Retrogrades: When planets do the “Moon Walk”

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In honor of the crab, which represents this Cancer issue, I want to tell you a story about things which move backwards. Last year, a client dashed into my office, about 20 minutes late for her appointment, and completely out of breath. She apologized for being late and explained how for some weird reason, she had spent the last hour retracing her steps back home twice to collect forgotten items, just to find herself stuck in traffic. Then in an attempt to find a short-cut out of the congested highway mess, she found herself lost in a neighborhood that eventually steered her once again closer to her home than to my office. “It was like the universe kept wanting me back home for some reason!” she blurted as she plopped into an office chair.

Unfortunately for my client, who has a very hectic schedule, her appointment turned out to be on the day when Mercury stationed in the sky to begin its first retrograde period for the year. Like Michael Jackson doing the ‘Moon Walk’, a planet occasionally looks like it comes to a slow stop in the sky (its station) and then begins to move backwards (its retrograde motion) to then stop and move forward again (its direct motion). It’s not actually doing this in the sky, but from the frame of reference of the earth, an optical effect occurs making it look like it is moving backwards with respect to the Zodiac background behind it. All planets, with the exception of the Sun and Moon, go through this apparent backwards movement sometime during their solar cycles. Mercury, being the fastest planet with the ability to do this, retrogrades on average, three times per year.

“So what tends to happen when Mercury goes backwards?” asked my client. I explained that all planets, when they slow down and go backwards or back direct again, mean that the things which they rule over will be more carefully re-examined or re-experienced in a different way. When Mercury is going into or coming out of the backwards shuffle, communications, travels, commutes, documents, lessons and investigations tend to get repeated, re-examined, or retraced. A retrograde planets says: “Stop what you are doing and do it again because it’s not quite right yet.” The acuteness of the problem tends to get noticed during the stationary days – either stopping to go retrograde or stopping to go direct.

The most infamous Mercury retrograde moment in our recent history, involved the U.S. Presidential elections of 2000. The elections took place on the 1st Tuesday of November, the 7th. Mercury had been retrograding since October 18th of that year and stationed on the very day of the elections. In fact, the exact time when it stationed coincided approximately with the hour when the voting polls closed on the east coast. Normally, by itself, this would not have indicated the voting turmoil that would ensue. But on this day, Mercury had stationed at the last degree of Libra, the sign of balance and cooperation, indicating the changing point where balance transforms into the beginnings of strong-willed obstinacy (the first degree of Scorpio). Mercury did this at the same time it was in a difficult angular relationship with Mars and Neptune, planets indicating conflict and confusion respectively. If we had astrological weather forecasters, the weather for that day could have read: “high chance of re-examination of communications accompanied by heavy showers of conflict and confusion.” What ensued could be called the most confused and conflict-ridden re-examination of what the public had actually communicated in the history of all U.S. elections.

Repeating and re-examining qualities occur not just in the changing astrological weather of the daily skies, but are also indicated in our birth charts. When a person has a retrograde planet in their birth chart, the planet indicates particular qualities that will be re-examined and repeated in a more thoughtful, impacting, or constructive manner in the life. When the degrees of the planetary placement are early, this more thoughtful repeated approach to those planetary qualities is still new to the person and may feel difficult or unfamiliar. But when the degrees are late, the person is repeating actions around that planet which he or she may be quite experienced with, but which may still need to repeat for other reasons. In the birth chart, we can see ourselves as school children repeating our retrograde planetary lessons more slowly and thoughtfully, whether because we got it a little off the first times or because we are experts and may want to impact others more than once.

An example of a retrograde Jupiter is found in Oprah Winfrey’s chart. Jupiter is the planet that represents religious, ethical and philosophical values. It is often embodied in those who are revealers of truth either in a religious, political, educational, or jurisprudence setting. When Jupiter is retrograde in a birth chart, it tends to indicate those who are working on being deeper thinkers or who might be working on keeping their opinions more to themselves after repeated exposures. Oprah has Jupiter in the chart placement related to career and in the middle degrees of Gemini. So she will repeatedly perform these tasks as a revealer of truths. Yet, her exposure suggests that she wants to do it in a more honest, benevolent and uplifting manner through her career.

The following table gives an outline of what each planet means when it is retrograde:

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| Planet | Positive Retrograde Meanings |
| Mercury | Communicating again. This time more instructively and thoughtfully. |
| Venus | Forming unions again. This time with more love and caring. |
| Mars | Defending things again. This time with more strength and courage. |
| Jupiter | Revealing truths again. This time with more honesty and candor.  |
| Saturn | Making commitments again. This time with more discipline and follow-through.  |
| Uranus | Liberating again. This time with more enlightenment and fairness.  |
| Neptune | Self-Sacrificing again. This time with more empathy and compassion. |
| Pluto | Regenerating again. This time with more spiritual purification and purging.  |

But here’s how the story ends: “What then would it mean,” asked my client, “to have had to retrace my steps back to my house nearly three times?” After some inquiry into her chart and current situation, it turns out that she had placed her house up for sale and was searching for a new one to buy. However, in her haste to sell her home, she had *forgotten* to describe the most important features of her house in her real estate listing, including its *coveted neighborhood*. Her retrograde Mercury experience, which seemed intent on making her go back to her home for lost items or because she didn’t know what neighborhood she was driving through, was mirroring her need to re-examine her communications regarding her house. And the message for the reader is to consider a Mercury retrograde experience not simply as an astrologically determined nuisance consisting of contract errors or computer crashes, but as a chance to re-examine something important you may have missed the first time.