

Neptune and Opening to Creativity

By Dena DeCastro

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As I sat down to write this, I confronted the same struggles that I always do at the beginning of a creative project. I worry about my ability to complete the task. I want to jump up, run around the house, and clean everything. I am scared of failing. I feel like a fraud, imagining that I've only been able to fool people into thinking I'm a writer. The voices come in: "What if such-and-such reads this? What if nobody reads this at all?"

What I've learned so far, however, is that my life without creativity might as well be a life un-lived. If I'm not creating, life becomes flat and boring. The rewards of creativity come when I am able to let go of those familiar ego-centered concerns: Will I look good to others? Will this be a success? Will I get the applause? In order to let go, I find myself calling on my ability to surrender, to trust, and to allow creativity to flow through me. This is a practice I've learned over time—and that I am continuing to learn. I certainly have not mastered it. But when I can relax my fears enough to let a creative project come through me—this is my natal Neptune at work.

By accessing the Neptune within us, we are able to open up to unseen forces, those which reside in the world of ideas and the imagination. In order to do this, we need to be able to move beyond the ego's fears. Since everyone has a Neptune, each of us can learn to use this function to bring forth our own creative expression. Yet while we are all born with the ability to be creative, so many of us shy away from—and even fear—using our creativity. Instead, we project these abilities upon the archetypal Artists, as if they have something special that we do not.

The Artist Mystique

I believe that *everyone* is creative. So it has been an enigma to me as a counseling astrologer that the majority of my clients almost flinch at the word "creativity" when it

comes up in a reading. Some shuffle their feet apologetically, saying, "Oh, I'm just not very creative." Where does this attitude come from? We have come to see creativity as something that only the "gifted" possess, something that is solely conferred by the gods upon the artists. It may very well be that creativity is an energy that comes from *outside of us*, and we are only a channel for it. But what, then, allows the working artist to easily access that flow, while most people shun their inherent ability to do the same? What makes people who define themselves as artists, who make creativity the centerpiece of their lives, any different from the rest of us?

It might appear that creative artists have some kind of special access to their creativity. However, we might come to understand artists instead in terms of certain skills they have, skills that we may also acquire with awareness and practice. From an astrological perspective, we can view the skill set of the creative artist as an attunement to natal Neptune. As Liz Greene writes, "...a dominant Neptune in the birth horoscope reflects a special receptivity to certain feelings and images arising from the deeper and more universal levels of the psyche."¹ A prominently placed Neptune can often be found in the charts of many famous artists. I define *prominent* as being in aspect to the Sun or Moon, on an angle, or in multiple aspects with other planets. I would also include multiple planets in Pisces (Neptune's sign) or the twelfth house (naturally ruled by Neptune) as synonymous with a prominent Neptune.

Because of the close connection with Neptune, perhaps the artist is able to move the ego's fears aside more readily in order to let creative energy flow. When we are overly attached to egoic concerns, such as looking good to others, getting applause, or receiving credit for the work, we can get in our own way. We become unable to freely express what is inside of us. Fears arise in response to the ego's agenda. These fears are a survival mechanism, the ego's way of keeping itself intact. We might hear those voices: "You'll look foolish if you put yourself out there," or, "You'll never be as good as such-and-such," or, "You can't control what will happen next, and that isn't good!" These are the voices that prevent most of us from taking the risks required in order to create. In response, we clamp down on the channel and close off the creative flow. When we do so, we close ourselves off to other things as well. The artist, attuned to Neptune, is somehow able to open up to

inspiration even in the face of the ego's objections. Neptune holds a key for each of us in moving past the ego's need for security and approval so that we can receive the gifts of creative expression.

Why Creativity Matters

When we access the Neptune archetype, we become connected to the transcendent, moving beyond the concerns of everyday life. Creativity is a means of spiritual connection, but this is only one of the gifts that creative expression can bring us. The wheel of the birth chart represents the life areas that come together to create wholeness. Without creativity (represented in the fifth house of the birth chart), we would be missing one of the crucial ingredients of an integrated, fulfilling life. We channel and express our creativity in different ways, but each of us has the ability to experience the joy that comes from engaging our innate talents. The fifth house of the birth chart is known as the house of Creativity, Play, Recreation, Romance, and Children (or the Inner Child). We might also simply consider it to be the house of all things enjoyable. The fifth house is naturally ruled by the Sun, which is itself is the creative spiritual source. This is the area of life in which we are rejuvenated and energized. We can "fall in love with life" when we are engaged with any creative activity. Even experimental cooking, rearranging drawers, gardening, and decorating a room are creative acts that can energize us, if they are things we enjoy. When we let the creative force flow through us, we are connected to life in an almost romantic way.

Neptune allows the artist to open to inspiration, and the fifth house is where we can manifest the product of that meeting between heaven and earth. Only through consciously working with our Neptune can we empower ourselves to bring joy into our own lives through creative expression. We might begin by observing how creative artists move past the obstacles that stop most of us in our tracks.

Merely a Channel

Creative artists throughout the ages—musicians, writers, painters, poets, actors—have expressed the idea that a creative work came *through* them, as opposed to believing

themselves to be its source. They often see themselves as a channel for the art, which itself seems to come from *somewhere else*. In a 2009 interview, Bob Dylan expresses the idea that his songs were written *through* him:

Over more than four decades, Bob Dylan has produced 500 songs and more than 40 albums. Does he ever look back at the music he's written with surprise?

*"I used to. I don't do that anymore. I don't know how I got to write those songs. Those early songs were almost magically written," says Dylan, who quotes from his 1964 classic, "It's Alright, Ma." "Try to sit down and write something like that. There's a magic to that, and it's not Siegfried and Roy kind of magic, you know? It's a different kind of a penetrating magic."*²

[Dylan's chart](#) reflects a very prominent Neptune placement. His Neptune makes major aspects to five of his planets: it trines the Moon, Jupiter, Saturn, and Uranus, and squares Mercury.³ Neptune is also conjunct his North Node, indicating the evolutionary need to move toward the lessons of Neptune in this lifetime. Neptune as it sits on the North Node is an ally for Dylan. Each of the planets that Neptune aspects functions in relationship to Neptune. For example, with Neptune trine his Moon, Dylan can easily find emotional security and sustenance (Moon) when spending time in the world of symbols and dreams. Neptune square his Mercury, on the other hand, shows that Dylan may struggle with clear communication. This has been evident in his speaking style during interviews, in which he speaks softly, and even mumbles enigmatically. The work of a Neptune–Mercury square is in balancing the psychic and intuitive input of Neptune with Mercury's need for understanding. Yet his Neptune and Mercury are both in Mercury-ruled signs, so perhaps this accounts for his ability to convey material from Neptune's realm with some amount of ease, despite the tension usually indicated by a square.

Dylan's attunement to Neptune ultimately seems to grant him a strong ability to stand outside of ego-consciousness. His lack of need to claim credit for the work may seem, on the one hand, merely humble. In the aforementioned interview, he effectively dismisses his own role in the writing of his songs. But he seems truly mystified as to the source of the work.

Another musician with a prominent Neptune is musician Jeff Buckley. His musical expression was often described by his fans as ethereal, otherworldly, spiritual—in other words, Neptunian. In an interview about Buckley's work after his death, fan Brad Pitt stated, "He tapped into something and he was the conduit. And it makes me think of this: where does art come from? Where does a true genius come from?"⁴ Buckley had an odd kind of fame; his name, spoken in a crowd, often goes unrecognized. But he is seen by many—particularly fellow musicians—as one of the bright lights in the modern era of music. He is known for his body of work in the '90s, particularly his album *Grace*, which is both critically acclaimed and dear to fans and musicians alike. Unfortunately, he passed away at the young age of 30, victim to an accidental drowning. He left the world with much of his potential still unexpressed. Yet during his short life, he made a huge impact upon the musical community. Bono of U2 once called Buckley "a pure drop in an ocean of noise."⁵

The oceanic metaphor is an apt one, for the prominence of Neptune and the element of water in [Buckley's natal chart](#) is undeniable. Neptune is conjunct his Sun, Venus, and Mercury in water sign Scorpio, trine his Saturn in Pisces, and sextile his Mars and Uranus in Virgo, making a grand total of six major aspects in his chart. Buckley felt that his lyrics came from poems: "Songs come out of poems, and poems come out of dreams...or reality."⁶ The lyrics of the title song from the album *Grace* embody the Neptunian concept of complete and ultimate surrender, even to death. Of the song, Buckley said, "'Grace' is basically a death prayer. Not something of sorrow but just casting away any fear of death. No relief will come; you'll really just have to stew in your life until it's time to go. But sometimes, somebody else's faith in you can do wonders."⁷

Buckley seemed to be able to create from a fearless place. He saw himself as a servant to the work. When asked how he'd like to be remembered, Buckley answered, "As a good friend. I don't really need to be remembered; I hope the music's remembered."⁸ Like Bob Dylan (whom he greatly admired), Buckley expressed a lack of need to take credit for the end result of the creativity.

Confronting Shadow Neptune

Along with the gifts that a pronounced Neptune in the chart may bring the creative artist, there are also the shadow expressions: addiction, escapism, and mental or emotional instability. It is possible to go so far in the direction of negating the ego that there is a loss of healthy ego function. Stories of creatively talented individuals who abuse alcohol and drugs, or who have suffered from mental breakdowns, are commonplace. There is strong evidence for a correlation between creative talent and the tendency toward these behaviors. So what is it about being an artist that opens the door to Neptune's shadow expression?

The artist's life is by necessity filled with risk and vulnerability. The creative artist must constantly face the fear of rejection, the fear of not measuring up to other artists, the fear of not meeting one's own high expectations. Additionally, creative artists are often sensitive, a quality that enables them to be gifted in their crafts. But those who are most sensitive can find the harsh world and its suffering to be overwhelming. It is the very gift of sensitivity, then, which may often cause the artist to want to shut down. In order to numb themselves to these overwhelming feelings, the artist may choose any number of available numbing substances. Or perhaps they experience a mental break, a split from reality.

The archetype of the "Suffering Artist" is pronounced in our culture. Edgar Allan Poe, Vincent Van Gogh, Ernest Hemingway, Billy Holliday . . . these are just a few of the hundreds of famous names that at first bring to mind immense creative achievements, shortly followed by images suffering, mental illness, and addiction. Each of these artists has a prominent Neptune in the birth chart.⁹ We see the starving artist, the self-sacrificing artist, the mentally-ill artist, the alcoholic artist. And who of us would want to go there willingly? We fear opening ourselves to the very gifts that allow the artist to create.

But when we do not engage our Neptune in life-affirming ways—creative expression, spiritual practice, service to a higher ideal or vision—we find ourselves searching for connection via shortcuts. Denied Neptune leads down the same shadow road as an over-functioning Neptune: pointless escapism that serves to take us further and further from

the very sense of connection we long for. By activating our Neptune proactively in healthy ways, we move off the shadow road. We can regain a feeling of belonging, to the universe and to ourselves.

Creating with Neptune

I'd like to offer some practical activities that can help us to exercise our Neptune function. By opening the door to Neptune's associations with dreams, the otherworld, and spiritual practice, we can access our own creative gifts.

Dream Work

Neptune is connected to the dream world through its association with the unconscious, the liminal, and the unseen. Dreams do not occupy the physical world we experience as objective reality, residing instead in the domain of sleep, where our conscious mind—with its ego-centric orientation—is subdued. When dreaming, we experience an altered state of consciousness that, from the vantage point of waking life, seems unreal. But the dream state can inform our waking lives in ways that enhance our ability to connect with our creativity.

Dreams have often been a resource for the creative artist. Paul McCartney, for example, famously received the melody for the song "Yesterday" complete in a dream.¹⁰

[McCartney's chart](#) features several Neptunian signatures. He has Neptune in late Virgo conjunct the Ascendant, with Neptune squaring the Sun and Mercury in Gemini, and Jupiter in early Cancer. As with Dylan's chart, Neptune and Mercury are both in signs ruled by Mercury. This configuration points to some ease, despite the square, in transmitting information from the dream world (Neptune) to the conscious mind (Mercury). Neptune in square to McCartney's Sun also indicates the challenge between needing a rational explanation (Sun in Gemini) and surrendering to the invitation into more mysterious waters via the dream state. In fact, it took McCartney some time to come to terms with the fact that he could have received something directly from a dream. He questioned it in good Gemini fashion, asking around to see if perhaps he'd unconsciously stolen the melody from another song. Still, he went directly to the piano

and played the tune from his dream upon waking, as if taking dictation directly from Neptune.

There are ways to further develop our ability to connect with our dreams, thereby enhancing our creativity. The practice of lucid dreaming in particular can lead to creative breakthroughs. In her article "The Lucid Artist: Lucid Dreaming as a Transformative Element of the Artistic Process," author Clare Johnson, Ph.D., writes: "My research has shown that while asleep and dreaming, the artist can work uninhibitedly with new techniques and mediums, consciously seek ideas for paintings or stories, enter into dialogue with fictional characters, sidestep the inner critic, and work on current creative projects."¹¹ Johnson is herself an artist as well as a scientist who has focused her research on lucid dreams. She also states that, for those who find lucid dreaming difficult, an alternate set of techniques designed to induce a "creative trance" can also induce a similar effect of being able to access creative ideas more readily as dream imagery infiltrates the imagination.¹²

Robert Moss, dream expert and author of several books on the topic, has written of dreams as a way to enhance every aspect of our lives, including our creativity. In *Dreaming True*, he states that dreams "...deliver both the *big* creative breakthroughs and the flow state in which we can follow through and bring them into full manifestation."¹³ The "flow state" might also be understood as that Neptunian place where we can release our identification with the day world of the ego, and the symbols and images can emerge from the deep waters of the unconscious. Working with our dreams can allow us to let the rules of waking life dissolve, because in a dream, anything can happen. When we spend time working consciously with our dreams, these rules can be seen from a different perspective and therefore become more malleable.

Besides journaling, drawing, and lucid dreaming, a practice called "incubating a dream" has become well-known with those who regularly look to their dreams for guidance and creative inspiration. This practice can be used to actively call in creative ideas or to ask for advice on a creative project. As Moss writes in *Conscious Dreaming*: "You can incubate a dream to solve problems or provide creative inspiration in an intentional

way."¹⁴ Incubating a dream is a simple process. You need only think of a problem, question, or project as you are falling asleep, then set the intention for your dreams to offer guidance. It is also helpful to set an intention to remember your dreams. Although the dreams that occur may not always seem directly related to the intention put forth by the dreamer, the unconscious has had time to process it during sleep. This is perhaps where we get the concept of "sleeping on it," referring to letting a situation that has been troubling us rest overnight before dealing with it. Dreams open us up to messages from our own unconscious that the conscious mind, ruled by the ego, filters out.

Unseen Helpers

Neptune, in its association with the otherworld and the invisible realms, may also connect us to what some artists have referred to as "The Muse." The Muse is a Greek term referring to the daughters of Zeus, goddesses who reside over the arts. It has been the belief of many creative artists that they must call upon, invoke, or pray to the Muse in order to receive guidance and inspiration. In an interview with Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, she describes the process of negotiating with the Muse: "The world is being constantly circled as though by gulf stream forces, ideas and creativity that want to be made manifest, and they're looking for portals to come through in people. And if you don't do it, they'll go find someone else. So you have to convince it that you're serious, you have to show it respect and you have to talk to it and let it know that you're there."¹⁵ The "it" she is referring to is the Muse. She goes on to tell the story of how she prayed to the Muse for the title of *Eat, Pray, Love*, and it arrived the next morning. [Gilbert's own Neptune](#) in late Scorpio is conjunct Mars in early Sagittarius and trine her Sun and Mercury in Cancer. There is an easeful exchange between Neptune and her Mercury–Sun conjunction, and all three planets are in water signs. Her willingness to relax into the flow of information that comes through Neptune is encouraged by this connection. Her out-of-bounds Mars in Sagittarius in its conjunction with Neptune directs the passionate pursuit of adventure toward a palpable engagement with Neptune's mysteries—such as unseen helpers.

Angels may also offer creative assistance. In his motivational book, *The War of Art*, Steven Pressfield asserts that to do anything creative, we must continually fight what he calls "Resistance," which arrives wearing the faces of fear, doubt, and the usual list of ego-related concerns. He writes of angels as our allies in the war against Resistance: "I think angels make their home in the Self, while Resistance has its seat in the Ego. The fight is between the two. The Self wishes to create, to evolve. The Ego likes things just the way they are."¹⁶ When the artist forms the intention to create, Pressfield believes angels, the Muse, and other unseen helpers show up to assist. However, the artist must surrender to the idea that wants to be born: "The artist is the servant of that intention, those angels, that Muse."¹⁷ Whether or not we believe in the Muse or in angels, perhaps when we simply humble ourselves enough to ask for help, we are reminded that creative ideas do not actually come from us, but *through us*. By placing ourselves in the position of servant to the work, the pressure to come up with something unique, spectacular, or earthshattering, is released.

Creativity and Spiritual Practice

Our creativity can be aided by having a spiritual practice. Whether engaging in contemplation, meditation, or prayer, we open ourselves up to connection with something beyond our ego. Through contemplation, we might sit quietly and turn over an idea in our heads, allowing images and words to float through our minds. In mindfulness meditation, we can use breath and body awareness to turn down the volume of the ego-mind, thus strengthening our ability to be inspired. Through prayer, we may actively request assistance with our creativity. Perhaps we connect with a deity, or perhaps we make the request of a personified guide or angel. But through each of these practices, we place ourselves in the position of surrender, humility, and receptivity. When we are able to move the ego out of the driver's seat for a time, we can receive what comes.

Conclusion

There are fewer people on the planet who consider themselves to be creative than who claim the mantle of "artist." We continue to be fascinated by watching the artist from afar, playing at the edge where ego dissolves into Neptune's all-consuming waters. We

project upon the artist the ability to take us into these waters vicariously. But we are afraid to swim there ourselves. Neptune asks us to surrender the ego's need for a clearly defined map of reality and to trustingly walk into a terrain where dreams are as real as waking life, where the angels and the Muse reside.

But while Neptune is often associated with gentleness, the path of Neptune is not always an easeful one. When we begin a creative endeavor, we must confront uncertainty and self-doubt, and that overwhelming feeling that "all of this may be for nothing." We know that the path of the creative artist has its joys and sorrows, its triumphs and sacrifices. But when we own the artist within ourselves, our lives can become infused with magic. And magic is something that I, for one, would not want to live without.

Chart Data

Bob Dylan, Rodden Rating AA. May 24, 1941, 9:05 PM, Duluth, MN

Jeff Buckley, Rodden Rating C. November 17, 1966, 10:49 PM, Anaheim, CA. (Note: Although the Rodden Rating is currently C, I have confirmed this birth time with a source close to Jeff Buckley's mother.).

Paul McCartney, Rodden Rating B. June 18, 1942, 2:00 PM, Liverpool, England.

Elizabeth Gilbert, birth time unknown. July 18, 1969, noon chart, Waterbury, CT.

Endnotes

¹Liz Greene, *The Astrological Neptune and the Quest for Redemption* (Weiser Books, 1996) 319.

² Bob Dylan, interview with Ed Bradley, *CBS News*, February 18, 2009, http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560_162-658799.html.

³Major aspects are synonymous here with the Ptolemaic aspects: conjunction, sextile, square, trine and opposition.

⁴ "Jeff Buckley: Everybody Here Wants You," from *Memorable Quotes* (television show), 2002, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0351127/quotes>, accessed January 10, 2013.

⁵ Jeff Apter, *A Pure Drop: The Life of Jeff Buckley* (Omnibus Press, 2008) 223.

⁶ Jeff Buckley, personal interview, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toE8YoMtcRE>.

⁷ "Jeff Buckley: Everybody Here Wants You," from *Memorable Quotes* (television show), 2002, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0351127/quotes>, accessed January 10, 2013.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Shadow Neptune: artists with prominent Neptune in the chart:

- Billie Holiday: Neptune opposed Moon, trine Mars and Mercury; stellium (Mercury, Venus, Mars, and Jupiter) in Pisces
- Edgar Allen Poe: Neptune conjunct Saturn, square Moon, Venus, and Pluto; stellium (Moon, Venus, Jupiter, Pluto) in Pisces
- Ernest Hemingway: Neptune square Mars, opposed Saturn, sextile Mercury, conjunct Pluto, conjunct South Node
- Vincent van Gogh: Neptune in Pisces square Moon; Neptune, Mars and Venus in Pisces

¹⁰ McCartney received the entire melody in a dream one night in his room at the Wimpole Street home of his then girlfriend Jane Asher and her family. Upon waking, he hurried to a piano and played the tune to avoid forgetting it. Turner, Steve, *A Hard Day's Write: The Stories Behind Every Beatles Song* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2005) 83.

¹¹ Clare Johnson, "The Lucid Artist: Lucid Dreaming as a Transformative Element of the Artistic Process," *Dream Time: A Publication for the Study of Dreams* vol. 29, no. 3 (Fall 2012), 9.

¹² Ibid, 11.

¹³ Robert Moss, *Dreaming True: How to Dream Your Future and Change Your Life for the Better* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000) xxxii.

¹⁴ Robert Moss, *Conscious Dreaming* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1996) 315.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Gilbert, "Me, Myself and Muse," Radiolab (audio, begins at 8 mins 10 secs) <http://www.radiolab.org/2011/mar/08/me-myself-and-muse/>, accessed December 15, 2012.

¹⁶ Steven Pressfield, *The War of Art* (Black Irish Entertainment, LLC, 2002, Kindle version) 134.

¹⁷ Ibid, 162.