

Practices

Star Charting*

Bess Matassa

**Star
Charting**



Practices

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Introduction

The Practice of Astrology

The stars saved my life.

Bottomed out in the throes of a psychological breakdown during my Saturn Return—a cosmic event that inspires reckoning—I nearly poofed myself from the planet. As I teetered on the edge of the subway platform, ready to roll onto the tracks, my life depended on the answer to one question: *Could I live with what lived inside of me?*

In astrological terms, what lived inside of me was on fire. My birth chart—the symbolic snapshot of the cosmos taken as each one of us enters it—contains an Aries stellium, a thick concentration of this sign's charge. The original big bang of the zodiac, the first fire sign of Aries invites us to strike a match and bring everything around us to life. I come from an ancestral line set ablaze. My maternal grandmother, thrice exorcised as a child, had once actually flared up beside the family poker table, courtesy of a lit Newport dropped into a housecoat pocket (she swore she'd quit). Her sister had suffered a

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far worse fate by flame: She blacked out and was incinerated in a boardinghouse bed.

As an adolescent, my own skin erupted into outbreaks of shiny red hives (“too much heat,” according to the Eastern doctors). And from those red hots that smoldered on my surface, everything started to ignite. I branded daredevil boyfriends in the second and third degrees, goading them into incendiary acts of fire juggling and breathing. When my own hair caught in a candle while I bent over a bathroom sink in a cocaine-fueled frenzy, I just let it burn.

Like some kind of cannibalistic cardioverter, I was hell-bent on provoking life’s pulse to beat faster. And by the time of my Saturn Return in my late twenties, I’d become a verb with no subject in sight. In the oft-cited concept championed by Carl Jung—one of the progenitors of “psychological astrology,” a twentieth-century answer to more deterministic strains of studying the stars—until we make the unconscious within us conscious, we will collide with it in the world and call it fate. If my fate was on fire, I was finally ready to face it.

Guided by an astrologically inspired Jungian analyst during my breakdown, my crude form of power was ground up by the celestial body Pluto. A “higher octave” expression of Aries energy, Pluto is the planetary god who metal-detects both the matter we’ve exiled from our consciousness and the precious stuff we’ve clung on to at all costs. The heroic story I’d cultivated to keep myself safe got shredded, and my deepest fears about who I really was beneath all my bravado were laid bare: puny, pathetic, and destined to be pulverized.

Astrology became my headlamp in the darkness, and I mined mystical meaning for dear life. In the star-charted ecosystem

that lived within me, every single element was infused with significance; nothing was arbitrary, out of place, or unworthy of love. Far from circumstantial or pathological, through the eyes of astrology my intensity was mythological instead. And with mythos and meaning, anything was enduring and, perhaps, even possible. My crisis issued an ultimatum to the heroics I'd always held close: If I said yes to the bigness that still lived within my birth chart, it would remember me to a world where I still mattered—and where my story was far from done.

At the heart of my expedition into my interior was the ultimate gift and challenge of this language of the stars: the chance to quit grasping *for* power and *against* powerlessness, and to actually start participating in the powers that were moving through me and all around me. The life forces that were mine but also so much more than just mine.

The Practice of Star Charting:

A Biodiversity of Being

Long before the stars saved my life, they had first brought me to it.

At age eleven, my hot little fire-sign hands clutched DK Publishing's *Parkers' Astrology* as I pored over the full-color pages packed with glossy images of the colors, cities, herbs, and animals corresponding to each zodiac sign. The world spilled its sparkle, and my everyday existence became an ongoing astrological treasure hunt. Determined to scratch 'n' sniff every archetype out in the wild, I hunted signs of the signs everywhere. Gemini's prism-like possibilities appeared in stick-on rhinestone earrings at the drugstore. Scorpio's excavation of

the outmoded surfaced in thick charcoal face masks applied ceremoniously at sleepovers.

What I encountered through these scratch 'n' sniffs were astrology's fundamental tenets of archetypal resonance and energetic affinity. From Babylon onward, similar astrological symbols and associated meanings have sprung up spontaneously across cultures and have remained remarkably stable through time. This symbology has been inspired by our reciprocity with the cycles of the natural world and our felt experience of its four elements (fire, earth, air, water)—the omnipresent matter from which all stuff on earth is made. Astrology is the language in which existence speaks.

Astrology “works” because we are part of everything that surrounds us, it is part of us, and we are all part of something larger. This is the ancient, hermetic “as above, so below” precept not as a fancy metaphor but as living fact (as in “heaven is a place on earth” in the lyrics of Belinda Carlisle). The energetic current of Gemini, for example, is immanent; it already breathes its way through life. We lift it to the surface when we feel its presence in a person, place, or thing and recognize it by its Gemini name. The stick-on rhinestone earrings aren't merely symbolic representations of the sign's color-changing qualities—they *are* Gemini energy itself. And whether or not we're born under the Sun sign of Gemini or have Gemini planets placed in our birth charts (more on this soon), any one of us can stick on those stones and catch all kinds of light.

In my childhood scratch 'n' sniffs, I didn't actually need to understand how or why astrology worked, or how it came into the world, because it was already here and working—its essence

emanated from everything around me and was instantly recognizable. This is the numinous potential of astrology as a revolutionary mode of apprehending the world. When we suspend our obsession with ferreting out the how and why of something, and soften our hunger to extract and impose meaning, we can become more curious about listening to and liberating inherent significance. Instead of pulling the pieces of an apparatus apart and asking them to explain themselves and prove their purpose, we start putting the fractured shards of this world back together where they belong. Understanding becomes an art of recognizing an already meaningful, magical universe.

This approach demystifies and redemocratizes divinity. When we return astrology to its original lineage as part of life itself—rather than holding it at analytical arm's length as something to be dissected, intellectualized, or even learned—we return it to all of us to enjoy and interpret, no matter our context or conditions. Astrology becomes a sacred process of participation through which we can remember and recover our original, intuitive knowing. Thus, we can transform it from an occult tool that's too often been kept hidden and hoarded by a select few and turn it back into the open secret we've shared with all of life, all along.

The psychological breakdown that birthed my career as a professional mystic was contemporaneous with the completion of my PhD. In my field of urban cultural geography, I was enamored of any method that kept me close to the ground: ethnography, embodiment, everyday practice. As I began offering astrological services to others, I was beckoned even closer down to earth, and any lingering traces of academia's conceptual

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distance quickly burned off. When reading birth charts, I was handling people's hearts in real time, and the magic had to meet the messy matter of life experience at every turn. With my feet firmly on the street, my first offering, called *Street Signs*, led people on astrological walking tours that brought their birth chart energies alive through New York City's landscape.

While I'm deeply indebted to the work of psychological astrologers like Liz Greene and Dane Rudhyar — among many other mystics and mediums of all stripes — my own astrological practice continues to thrive and evolve when it breathes through all forms of beingness rather than seeking to situate itself within a particular cohort of practitioners or field of study. The “field” is the fullest range of existence, unfiltered. And the “method” is to let more of this matter meet us and to call it by new names. Here, astrology becomes a poetic practice that pulses in concert with all kinds of creations: from the life-leaning-forward of Aries grass blades punching through the pavement cracks to the iridescent bubble-pop confections of Pisces Moon Carly Rae Jepsen.

From baby Bess astro-autodidact to post-Saturn-Return professional star charter, my astrological practice has always been born from the beauty of this original belief: Astrology is no different from life. It *is* life, and when wielded with wonder, it can give us even more life. Seen as synonymous with existence, astrology becomes a call to celebrate the soul of every speck and mini-shimmer that's got a spark. Quite simply, if you've lived through it, touched it, tasted it, there's an astrological name for it. And when we call things by their names and let them exist in all their beingness, we liberate them to become more of what they are already born to be.

This is the true alchemy of astrology used in service of evolution: to behold without analysis, explanation, or augmentation; to hold with love and to let live.

Collectively, we are experiencing a crisis of separation—born from barren ways of existing built on extraction, othering, and the abject denial of human complexity. We see it in cancel culture’s refusal to acknowledge our capacity for reckoning, transformation, and redemption. It’s in the haunted hierarchies of toxic masculinity and white supremacy. In the saturated media sight lines, which seem to show us everything while often leaving us with less than nothing. In our ceaseless march toward artificial intelligence without the commensurate growth of our emotional intelligence. In our self-imposed exile from the earth itself. And, most terrifyingly, in one ferocious fact: After centuries of so-called progress, we cannot stop killing each other.

As our crisis of separation has escalated, modern spirituality practices—and astrology, in particular—have proliferated, fueled by the human quest to find some scraps of meaning amidst the shrapnel and to try to remember that we all share something larger that might even be divine. We’ve begun to intuit, and rightfully so, that our challenges cannot be faced by employing the same methodologies and worldview that created them: ones that rely only on what we can see, touch, manipulate, and prove and that prize the trafficking of information at the cost of emotional experience. We need a new mythos, now more than ever. Stories with heart and guts that allow us to be both human and heroic.

Some of the astrological offerings that have emerged from our crisis are nuanced, while others are more like fast fixes: date-driven horoscopes, “what’s your sign?” memes, and dat-

ing apps that promise star-studded soulmates at first swipe. At best, these offerings give us an expanded language for thinking about who we are and what we're up to on earth. At worst, they become akin to an astrological eugenics that keeps us safe in our separateness by deflecting blame and denying ownership of certain aspects of life. *He's such a Taurus, that's why he's so stubborn. . . . I'll never be with another Scorpio—toxic! . . . I've got to wait till Mercury retrograde ends to make plans. . . .*

As with all modes of meaning making, we suffer when we use astrology for determinism and event-based prediction at both ends of the fate–free-will spectrum. As either a fatalistic abdication of responsibility—where we shut our eyes tight and hope the stars align for a “good” future—or a rigid, rationalist exercise in figuring out exactly how astrology “works” so that we can strip it of its intuitive poetry and use it to control outcomes and mastermind our grand plans.

But astrology is neither a religious practice nor a scientific method. It is not the answer to our prayers nor even to our questions. Instead, when we let it live in the liminal space between fate and free will, this ancient romance language becomes a love letter to the anima in everything. It offers us a chance to respond to our current crisis of separation with the diversity of divinity, by beholding the astounding complexity inside ourselves, each other, and the world around us.

When we practice astrology, we shift from a who's-doing-what-to-whom universe of causality into an emergent landscape of collaboration with the weather conditions, which can actually give rise to change. We stop asking, *What's going to happen to me?* and start wondering, *What's happening here?* By shifting our inquiry and invigorating our compassion and

curiosity, we become part of the world once again. Instead of pushing away certain expressions of life that might not be to our taste, we become omnivores of experience who metabolize every flavor, from the clarifying citrus of Libra to the fortifying bone stock of Capricorn. This is the practice that led me away from my duel-to-the-death attempt to eradicate the gnarliest bits of myself and back into the streets that teemed with all signs of life. Beyond perceptions of good versus bad lies an altogether different form of power.

In this universe, there are no harbingers on the horizon, only happenings that flower from collaborative forces: The future is made from the macro movements of the cosmos, our micro maneuvers down on the ground, and everything in between, all firing together in this very moment. Free from the constraints of blame-based causality, we are free to take up all of our life's causes—suspending our judgment, befriending what's meeting us, sensing how it wants to move, and helping it move along.

This is the discovery of soul purpose: the marriage of our personal will with the will of this whole wild world.

Charting Your Course

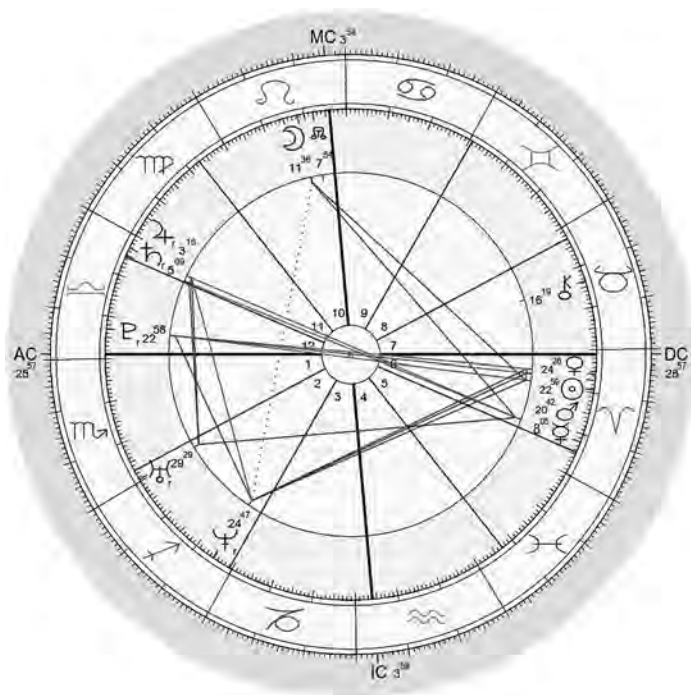
For most of us, our first formal encounter with astrology is through the broad strokes of our Sun sign (also known as our “zodiac sign” or “star sign”) and then through the more personalized lens of our astrological birth chart.

A blueprint of the cosmos that shows the arrangement of the celestial bodies at the moment we debuted, our **birth chart** reveals our creative challenges and calls to action in this incarnation (fig I.1). At the heart of this chart sits our **Sun sign**,

which marks us with a singular mission: We are here to take up its cause and let its energy course through us. Behind the Sun's glisten of exposure sits our **Moon sign**, a more nocturnal shade of self that imbues us with emotional atmosphere and unconscious nature. And to alchemize the two, we have our **Rising sign**. The sign that was emerging on the eastern horizon when we materialized, our Rising sign is the front door through which we meet life and self—a thematic refrain that leads us on the adventure of our lifetime. Together, these three pieces form our dynamic core: a mission, a mood, and a destined meeting.

From here, each of us has a whole suite of planets placed in different signs (that is, our Sun sign might be Capricorn while our Venus sign might be Aquarius). We each have different sign saturation points. For example, we may have planets placed in Virgo, but none in Scorpio. When three or more planets sit within a single sign, we've got a **stellium**—an amplification of energy that invites us to become extra intimate with that sign archetype.

You could spend lifetimes trying to untangle the chart's lines and interpret its calculations. And while there is value to the specificity of astrology's machinations, some of this technical tangle is also evidence of how the art's inherently intuitive qualities have been co-opted by our cultural obsession with the codifiable, provable, rational, and, in fact, chart-able. In my perusal of *Parkers'* I skipped right over the pages on how to compute this tangle using calculators and protractors—instructions hidden all the way in the back and definitely not printed in full color or high gloss. My eleven-year-old self was already too busy exploring the zodiac out in the wild, as some-



- 1.1 A map of the cosmos at the time of our birth, the astrological birth chart divides the sky into twelve sections. Beginning with the Rising sign, labeled as AC or ascendant, and moving counterclockwise, we see an outer wheel of twelve zodiac signs. Next is an inner wheel of celestial bodies that sit within those signs, separated into pie pieces, called houses. The lines of communication that run between parts of the chart are called aspects. The Sun sign is the doughnut with the dot in the center of the circle, and the Moon sign is the crescent slice. Chart image generated by astro.com.

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thing breathable and wearable that sprang from the dynamic experience of the world rather than a representation of it.

Star Charting is not a book about how to explain every cranny of your birth chart, cast your horoscope, or crack the code of the cosmos. Instead, it is a practice of personal and collective poetics and a process of reanimating the world. When we practice star charting, we begin with the inhabitation and observation of life itself, rather than letting our charts delimit the cadence of our experience. You both *are* and *are not* your birth chart. As you travel through this book, you will honor your personal zodiacal saturation points. And you will also head “off-road” and beyond the chart to encounter signs of the signs wherever you roam.

The **twelve zodiac signs** illuminate a journey of the human spirit through a rainbow of evolutionary experience. This adventure begins with the first sign of Aries, in all its va-va-voom verbness. And it ends in the ethers of Pisces, which Slip 'n Slides us beyond our stable notions of self.

These are twelve modes of perceiving, listening to, and bearing witness to life. Twelve approaches to meeting it and moving with its currents. Twelve ways of not losing heart. And twelve styles of co-creating change that are born from channeling the power that moves through all of us—and through everything else with a beat.

Tracing this arc, *Star Charting* invites you to rock and roll through the natural rhythms of all of life. Each year, the Sun spends about a month in each sign: The year starts in Aries season with the spring or fall equinox (depending on your hemisphere) in late March, and ends in Pisces season, twelve months later on the

other side. During each of these **sign seasons**, life on the ground dialogues with that archetype and invites all of us—regardless of our personal chart—into communion with its themes.

Each of these twelve signs is made from one of the **four elements**: the stuff that already surrounds you and lives within you, present in everything from a burner flame to a bubble bath. Fire gives us life force. Earth gives us form. Air gives us freedom. And water gives us back.

Each of these elements is then filtered through one of the **three modalities**: cardinal, fixed, and mutable (there are cardinal, fixed, and mutable fire signs, and so on through the elements). We arise through the four cardinal signs that initiate each season; we abide in the fixed signs that steady each season's center; and we disseminate in the mutable signs, where the season falls away.

Within each chapter, you'll encounter a sign's energy through a **quartet of practices**. Because this book is born from the belief that the practice of star charting is synonymous with the practice of living—that astrology *is* life—I'll first bring it alive the only way I can: through my own existence. Next, I'll invite you to witness it from a greater distance. Then, you'll make it a part of your story. And finally, we'll free it together.

Throughout all of these practices, we will approach the signs as living entities that are present within each of us, and within all of life, in different concentrations at different moments. The signs are this book's truest protagonists: They are the spirits seeking to express themselves through our flesh. They are what give us animation. And as we channel them consciously, we give them, and all of life in turn, more spirit.

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The words written in this book are intended as more than just conveyors of meaning. The poetics are part of the sensory practice of bringing the signs into being—spoken as a kind of full-bodied onomatopoeia where the sounds of the sign sound like the sign itself. This is language as incantation and invocation. As part of your star charting practice, feel free to cast spells: Read passages aloud without grasping for analytical meaning and see what is summoned.

While each sign has a core form and feeling tone, there are infinite interpretative variations and no right or wrong resonances. I encourage you to take these energies and make them your own by developing new associations and speaking astrology in an accent that is yours alone. One way to do so is to start by identifying a “magic key” for each sign that is highly personal: a scent, scene, sound, sensation that immediately opens you into its lifeworld. An inherited fur coat might be your gateway to Capricorn’s timeless majesty. A tube of suntan lotion might unveil Leo’s emblazoned heart.

As you follow these interconnected registers and rhythms of our practice, a biodiverse symphony of being will begin to build inside of you and around you: colliding, beholding, channeling, and divining.

Colliding

We each meet our self by meeting life according to our own matter and alchemizing it into something more. Each sign chapter in this book opens with my own personal practice of astrology: close encounters with the signs that have composed my life. They are inevitably infused with the scorched, splashy style that’s emblematic of my Aries-Leo-Mars-Pluto-heavy

makeup. The signs have been served to me in unsubtle forms, Minute Maid frozen juice concentrate style. And I have often met my self through fighting, fucking, and life-forcing in the face of death.

Throughout these stories, many practices proliferate—lip-sticking, flying, feasting, strutting—evidence that when imbued with attention and meaning, all forms of living are always already forms of divining. Beyond all the glitter and grit of these tales, the heart that beats at the center conveys the omnipresence of spirit in its rollicking range of forms and the possibility of encountering divinity at any depth. And beyond their particularity to me, these bits of memoir still carry the universal, archetypal shape of their elements. My fire-sign stories spark my own self at their center. The earth chapters are weightier and more finite, charting my body and time. My air missives trend to the abstract and speak of translations. Water tales dance with returns, releases, and endings.

They are the love poems of an astrology that's made from encounter and exchange. While my fiery self flames throughout, these stories share my lifelong practice of harnessing the signs to become new rhinestone-stick-on sides of self and to go elsewhere. When we meet the signs on their terms and give more of ourselves to them, they give themselves right back. As I lived these stories, and processed them through writing, I had to face Aries, earn Capricorn, let Gemini elude me, and feel Taurus delight me.

Meeting the signs means exploring the tension between our willingness to morph and our deep knowledge of what is immutable within us. We unlock the doors to the divine by fitting ourselves to the keyholes without losing our original form.

Beholding

In the second part of each chapter, we'll embrace a sensation-based practice of coming alive to the sign's presence. Here, the sign is introduced as a current of energy that flows through all of life. For example, the Cancer archetype, rather than taking the form of a cookie-baking caretaker that we either "are" or "are not," becomes a current of homing, encircling, and gestating—evident in everything from the evening rush of workers heading back to their lairs to the cycles of the almighty tides. Through this part of our practice, you'll be invited to simply notice the energy in the world around you and within you, and to hold it in beauty and power without having to understand or analyze it.

Channeling

After beholding in beauty, we'll engage in a personal-inquiry practice of bringing the sign into self-awareness. Here, you'll seek signals of this sign within yourself and your life in order to better understand how it flows through you and only you. Through this section of our practice, you'll explore your personal inflection points: noticing whether or not you have any planets placed in a particular sign and what relationship you have with the sign's qualities. We honor what's here, and we become curious about what's less present. Because in a cosmos of inherent aliveness, nothing is ever truly gone.

Whether or not you're packing planets in a sign, you'll also be invited to find more ways of accessing each through its **ruling celestial body**. For example, while we might not all have planets placed in the freewheeling sign of Sagittarius in our

birth chart, each of us has a Jupiter sign (Sag's ruling planet) in our chart that encourages us to build more faith.

Rather than memorizing a cookbook of astrological interpretation (à la What does it mean if I have Jupiter in Libra?), you'll be invited to explore your placements through an elements-based practice of energy awareness (for example, Libra is an air sign, so what might it feel like to access the faith that Jupiter promises through the expansive possibilities of air?). I'll provide you with a way to start playing that's inspired by my own associations (for example, for me the vigor of the planet Mars comes alive as our astrological "blood type"), and I encourage you to use this as a launchpad into making your own metaphors and meaning. You can find your planets on a free site like astro.com or cafeastrology.com, or simply by internet searches like "What's my Venus sign?" If you're more advanced, you can play with layering these practices and incorporating houses, aspects, and transits.

Additionally, each of the **tarot's twenty-two Major Arcana cards** is imbued with a concentrated form of astrological essence. This resonance between the cards and the cosmos stems from the same archetypal innateness that informs all of astrology. For example, Sagittarius's sprawling wildfire current already courses throughout life, and the Wheel of Fortune and Temperance cards are two places where it happens to spring to the surface to be felt and seen. Tarot is deeply embedded in my astrological practice, and I find that working with the cards brings the zodiac symbols into accessible and vivid Technicolor by revealing new tones in their palettes. It also reminds me of the intuitive, emergent quality of astrology. Just like we might flip a tarot card to see what's "revealed," we can see what signs

and planets sparkle for us in a given moment and follow their guidance, rather than delimiting our experience of divinity through birth-chart dogma.

You can choose to work with each sign's tarot cards in an intentional way, perhaps by taking them out of the deck and magnetizing them to your kitchen fridge or propping them up on a dashboard as you travel through a chapter's practices. You can also use them in a divination-based way by isolating these twenty-two cards, drawing one "blind" from the pack, and letting it guide you to work with a particular sign (say, if you pluck the Fool card from the pack, you could dive deeper into the Aquarius chapter). And don't worry if you don't have a tarot deck; you can always just write down the names of the twenty-two cards on the backs of uniform index cards.

Divining

Finally, we'll place these sign currents within the larger context of a co-creative universe and explore how we can harness them to effect collective change. You can call on the credos in this section as a kind of magical manifesto that can spark broader conversations in your community.

You're encouraged to gather with a partner, a group of colleagues, family members, other beloveds, or strangers to embrace these cosmic commitments—either during that sign's particular season or at any time when its principles could benefit your sense of interconnection and future possibility. While we all certainly have access to each sign's energies regardless of our personal astrology, cultivating a biodiversity of shared beingness can also happen by calling upon our sign "specialists." People with particular sign placements—especially the

Sun, Moon, and Rising—can become our beacons who uphold these qualities and help show us their way.

Your Path Through the Practices

Each of us is here to have at the whole of the zodiac on our terms, and I encourage you to divine your own path through the practices. If you're brand-new, you might start by reading about your Sun sign and build from there, perhaps next looking to your Moon and Rising signs. Together, your **Sun/Moon/Rising** signs form the trinity of you, and their qualities exist in rhythmic exchange. We stretch toward the individuated exposure of our Sun, we shelter into our Moon's shade, and we greet our Rising's adventurous invitation. You can sample these signs singularly as you need them and also start to explore their alchemical intersections.

Beyond your birth chart, you can also apply the **astrological energies as elixirs**: choosing to select a sign chapter that you feel could best support you during a certain life moment. You can do this consciously. Or you can do it unconsciously by closing your eyes and flipping to a section of the book or by isolating those twenty-two tarot cards and pulling one to lead you to the corresponding sign's chapter.

Finally, above all, you can chart your course from **Aries to Pisces as a complete soul program**. You might experience this like an exploratory yearbook, where you follow along month-by-month from Aries season in late March all the way to Pisces season on the other side. But there's no need to confine yourself to strict seasonal dates. You can always seek the solar power of Leo energy in the depths of a Capricornian winter, or explore

the distinction between Libra's autumnal clarity and Scorpio's fall composting. This archetypal adventure can be tapped over any measure of time—over the course of twelve weeks, twelve days, twelve hours, or twelve minutes—where the chapters offer twelve ways of being in, and with, this wild world.

Astrology asks us to behold ourselves in all of our multitudes. It is a practice of coming closer, coming together, and putting our hands on all parts of this planet—even, and especially, the parts we'd rather keep at bay. When we star chart, we befriend both the familiar and the strange and cease to be strangers. We turn against separateness in all directions and say: *I am another you and you and you, too*. And god is everywhere.

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