

Starkle, Starkle, Little Twink

.....

There is an informal, effective way to challenge astrology that is neither a disdainful dismissal nor a tedious, scientific recital. It is just a matter of asking some simple questions.

JUDITH HAYES

The full quote is, "Starkle, starkle, little twink; who the hell you are, I think?" Uttering these words of drunken contemplation is a pudgy cartoon character, holding what surely must be his sixth or seventh martini. His heavy-lidded eyes gaze out soporifically, as numerous bubbles, surrounding him like a halo, complete the picture. This tiny bit of tomfoolery appeared on a cocktail napkin in the San Francisco Bay Area somewhere around 1980.

She's quoting *cocktail napkins*?! you may rightly ask. Well, yes, actually I am. Contemplation of the stars, drunk or sober, has been a preoccupation with humankind since our inception. It seems to be one of the first things we humans ever set our minds to. And with good reason.

The night sky is a glorious, intimidating, curious thing. Many humans, over many millennia, have gazed up at the

stars and wondered, "What the heck *are* those things?" And for so many millennia, people hadn't a clue. Humans thought up some very creative explanations for the stars. They were holes in the sky where light peeked through from the brilliant heaven above that sky. They were the campfires of thousands of other hunting clans, just like ours—except they were very, very far away. They were the night-lights of the gods. Although we had no clear answer, humans were determined to come up with the right explanation for this enigma.

Those few stars that refused to stay put complicated things for our remote ancestors in this already puzzling mystery. Now why would a handful of stars, among all those thousands, behave that way? Night after night, as the canopy of stars moved majestically and predictably across the sky, there were always those few rebels who refused to go along with the rest. It was eerie.

And if you looked very closely, some of these rebels looked quite different from the rest of the vast array. For one thing, they didn't seem to twinkle like the others. And one of them, on certain nights, actually looked as if it were red. Then there were those two brilliant rebel stars that were always so low on the horizon at sunrise and sunset, that were often more bright than any other star in the sky. These were deep mysteries indeed.

We finally did figure out that the brilliant morning and evening stars were one and the same—Venus. And some of us ultimately realized that these rebels were not stars at all—they were gods, a logical deduction if ever there was one. Well, that turned out not to be the right answer. But once we concluded that these "wandering" stars were in fact planets, we set about the exciting business of interpreting their bizarre motions in the heavens, and how these meanderings might affect us. Thus, astrology was born. And we have been happily engaged in it ever since.

For almost as long as astrology has existed, there have been cogent arguments put forward exposing its fatal flaws. Once the real distances to the planets had been fairly well calculated, and gravitation was more or less understood, these arguments carried even more weight. How could planets, hundreds of millions of miles away from us, have any effect on a newborn baby? Logically, they could not. But logic has never been our strongest suit. Consider:

According to statistics quoted in *Life* magazine (July 1997), 48 percent of Americans say that astrology is valid; in the last twenty years the number of astrologers has increased from around 1,000 to 5,000; and 20 million books on astrology are purchased annually in this country alone. Helping to feed this silliness, and very unsettling to a skeptical thinker, is the fact that the *Life* article author concluded with a ringing endorsement of astrology (see "Life Magazine's Star Struck View of Astrology," SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, November/December 1997).

We seem to be galloping backward. It's as if we just can't wait to return to the Middle Ages, when illnesses were often treated with exorcisms, witches really flew on broomsticks, and the stars unquestionably ruled our destinies with a firm hand. Christian fundamentalism is on the rise and comets are again being perceived as messengers from God, at least in cer-

tain sections of San Diego, California.

So what do we do, other than wring our hands and gloomily anticipate a real, widespread return to medieval thinking? On a personal level, there is much we can do, if we all jump in and give it a try. Undoubtedly you know at least one person who believes in astrology. And though you may not be able to disabuse your believing friend of that cherished belief, exchanges such as the following can



Judith Hayes

be fruitful dialogues, especially if witnessed by several astrology adherents. These conversations will be far more successful if you avoid condescension and patronization. You can, instead, gently nudge your friend to examine his or her own beliefs.

This sort of amiable interaction can do more to encourage critical thinking than quoting all of the actuarial statistics and probability studies put together. You can argue probabilities, statistics, and the laws of universal gravitation until your believing friend begins to doze off, but in the end it's always the same. *I don't care about statistics! I am a Libra, and that describes me to a "T"!* So, there is another way to challenge astrology. In a light, conversational manner, you can ask some simple questions.

Almost no one understands "the precession of the equinoxes." Almost everyone understands "the stars have moved." Without sounding pretentious, you can ask your Libra, "Did you know that the stars have moved since astrology was invented? Yeah, the constellations have all moved, relative to us, quite a bit in the last 2,000 years. So, the planets no longer move in the constellations that way that astrologers say they do. Doesn't that change everything?" The response will likely be a blank stare, followed by a defensive, "That doesn't change the fact that my horoscope fits me absolutely perfectly!"

You can then ask about Hitler. Many people had to have been born at the precise moment that he was. Does that mean those people had more in common with Hitler than with their own friends and family? And then of course there is Stalin, Attila the Hun, Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy, Ivan the Terrible . . . well, obviously this list will be very long. Will all those millions who were born at the same time somehow be soul-mates of these monsters? If not, why not?

Personalize it. Say to your female friend, for example, "Let's

Judith Hayes is a freelance writer. She is currently a senior writer for The American Rationalist, and has a monthly electronic column, The Happy Heretic (www.thehappyheretic.com). She can be reached at this Internet site or at email (jhayes@goldrush.com) or at: P.O. Box 77, Valley Springs, CA 95252-0077.

assume you were born at precisely the same moment as a male, poverty-stricken, Venezuelan farmer/turned bank robber/turned state prisoner. Do you really believe that you have far more in common with him than you have with me, a female, your chosen and thus far unincarcerated friend, who works in the same office you do, and likes the same rock music?" The "yes" you receive to this one should be rather shaky.

Another rumination worth expressing is, "You say you're a Libra. Since there are six billion people in the world, and only twelve signs of the Zodiac, that means there are about 500,000,000 Libras in the world alive today. And if you add the countless billions who have already lived and died, there have been billions of Libras. What could you possibly have in common with all those billions, who lived in wildly different climates, eras and cultures, that you don't have in common with me?" This question is usually a stumper.

Another good question: Who decided which birthdates corresponded with which characteristics? You will no doubt get a response such as, *It was slowly accumulated, ancient knowledge.* So then ask how the ancients who created astrology could categorize *all* humans, when they weren't even aware of the existence of humans on the other side of the planet—the Americas, for example. How could they be sure their horoscopes would apply to those unknown humans? *All humans have similar human traits.* Well, if that's true, then there really aren't any zodiacal differences between any of us, are there? *Yes there are. No matter how big the numbers, the differences are there.* Hmmm. Well, then, whoever it was who determined what these differences are—was he inspired by God? If you don't know who determined these things, or when, or how, then how can you be expected to believe it?

The useful tactic of pointing out the unambiguously conflicting horoscopes offered by different astrologers for the same individual will probably elicit the statement that some astrologers are just not good at their trade—as happens in all

vocations. You then might want to cite the 1985 University of California test conducted by physicist Shawn Carlson (SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, Spring 1986, 194–196; also Randi 1993, 99). He tested thirty astrologers who had been represented by the American Astrological Association to be the "best" in the trade. Their task was to match horoscopes with people, and they got it right in only 33 percent of the 116 horoscopes. Pure chance would produce equal results, as would tossing a coin. Does your friend have an explanation for such a surprising outcome? And just how do we find out which astrologers are "good?" What is the litmus test? Is astrology a talent that is magically acquired by unknown means? Believers in astrology are reluctant to associate the word "magic" with astrology, but if they can't offer a better explanation, they're stuck with it.

Identical twins have been known to be very different. How can this be, you ask? The response is usually a vague shrug, but you can gently press for an answer. The answer should sound hollow even to the person offering it.

These sort of exchanges are almost always worth the effort. In striking a blow for rationalism, you never know when you might plant that one seed of doubt that may someday blossom into the intellectual flower known as critical thinking. It's certainly worth a try.

However, if, even after all of this, your friendly attempts come to nothing, with no minds changed and no seeds planted, don't be too discouraged. It's probably just the way things were meant to be. Perhaps it was written in the stars.

© 1997 by Judith Hayes

References

- Miller, Kenneth. 1997. *Star Struck—A journey to the new frontiers of the zodiac.* *Life Magazine* July 1997: 39-53.
Randi, James. 1993. *The Mask of Nostradamus.* Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books

**Don't Think About
Pseudoscience . . . Without
Skeptical Inquirer**
the magazine for science
and reason

Six times yearly, leading scientist and investigators reveal what's really known about pseudoscience, fringe science, and the paranormal. Published by the world-famous Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). MasterCard and Visa subscription orders call toll free 1-800-634-1610.
1 year - \$35.00 • 2 years - \$58.00 • 3 years - \$81.00
For further information call (716) 636-1425.

visit our web site: <http://www.CSICOP.org>