating. I feel closer to knowing my true nature than I have ever been. My true nature as a 12th-house person is also a tiny pointer to humanity’s true nature ... we are all particles poised to flip back to the wave ...

Deep in our cell memory may be the knowledge that quantum physics has uncovered in the 20th century, divined and expressed intuitively in our



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cosmologies, religions, and myths from our very early days as humans trying to understand why we are here: We blip endlessly in and out of the Quantum Vacuum, the Void, God, Goddess, Brahman, the Cosmic Egg, the Collective Unconscious.

Matter has a strong pull at all levels towards dissolution, then re-forming somewhere else as something else ... as multiverse, cosmos, star, solar system, planet, individual life forms. We humans are part of the universal process; thus *our destiny, periodically within an average lifetime, is to be dissolved — undone*. The ultimate dissolution for any one lifetime, of course, is death. In this way, I have come to think of that ancient (and none too popular!) description of the 12th house — “the house of one’s own undoing” — as an accurate piece of description and *not in itself negative*.

At a deep cellular level, then, I consider that 12th-house people are more aware than others of the essential fragility of form and structure — and the Vastness to which form returns. This awareness is initially unconscious, developing only gradually (if at all) as their lives unfold: over decades rather than just years. Likely there is always, underlying even the most apparently successful public life, this 12th-house undertow, this pull towards the Void. *The more planets located there, the greater the pull*.

With this awareness probably co-exists a greater level of fear for 12th-house people than for the rest of the population. If form is so *fragile*, it can easily dissolve. Therefore, ties of love and friendship, community, material possessions, worldly status, sanity (as defined by common consensus) — all the certainties of life that more grounded people take for granted — can be much more tenuous and fragile for the 12th-house tribe.

Until they make peace with this fear, they are likely to deal with it by holding on too compulsively to some or all the above. Or, going to the opposite extreme, they may do their best to avoid becoming involved with any, some, or all of the above, depending on which

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kinds of attachment carry the most powerful positive or negative charge.

The 12th-House Challenge

Being able to see our tiny lives as diamond sparks in relation to and part of the “dazzling darkness” of Eternity, finding our own way to frame and live out this relationship — whether it be through conventional religious affiliations or whatever framework fits our particular era, culture, and psychological makeup — this is a big task for anyone. But it seems to me to be the particular one that we 12th-house folk are asked to undertake to a greater extent than other people are.

This challenge, which at times is very painful and disruptive to ordinary dimensions of life, appears to demand periodic sacrifice, renunciation, and withdrawal from the “real” world into that world whose compass is oriented to Eternity. These are rites of passage, which 12th-house people must go through to enter into deeper and deeper levels of connection and a more creative, positive relationship with what belonging to the 12th house means.

The horoscope’s great gift is to show each of us our unique “take” on the human drama: We are all connected to a Bigger Picture. Archetypal patterns shape and structure our whole life from birth to death. The great gift of a mature perspective, perhaps deepened by the midlife crisis/transition, is an eventual realisation that these particular challenges *must* come our way. At best, they can be met over time with grace and acceptance, rather than resistance and fear, bringing the reward of inner peace.

To paraphrase Jung’s wise dictum: Free will is the ability to do gladly that which we must do anyway.

Consent, Faith — and Respect

For 12th-house people, though, arriving at a state of balance and acceptance of such a profound paradox as that of the relationship of (to put it in one of many ways) *being and nothingness* is no easy process. Jung’s concept of the “night sea journey” is powerfully descriptive here. There are times when being a 12th-house person means being lost in the darkness, tossed by mysterious storms whose origins are unknown and perhaps unknowable, unable to stand upright long enough to take a compass bearing, not knowing where the journey is leading, when it will end, or whether one will survive at all. As André Gide so eloquently wrote: “One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.”⁷

During such trials, one’s greatest strengths are **consent** to the experience, however harsh it may be, and **faith** that, whatever the outcome, one’s own tiny speck of matter is in meaningful relationship to Eternity.

Although life was generally pretty tough and a lot shorter in times preceding the Scientific Revolution, it may well have been easier for 12th-house people to find their balance then. In that era, living was tied to the pace of the diurnal cycle of night and day and the cycles of the seasons. People generally did not travel far. The pace was much slower. Most people’s lives unfolded within the context of religion and ritual. The twin practices of contemplation and retreat were thus much more accepted as a normal part of life.

Nowadays, within a ubiquitous cultural context whose thrust is towards increasingly frenetic participation in material preoccupations on a 24/7 basis, *doing* is very much emphasised over *being*. People who wish and/or need to withdraw from the quotidian world on a regular basis tend to be seen as odd or lacking in some way.

I’ve never forgotten a Centre for Psychological Astrology seminar in the 1990s in which Liz Greene, talking about the demands planetary transits

place on us, said something to this effect: “You have to give the god what the god wants. And if it’s Mars, don’t offer a bunch of flowers!”

Whether the world considers us odd or not, I think that a major key to entering the 12th house as a willing visitor, rather than a fearful and reluctant guest, is eventual recognition by 12th-house people that they need to offer conscious **respect** and honour to the 12th house, prioritising time there on a regular basis throughout their lives.

Twelfth-house time is radically different from ordinary time. For example, contemplating and making art; making, playing, and listening to music; walking in solitude, communing with Nature; sharing communal rites in church, mosque, temple, or the church of the open air: All these activities take one into sacred time, where the moment and Eternity are one, and the numinous hovers. I feel that 12th-house people need those experiences of being in sacred time more than do other people.

They also need to give themselves permission to retreat, to dream, to be out of the everyday world. This can take whatever form fits the life pattern, life demands, and temperament of the person concerned — from regular formal retreats, to allotting a chunk of time each day to withdraw into a room alone with a book, music, meditation, or yoga practice. Drifting and doing “nothing,” wandering in space/time, seems to me an essential quality of being for 12th-house people, if they are to maintain balance together with good mental and physical health.

Twelfth-house people need to learn a way of being “in the world, but not of it” which enables the intangible dimensions of their makeup to have the room they require.

A Personal Testimony

Until my energy collapse forced me to have huge amounts of rest, I considered an hour without activity (apart from holidays or the necessity of sleep) to be an hour wasted. However, I slowly came to realise that sitting in the park in the sunshine staring at a bee for an hour was equally as valuable as, say, spending an hour catching up on paperwork. I also realised — and it is a pretty hum-

bling realisation, especially for someone with as many Leo planets as I have! — that the world was managing to carry on perfectly well without me.

If we die or disappear, life goes on. We are special, and we are not. Because of this realisation, one of the many gifts of my “timeout” has been a failure to recover the same sense of urgency I used to feel about getting everything done. This may at times infuriate my nearest and dearest, but I enjoy being a lot more relaxed and laid back than before. After years of a very restful life — reading, writing, thinking, lying around drinking tea and doing “nothing” for many a peaceful hour, strolling in the park nearby watching the seasons change — I realise just how developmental all this has been. I feel full of spiritual and imaginative energy, and am happy to be back at work, albeit part-time.

I do not wish, however, to minimise how terrifying it was to lose my personal power. Going from being strong and self-reliant to having to depend heavily on family and friends for all sorts of help has been an exercise in humility, to say the least. Not knowing if I would ever recover generated a great deal of anxiety for a long time. To keep my head above the deep waters of fear, I needed to use every tool acquired in decades of both working on my own process and supporting other people’s as a teacher, therapist, and astrologer. Mindfulness practice was the biggest aid, and I owe a huge debt to Buddhist wisdom. Pema Chödrön, Jack Kornfield, Jon Kabat-Zinn, thank you so much!

Ultimately, the love of those closest to me, along with my own consent and faith, pulled me through. Having learned the hard way that *being* is every bit as important as *doing*, I now honour and act upon my need to enter “12th-house time” on a regular basis. I feel pretty much at peace, at last, with both the gifts and the limitations that the 12th house brings.

Author’s Note: A very early, much shorter version of this article appeared on my blog “Writing from the Twelfth House” under the title of “Evoking the Twelfth House.”

Chart Data are confidential, but the source is AA: birth certificate.

References and Notes

1. C . G. Jung, *Analytical Psychology*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, (London), 1976, p. 41.
2. “Second sight” is a form of extrasensory perception, the supposed power to perceive things that are not present to the senses, whereby a person perceives information, in the form of a vision, about future events before they happen (precognition) or about things or events at remote locations (remote viewing). (See Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org>, and Search for “second sight.”)
3. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published by Longmans, Green & Co., 1902, pp. 563–564.
4. From the poem “The Night” by Henry Vaughan (1621–95), v. 9.
5. Brian Swimme, *The Secret Heart of the Cosmos*, Orbis Books, 2003, p. 93.
6. The “multiverse” (or meta-universe) is the hypothetical set of multiple possible universes, including ours, which together comprise all of reality. The different universes within the multiverse are sometimes called parallel universes. Multiverses have been hypothesised in cosmology, physics, astronomy, philosophy, transpersonal psychology, and fiction, particularly in science fiction and fantasy. The specific term “multiverse” was coined by psychologist William James (Wikipedia, “multiverse”).
7. André Gide, *Les faux-monnayeurs* (“The Counterfeiters”), 1925 (WikiQuotes).

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Anne Whitaker lives in Glasgow, Scotland. Her background is in adult education, generic and psychiatric social work, and private practice as a counsellor, counselling supervisor, and mentor. She has worked as an astrologer, teacher, and writer since 1983. Anne blogs at www.anne-whitaker.com, where her e-book *Wisps from the Dazzling Darkness — an open-minded take on paranormal experience — can be purchased. Two original astrological research studies, Jupiter Meets Uranus: 1997 and 2010/11 and The Moon’s Nodes in Action, will be available there as e-books in August.*