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All the World’s a Play

A Conversation with Laurence Hillman

by Ray Grasse

I first met Laurence Hillman when we were paired up to share a hotel room at the “Cycles and Symbols Conference” in California in 1994. It was my first astrology convention — and his, too, I soon learned. I’d been familiar with the work of his father, James Hillman, a well-known pioneer in the field of “archetypal psychology,” so I was curious not only to compare notes as fellow astrologers, but to see how that early psychological environment might have influenced his approach to the discipline.

What I encountered was a brilliant astrologer with keen psychological insight into the subtleties of his craft. Surprisingly, he mentioned that he’d never actually read any of his father’s books from cover to cover (a way to differentiate his own developing ideas, perhaps?). Yet, he went on to explain how growing up around psychologists — especially Jungians — caused him to be virtually “marinated in the archetypes” from an early age.

*Since that first conference, he’s gone on to give voice to that archetypal perspective in countless lectures and in two books: *Alignments: How to Live in Harmony with the Universe* (co-authored with Donna Spencer) and *Planets in Play: How to Re-Imagine Your Life Through the Language of Astrology*. Raised in Switzerland and fluent in five languages, he moved to the United States at age 23 and lives with his wife and two daughters in St. Louis, Missouri. He currently maintains a busy astrological practice, with clients around the world, and lectures frequently both in the U.S. and abroad. Laurence’s Web site is www.lhillman.com; his e-mail address is Laurence@lhillman.com; and his phone number is (314) 997-7744.*

I spoke with him in June 2010 about the archetypal dimensions of astrology, the intermixture of astrology with theater, the Moon’s nodes, and his perspective on current events.

Ray Grasse: Let’s start at the beginning. How did you first get into astrology?

Laurence Hillman: Well, I was a bored teenager living in Zürich, Switzerland, and my mother was very interested in astrology. Just so I’d have something to do, she suggested I study astrology with a family friend I’d known all my life, who was a professional astrologer. When I went to him, he said,

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“So, you’re here to study astrology?” I said, “I guess.” Then, just ten minutes into my first lesson, I had a clear vision that this is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. My next thought after that was: I’m going to do this full-time when I turn 40, because there are a lot of other things I’ve got to do first. And that’s pretty much what happened. I started full-time when I was 38, though by then I’d been practicing astrology for two decades already.

RG: You were raised in a heavily psychological household. How did that affect your general perception of things, including astrology?

LH: I grew up in an environment infused with notions about depth psychology rather than, say, behavioral or motivational psychology, which don’t concern themselves with concepts of an “unconscious” or “deeper motivations,” like depth psychology does. So, from a young age, it was always natural for me to imagine that we actually do have a psyche and, along with that, an often largely unconscious inner “story.” We’re complex beings with a virtual universe of rich inner impulses and drives, not just a bag of chemicals and electrical impulses to be understood mechanically or biologically. Depth psychology is already “archetypal” from the start.

Later on, when I discovered astrology, I found it to offer the perfect language for describing this psyche with its active inner life. It’s incredibly rich in metaphoric resonance and imagery, and not just some dry, analytical way of looking at life or psychology. Later still, theater provided me with a similar metaphor for describing what I imagined to be unfolding inside of us: We have an inner stage — the psyche — where our personal play unfolds. The ten planets are like characters interacting on the stage of that inner drama. Studying that inner play, the “psyche-logia,” comes very naturally to me. Partly, that’s my nature, my own inner play, but it helped to be raised in an environment where the language of depth psychology was dominant.

I don’t begin by looking at the Moon square Saturn as a “problem.” Rather, I think of it as a “story,” and like any good story, there is a lesson to be learned in it.

RG: Did your formal education play any role in this?

LH: It definitely played a role. I went to a Rudolph Steiner school — they’re called Waldorf schools here in the States. For those who don’t know, these schools offer a largely right-brain education emphasizing things like fairy tales, mythology, and music, and all of that contributed to cultivating my imagination. Combined with the heavily Jungian slant of my early household, I learned to look at the world mostly through psychological and archetypal lenses — and that included astrology. I tend to think about how and why people do what they do, but in a psychological way. In other words, I find myself frequently asking: “Hmm. What’s the underlying story? I wonder what archetypal patterns are at work here.” I actually imagine a play going on inside of people at any given moment. Birth charts are like frozen snapshots in an ever-changing archetypal play.

RG: Perhaps we should clarify what “archetypal” means.

LH: The word itself means “first-molded,” which suggests a fundamental pattern after which other things are shaped. If we translate that into human life, archetypal patterns are experiences we all have, as if they are based on a prototype. So, universality is a key to the archetypes. In an archetypal approach to astrology, the planets are the archetypes, the universal patterns.

When we see Mercury in a chart, for example, we think of what might be

called the “trickster” pattern. The Trickster archetype is found in virtually every culture throughout history, so when we look at Mercury in someone’s chart, we know we’re looking at a universal pattern we can all recognize. But as astrologers, we can then look for other clues about how that Mercury/Trickster figure is interacting with the other planets. We can begin to understand how that particular Mercury is staging himself for this person. Is he a fast-talking car salesman? Is he a magician? A fool? Those subtleties are revealed by the placements and all the interactions of that Mercury.

Besides archetypes like the Trickster or the Hero or the Teacher, there are more abstract examples, like falling in love. If you fall in love in northern Siberia or southern Egypt, for example, whether today or 2,000 years ago, the human experience is remarkably similar. The longing for the beloved, those butterflies in the stomach, the sweet pain — these feelings are archetypal because they’re universal. We all experience and live these archetypes. Sometimes we enjoy them, other times we suffer them, and sometimes we are not even aware of them.

RG: What do you see as the value of this archetypal way of understanding life?

LH: Well, the flip answer is that it’s “preventive medicine”! As I said to a client just this morning, I’d rather wonder about and figure out what my Mars wants, instead of being reminded of what it wants by a mugger! This is not about appeasing Mars, but about having the ability to choose how I’d like to experience Mars. We all experience Mars in our lives, that’s a given. It’s unavoidable, because Mars is an archetype on everyone’s stage.

The notion that we have a choice about how we experience Mars is counterintuitive to what some of my clients think, because they’ve developed a notion that Mars is bad or harmful or dangerous due to how some of the traditional sources talk about it. I don’t subscribe to that idea, since I don’t believe in good or bad planets in that way. Rather, I want to know the archetypal principle that *underlies* Mars. And

I can get that by looking at a few key words for Mars — for instance, drive, fight, separation, sexuality — and I can begin to make a list of the ways I want to express that Mars, and accordingly take action. What is psychological about that approach is that it denies people the use of blame psychology as an excuse for their circumstances.

RG: What do you mean by “blame psychology”?

LH: We’re not who we are because of what was done to us, or because of our inability to change our chart, or because of something in the past. These are just attempts to affix blame for our problems, and it doesn’t lead anywhere. Rather, we are what we *choose to do* with what we’ve experienced, and how we step into our chart around that particular experience in the present. That’s a huge difference! There’s much more possibility involved. It’s not fatalistic and fixed. Once we understand the underlying archetype in any problem we might have, we have enormous flexibility in dealing with it.

RG: Can you give a specific example?

LH: Okay, say I have the Moon square Saturn. The simplistic textbook interpretation might be that I tend to be depressed, am inclined to melancholy, emotionally stunted, or even that I have a cold mother.

First off, I don’t begin by looking at this Moon square Saturn as a “problem.” That’s not my language, although some astrologers might think of it that way. Rather, I think of it as a “story,” and like any good story, there is a lesson

to be learned in it. If I consider learning to be valuable, then there is gold in that lesson, in that story. I’m fully aware that some lessons are difficult and some are downright awful, so I’m not denying that, not at all. But if that’s all I have to offer, where does that leave my clients? If I label this square a problem, I’m doing more harm than good. I’m simply affirming what they experience as an awful list of events and feelings. If I label it and bottle it like that, there is nowhere for them to go.

RG: So, what exactly do you do?

LH: Okay, let’s imagine that the “Moon–Saturn problem” is over here in my left hand; I might even ask my clients to hold out their left hand and visualize this. For whatever reason, this square may have manifested for them as one of the more unsavory expressions I just mentioned, like depression or mother problems. So, what’s now in their left hand is the cumulative experience of that painful Moon–Saturn, which is really just a pile of old crap.

But then I ask my clients to hold out their right hand, and we begin to look at how that Moon–Saturn story could also read in a more constructive way — for instance, the ability to hold one’s feelings in check, something that would be useful for a judge or referee. Another example of a constructive Moon–Saturn might be building houses for Haiti’s earthquake survivors. These expressions of that “problem” are just as valid as the possibility of depression, a cold mother, or melancholy. You see, what happens then is that the crap in the left hand becomes *fertilizer* in the right.

What I’m saying is that, if you really understand the core of the underlying

pattern, you can now say, “That old way is not how I want to live my Moon–Saturn! I want to live my Moon–Saturn by doing x, y, or z instead.” And that new way is now over here in your right hand. There are as many ways to respond to the Moon–Saturn pattern as there are people in the world, really, because we have flexibility about how we express these archetypal impulses. But if you simply look at what’s in your left hand, you can spend your whole life in therapy, analyzing or blaming or feeling guilty about what’s going on over there in your left hand.

RG: This seems to bring us into the whole area of free will versus fate, doesn’t it?

LH: Sure. There are lots of terms thrown around when it comes to fate, like karma, chance, luck, destiny, and predestination. Rather than try to sort out what they all mean, I’ll try to explain what I understand to be happening in our lives.

First, we have a personality, and that’s what is shown in the horoscope; it’s the sum total of all these parts. Sometimes we call them character traits, sometimes we call them planets, sometimes we call them archetypes, but whatever we call them, they’re basically the characters we get to know on our inner stage. Some are fighting, some are getting along, and some aren’t relating to the others at all — and all of that is shown in the chart. The chart reveals our general ways of relating to the circumstances that come at us throughout our lives.

But the key here is that there isn’t “one singular way” those characters are going to express themselves in the

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world, according to some traditional formula inscribed in a book. We need to bring *imagination* back into astrology and make it less of a science and more of an art form. *Nothing* in the chart means anything in a certain, fixed way! Mars in the 5th house doesn't mean a person is going to be a gigolo or feel especially libidinous. Of course, it could mean those things in some cases, but if we say to the client, "It is this," we aren't allowing for an intuitive sense of how their particular Mars could express itself. That very same Mars might just as well mean they're going to put a lot of energy into their kids or into their creative projects, or any number of things. Mars is archetypally about drive, force, and feistiness, and where Mars is placed simply shows where we put that energy.

So "fate" would be the fact that Mars needs to be expressed through the 5th-house principle, in whatever sign it's in and in whatever relationship it's in to the other characters on your inner stage. There are certain limitations, sure — your Mars is not in the 7th or the 11th house — so that's your "fate," you might say. In turn, "free will" is how we choose to express that Mars, how we *respond* to that energy. Free will comes from the fact that there are as many ways to express that Mars as there are people on the planet. And there's no book or computer interpretation in the world that can possibly encompass all of that.

RG: I recall that this way of thinking posed some problems for your editor when you were writing your last book, *Planets in Play*.

LH: Yes! I was asked by my editor to include chapters that listed the planets in the houses and signs, with relatively fixed meanings. That seemed very limiting to me. The way I got around that was by describing the clothing and the setting of how and where a particular inner "actor" might appear. The idea was to stir the imagination instead of giving a concrete recipe.

For instance, for Mars in Cancer I wrote: "This Mars is dressed in over-

Mars is archetypally about drive, force, and feistiness, and where Mars is placed simply shows where we put that energy.

alls. He is getting ready to paint the family room. You will find him constantly fixing and restoring heirlooms and other antiques that he chases after at yard sales ..." and so on. This gives a more open-ended image. And whenever I'm doing readings, I find that new images for a Mars in Cancer will intuitively emerge. It bothers me that some of my clients have come away from other astrology readings that spoke in hard absolutes like "never" or "always" or "impossible." I don't see astrology in terms of absolutes. I instead try to offer my clients imagery that they can shape into something personal and open-ended.

RG: A number of years ago, I was surprised to hear you say you'd never actually looked at your children's horoscopes — not up to that point, anyway. I found that intriguing, because I couldn't recall any other astrologers who could say that.

LH: Well, I think having a child is like being handed a seed. You plant it in the ground and see what happens. I'm more interested in finding out what kind of a plant it is than trying to analyze the plant before it's even sprouted. I thought it was more of a mystery, and more respectful to them, if I didn't "know too much." It was a matter of honoring them enough to show themselves to me before I saw them in my own way, through a particular filter like astrology.

RG: You wanted to experience their essence unmediated by an intellectual construct?

LH: Exactly. I also knew that astrology was a fabulous tool and that I would use

it if I needed to. And I have used it, and it's been very helpful.

RG: You mentioned the theater earlier. I know you've conducted workshops with Richard Olivier, Laurence's son, as well as actor Mark Rylance, on the stage of Shakespeare's Globe Theater in London, where you've blended theater with astrology. Could you say a few words about that experience?

LH: Astrology is an extraordinarily complicated and rich language. As astrologers, we either throw information at people using dense jargon, or we explain what we are doing in terms they can understand. Obviously, I prefer the latter, so I wanted a metaphor to convey the complexity of what I'm doing in clear, manageable terms. Over the decades, I've experimented with various metaphors and visuals, and I ended up with theater imagery as a way to introduce archetypal astrology to my clients in just a few minutes.

I begin my readings with the image of the horoscope being a circular stage where the planets are acting out a play, a drama, and each one of them is an archetypal character playing a role. It's as though the heavenly bodies dropped onto that inner stage at the moment of one's birth, and we've taken a snapshot of it from the rigging above, freezing that moment in time. The aspects tell us who is arguing with whom, who is kissing whom, and so forth. There's a story going on in every chart, just as there is in a real play. The planets are the *who*, the aspects are the *what*, the signs are the *how*, and the houses are the *where*.

Of course, the notion of blending astrology and theater isn't new. There is currently a branch of astrology called Experiential Astrology, or Astro-drama, and I use some of these techniques in workshops. But blending astrology and theater is an idea that goes back many centuries. The application of these ideas became especially clear to me when I was invited to work on an archetypal approach to some of Shakespeare's plays, which contain astrological ideas. Beyond the obvious reference to "star-cross'd Lovers" in *Romeo and Juliet*, there is that lovely line in *As You Like It*

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where Beatrice says, “A star danced and under that was I born.” Or, in *All’s Well that Ends Well*, Helena says “... you must needs be born under Mars.” The fact is that, to fully appreciate Shakespeare, a basic knowledge of astrological terms is necessary.

RG: In the context of a workshop, what are some of the ways you might work with or develop these connections?

LH: Using an archetypal approach, we might now ask questions like, What would a “Jupiterian” (or jovial) Henry V look like, versus a Martian or Saturnine one? This was especially fun when we worked with the actors participating in the group. Exercises like this help to give people a direct understanding of the archetypal qualities of the different planets.

This same approach to imagery also served as the basis for my book, *Planets in Play*, and I simultaneously expanded on these ideas in a series of slide shows, along with sound and music, illustrating the primary astrological archetypes. I use these whenever I teach, and I’ve put them on my Web site as yet another way to help people see the archetypes in their lives. I love to create visuals as a stimulant for imagery; actually, one of the reasons I went to architectural school was that I was attracted to form and space. I’ve always had images and ideas in my head that I wanted to share with others, and finding new ways to make things visible has always inspired me. I find it enriching. Unless you can see Venus in a chocolate mousse, I believe you are missing her full essence!

RG: You mentioned that there were hints of the merger between astrology and theater throughout history, which is a fascinating subject by itself. Over the years, scholars have talked about how the roots of modern theater can be traced back to the religious dramas and rituals of ancient times, going all the way back to the cave dwellers. But I think an argument could be made

that nearly all of the major religious rituals of history — whether they be Hindu, Egyptian, or Christian — were astrological rituals, a kind of early “astro-drama,” since they were acting out the seasonal or planetary energies of the time. Look at Christmas, for example, and how it was associated with the winter solstice and the earlier celebrations of the Sun’s return after the darkest point of the year.

LH: An awareness of celestial timing has been a part of society for millennia, although we don’t usually realize it. And I would add that, in ancient times, the only thing 100% predictable was the cyclical movement of the heavenly bodies, in particular, the Sun and Moon. The only thing people knew for sure was that Mars was going to return to that point in the sky, or that the days would start growing longer at a certain time. So, all order, all structure, all calendars were indeed organized around planetary movements, as were rituals, anniversaries, and celebrations. In an extraordinarily unpredictable world, the sense that there was some kind of order was a huge factor in understanding the world. In that way, we organized time; the Saturnine sense of structure came to us by following the planets. And all these rituals and celebrations were a way of organizing our world, as well as a way of aligning ourselves with those great cycles.

RG: I would add that astrology also arose out of the sense that each of those cycles and celestial markers had its own unique meaning, with the rituals and celebrations being designed to honor, perhaps even exploit, those distinct qualities.

LH: Right. It brought meaning to our lives, not only by organizing our world, but by aligning our lives with the meaning of the cosmos. That’s even acknowledged in a work like *Ecclesiastes*, chapter 2, verse 3, which talks about how there is a time for planting, a time for dancing, a time for loving, and so forth. Different times are better for some things than others. Response-ability means responding to what’s happening.

I believe that the ancients had a subtler notion of time than we do. For instance, the Greeks distinguished between *chronos* and *kairos*, and I would translate that into the difference between the *quantity* and *quality* of time. The first of these is easy because it’s how we typically think of time, as measured in quantity: I have little time or much time.

The notion of *kairos* is much more subtle. It implies that there are different *kinds* of time, that time has a particular *quality*. We still have remnants of that notion in our language when we say, “This is not a good time for me.” It’s an assessment of the quality of the moment we are in. In essence, astrology is a tool for measuring and describing the quality of time. The more we know about the quality of a moment, the more we can decide what archetypes we wish to express at that point. Ancient celestial observers were keenly tuned into the qualities of the moments that the planets marked off.

RG: Speaking of qualities of time — as of this moment (June 2010), we’re in the midst of some very powerful planetary patterns, especially the emerging t-square involving Uranus, Saturn, and Pluto. I’m curious to get your take on what’s occurring on the global stage right now.

LH: First of all, the wonderful thing about mundane astrology (the branch of astrology that studies historical trends) is that it helps explain everything we see happening in the news. And that’s very reassuring, because the one certain thing about transits is their expiration date, their shelf life, so to speak. This is a key idea, because it lets us know “this, too, shall pass.” This transitoriness is a natural part of the cyclic nature of existence. After all, we do call them “transits,” don’t we?!

But as for the t-square, since Pluto is at the critical point of the current configuration, this period is about the emergence of Pluto in some new way — a new awareness of what I call the “dark feminine.” We are collectively horrified as we see Mother Earth, in her awesome force, bleeding — and by that I mean the recent devastating earthquakes, min-

ing accidents, and of course, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. At some point, even Mother Earth won't take it anymore, and Pluto is her messenger. I don't believe the Earth is coming to an end; that's a concept that's existed as long as human beings have been on the planet — the fantasy of end times. But there is now a constant reminder that we need to change how we view and use the Earth's natural resources. This is about embracing the dark feminine, the yin in the world.

Pluto is asking us: Where is your deepest "hole," and what are you trying to fill it with? Collectively, we're going to a level of depth now where people have to become aware of their deepest psychological fears. For example, if they're getting plastic surgery, maybe it's their fear of death. What are you really trying to fill? If you're consuming stuff, if you're filling your time with busyness, cell phones, text messaging, and so on, what are you really afraid might happen in the stillness that Pluto offers?

There is also this slow emergence of the realization that the pillars of our old ways — science, religion, justice, and even capitalism — are no longer working. We're finding out that these pillars are not made of stone, but of wood. For months now, scientists haven't been able to fix the leak in the Gulf; religion doesn't have answers for an increasing number of people; "justice for all" seems increasingly distant; and capitalism itself isn't looking too rosy at this point, either. For me, Pluto feels a lot like termites eating away at these wooden columns of our temple. It's very slow and scary — we don't realize how much has crumbled until the roof is practically on top of our heads. These times are challenging, of course, but they also offer huge opportunities.

RG: The subject of your first book (co-authored with Donna Spencer) was the Nodes of the Moon. If the horoscope reveals the different characters on one's inner stage, where does the North Node fit into that picture?

LH: First, I define the personality as the sum total of all these inner parts we've been talking about, but separate from

There's a story going on in every chart: The planets are the who, the aspects are the what, the signs are the how, and the houses are the where.

the personality there is what I call the soul. The soul uses the personality to experience certain things in this life. It is immortal and travels through many lives. I've used the imagery of an endless train track to illustrate this journey. This track comes from somewhere and goes somewhere. The South Node is where you've come from, where you already have a bunch of PhDs under your belt. It's a comfort zone where you like to hang out simply because you know it.

But the North Node is where that train track is heading, to a point of new learning. The house position of the node is much more important than the sign, because the house tells you *where*, and the signs have to do with *how*. For me, the North Node is an area of life that you've come here to get to know better. The concept is as simple as that and as complicated and rich as that. It's about getting to know life better.

RG: To "know life better" — toward what end? What are we being called to?

LH: When I say "getting to know life better," I'm talking about becoming emotionally fulfilled, mentally focused, and more spiritually aligned. For lack of a better term, it's moving toward a sense of overall happiness.

But in a larger sense, the lunar nodes relate to the notion of reincarnation and the idea that there is a direction we are heading in, one that is on the soul level and is not personality-based. When we're feeling particularly lost, the solutions never come from our personality, which rarely sees the big picture.

Of course, people almost always try to solve their problems from the level of the personality; that's what we do in therapy, that's what we do in every self-exploratory type of process. But the gift of astrology is that it can take us outside of the personality, outside of personal history, outside the chart itself and in a more esoteric, spiritual direction. Follow the Yellow North Node! (*laughs*)

RG: Can you give a specific example of this from your practice?

LH: Okay, here's a specific instance I used in *Alignments*. Charlie was a middle-aged manager who came to see me many years ago because he "wanted to change things a bit." His North Node was in the 5th house. Before he arrived, I remember wondering how he might be expressing his creative side. His North Node being in Taurus, I'd thought that perhaps his creative pursuits might be both artistic and practical.

Charlie arrived looking extremely sad and gave me much more information than I asked for. He complained about his seemingly endless responsibilities — his co-workers, his demanding wife, his kids in college. I asked him, "Charlie, if you had no responsibilities and could do whatever you wanted, what would you do?" He looked at the floor, sobbing bitterly now, and said quietly, "I would sculpt." The place where Charlie felt comfortable and spent most of his time was his 11th house — the corporation, the group, the Big Idea, and helping others do well. He wasn't paying enough attention to his soul's compass, and this was enormously painful for him.

RG: If the North Node truly leads to a point of greater happiness, one has to wonder why we aren't automatically drawn there. It's almost as though we have some resistance to following our calling.

LH: There are two things about the calling that are crucial. The first is that no one really wants to do it! I have yet to meet someone who gladly tiptoes through the tulips to their calling, and that's presuming there are no planets sitting on the nodal axis, which changes



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the picture considerably. No one wants to pursue it because the calling differs from the actors on the stage.

Unlike the planets, the North Node has no vested interests; it's simply a place that sits there, like a destination on a map, and your job in life, on a soul level, is to explore it. If, for instance, you find out that your calling is to go to Paris, you can say, "No, I don't particularly like the French, so I'm not going there," or you can spend your whole life learning the language, studying the culture, and actually going there. But the key is that Paris doesn't care either way, since Paris is just a place. You can't ignore your inner characters, the planets, but I've seen many people in my practice who are completely disconnected from their calling. They may *long* to go there — that's different. But they'll usually fall back on their comfort zone, as indicated by the South Node and the house it's in, simply because that's what they already know.

The second thing I've learned about the North Node is that exploring it is a lifelong process. In other words, the day you can say, "I truly and fully understand Paris" is the day you can close your eyes and stop breathing, because you're done for this lifetime. The fact that you're alive means you're not there yet. The exploration of your North Node is not something you do when you're 19, get a certificate for, and then be done with it. It's a lifelong task.

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Jody Sibert's art has found venues in galleries, universities, private collections, books, magazines, and the PBS series, Visions. Elements for her collages are removed from their familiar contexts, and the logic of the mysterious unconscious creates their new relationships and their new environments. Jody can be reached at (310) 614-1605.

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