

Planetary Miasms

The Astrology of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic

*“I had a little bird,
Its name was Enza,
I opened the window,
And in-flew-Enza.”*

For years, this now-forgotten nursery rhyme was the only commemoration of the great influenza epidemic of 1918. Although every family had a story about it, no one told the stories. In one family, a daughter attributes her father’s emotional distance as related to the illness. He was sent away to live with his aunt in Ohio, where they thought he would be safe from the flu. He was taught not to touch anyone or get close to them during that time for fear of dying.

Mentioned only peripherally in scientific and cultural literature for nearly 100 years, the 1918 influenza pandemic nonetheless has driven much of the medical research and public health activity since its occurrence. No one talked about it but when probed, elders would admit that they were deeply affected by their experiences of the flu.

It was an event that flew under the cultural radar for the most part until the pandemic scares of the last three years, as SARS, then avian flu, hit the headlines. Now it has revealed itself as the source of all the fear, the benchmark to which we compare all viral outbreaks. Here are the facts about the 1918 flu:

- More than 25% of the US population became ill in late 1918. 36–40% of those in the military were afflicted.
- It killed an estimated 20–100 million people worldwide, a number that is so uncertain because it was impossible to keep mortality records in many locations. By comparison, World War I (which was raging at the time) was responsible for 15 million deaths (in and out of combat). In 1918, more soldiers died of flu than in combat.
- The death curves were W-shaped, affecting those under age 5, those aged 20–40, and those aged 70–74.
- It killed 2.5% of its victims and was 25 times more deadly than any other influenza. If a comparable pandemic occurred today, it would kill 1.5 million people in the US within a matter of weeks.
- It killed so many people that there was often no one to bury the dead. Entire cities shut down. Entire families and villages were wiped out in some locales. People died within hours of contracting the flu.

As with all flus, the 1918 flu attacked the lungs and upper respiratory tract. Its victims died by suffocation as their lungs filled up with fluid and dead cells. The deadly outbreak of this influenza occurred in the last third of 1918 and the first quarter of 1919.

A new strain of influenza typically mutates in the winter and spring of the year before it reaches the human population. It lies dormant until colder weather creates the biological environment for the newly developed strain to flourish, in the fall and winter of every year. If it catches hold while schools are in session, children become the primary means for its spread. In the spring of 1918, the influenza that would become deadly later that year spread as a mild and

relatively harmless virus in February–May that infected an extremely high percentage of those whom it contacted. This flu followed the same pattern as in the later pandemic, causing symptoms in young, healthy adults while missing children and the very old. It struck quickly and widely, closing down businesses, government offices, and public transit. The difference was that people recovered after three days and resumed normal activities. It was called the “three-day fever” among the troops.

In examining the astrological factors of this influenza, we will need to look at the planetary movements for late 1917-early 1918 when the virus might have mutated, February-May 1918 when the first, mild outbreak occurred, and August 1918-April 1919 when the deadly, final epidemic spread.

The First US Outbreak

To start, let’s look at the chart of the first recorded US outbreak of the fall epidemic, after which the crisis rapidly escalated. This event reveals the role of the planets in the incubation and first mild outbreak as well. The flu arrived in the US with a group of sailors who docked in Boston in August. On August 28, eight of them got the flu. The chart for this untimed event is shown below. Where the first worldwide outbreak occurred is debated, but this is a clearly documented event that reveals core astrological qualities.

In such a situation, the usual suspects are the planets beyond Mars, with possible Mars involvement as the ruler of inflammation. Neptune is associated with the stealth attacks that diseases make, as well as the drowning deaths that these people experienced. Saturn and Pluto are associated with death, Uranus with sudden and erratic influences. Jupiter enlarges whatever it touches. So, what happened here?

Jupiter conjoined Pluto. Jupiter had just passed (on August 10) its conjunction with Pluto in Cancer at the time of the Boston outbreak, and these were sesqui (135°) to Uranus. Pluto rules death, while Jupiter magnifies of the affects of all it touches. In Cancer, we expect a watery influence (recall that the patients drowned in their own fluids). Families and daily family life were deeply affected. In some instances whole families were wiped out in a matter of days. Fear of the flu broke down family support systems as well. Children were sent to stay with relatives in remote locations, and many were unable to return when their family was destroyed. Although Jupiter had passed Pluto when this outbreak occurred, it remained in Pluto’s vicinity and retrograded back to within a degree of Pluto’s location until March 1919, within orb through the end of the final outbreak.

Saturn opposed Uranus. Saturn’s opposition to Uranus occurs throughout the epidemic and times itself exactly to the period of the worst outbreak and the highest death toll on record, in orb from August 1918 through the spring of 1919. Saturn in Leo suggests a suppression of society’s normal operation in some way as well as a burden on children. Social interaction was stopped during this time, and many children were orphaned. Uranus represents sudden disruption and reflects the speed with which the disease spread and took lives. The opposition is an aspect of culmination, in the case of Saturn and Uranus occurring once every 44 years. In this case it plays into a larger planetary interaction, that of Saturn, Uranus and Neptune.

Saturn conjoined Neptune. Neptune was not involved in any aspect to these planets in orb at the time, although Saturn conjoined it in Leo in August 1917. This is a major planetary event that occurs every 35 or so years. So, even though their conjunction was no longer in orb in August by most measures, the influences associated with it would still be unfolding in 1918,

especially since Saturn had not yet left Leo (the sign of the conjunction). It is worth noting that the mutation and incubation of the new strain would have occurred at or soon after this time.

Saturn-Neptune can be associated with the conditions that exacerbated the impact of the flu on the world population — the massive affect of WWI. It magnetized all resources, all strength to its cause. It sapped the medical assets, both human and material, of the world. It took the healthiest and strongest to fight or support the fighting. In 1917, the war was at its worst, an influence that would allow something like the flu to gain more than a foothold in the population. Although the motivation for war was winding down in 1918, the fighting was still intense. Troops were still being mobilized, especially in the US, where soldiers were squashed together on ships, in camps, in trenches and hospitals, they were sharing their breath and weakened by poor nutrition, dehydration, exhaustion, or injury.

Uranus opposed Neptune. In 1906-10, Uranus in Capricorn opposed Neptune in Cancer eleven times. Although this coincides with a generally peaceful time around the world, there was an arms race taking place in Europe, spurred by Germany. This was a period of posturing and tension between the most powerful nations, a king-of-the-heap game that resulted in both great 20th-century wars. More generally, this was a time of globalization — in fact, the entire Uranus-Neptune cycle which began in 1821, we might argue, was the first cycle of true globalization. This major cycle lasts 171 years and coincides with significant trends in human innovation and developments in mass consciousness. At the time of the opposition, we had all of the worldwide connectedness, from trans-Atlantic telephone trunk lines to ships that sailed round the world, but none of the wisdom of how to cope with this connectedness.

This included how to cope with disease. 1918 was before antibiotics, before viruses had been understood. Until the 20th century, a city could not maintain its population without a constant influx of immigrants, due to the plagues and diseases that periodically swept through killing thousands. With the growth of the scientific method and its discoveries in the 19th century, bacteria were isolated and their role in disease was understood. Until the 1918 pandemic, influenzas were thought to be caused by bacteria, but frantic research at the time proved that to be in error. Spurred by the 1918 flu, scientists began to understand viruses and learn to manage them. Management of disease processes and development of the field of public health also received more focus and funding in the wake of the Spanish influenza pandemic and the Uranus-Neptune opposition. Discovery (Uranus) brought awareness (the opposition) to disease processes (Neptune).

Saturn translates the light of the Uranus-Neptune opposition. In 1918, the Uranus-Neptune opposition had passed, but Saturn was re-triggering it. As noted above, Saturn had just conjoined Neptune and was on its way to oppose Uranus. This is an example of a powerful affect in planetary interactions, a form of what the ancients called “translation of light”. In traditional translation of light, the “light” of a slower moving planet is carried or translated to another slower moving planet by the Sun or Moon. However, I have found that any faster moving body can carry the light of a slower moving one. In this case, the two slower moving planets are Uranus and Neptune; the faster moving body is Saturn. So, even though Uranus and Neptune had completed their opposition, Saturn was bringing it back, adding its own color to it. Saturn, as we know, brings things down to earth. What had been associated with a trend, with troubling even devastating patterns, now became catastrophic — so catastrophic that the event brought about a reversal of direction in human ideology and progress.

This reversal was experienced primarily as the sense of urgency with which WWI was

ended — the 1918 flu hastened the development of the eventual peace treaty. It also spurred more intense interest in disease, with the resulting understanding that we now have of viral and bacterial processes and the tools for outsmarting them. This is the type of effect we could expect from the interaction of Saturn with Uranus and Neptune at the time of their opposition — an influenza pandemic that was so fearsome that its story would be suppressed for almost 100 years, to resurface in public consciousness as new pandemics threaten our well-being.

The Next Pandemic

From this information, what can we say about the potential for a pandemic based on the avian flu or some new viral threat? It might help to briefly look at the other pandemics of the 20th century. Two flu epidemics qualify as pandemics according to modern standards, the Asian flu of 1957-58 and the Hong Kong flu of 1968-69. In each case, these epidemics did not kill near as many people as the 1918 flu, at 2 million and 1 million worldwide, respectively. The 1957 flu seems to involve eclipses occurring in planetary clusters, while the one in 1968 relates to the Uranus-Pluto conjunction.

The planetary patterns we face now do not involve Uranus and Neptune interaction, such as that associated with the 1918 flu, but there is another outer-planetary interaction that could signal such an event, the approaching waxing square of Uranus and Pluto, which will occur in 2011-15. If one happens based on this contact, it will be in late 2009 – early 2010. At this time, Saturn carries Uranus energy to Pluto across the 0° cardinal axis (Saturn in Virgo-Libra, Uranus in Pisces, Pluto in Capricorn). At the same time (May-December 09), Jupiter also conjoins Neptune three times in late Aquarius; Mars is also retrograde in Leo. Although this is a different mix of planets, the combination of events and its timing could suggest a significant flu event. The eclipses of this time, which could contribute, aren't involved. However, they make “near misses” to Saturn, Uranus and Pluto from late Gemini-Sagittarius and mid-Cancer-Capricorn in December 2010 and January 2011 (a year later).

An avian pandemic spread (among birds) in 2005, restimulating interest in human vulnerability to epidemic disease in general and the 1918 influenza in particular. A few years ago it was SARS. Both these events occurred as Saturn opposed Chiron in a long series of contacts which will continue in 2006, after which Saturn opposes Neptune in 2006-07. These planetary contacts could suggest a significant mutation — and subsequent epidemic if we cannot unite around the world to deal with the newest level of global connectedness.

Surely these patterns suggest that we will be more aware of disease processes and the toll they take on human life and vitality. Hopefully this will spur a global effort to overcome unhealthy conditions that foster the cross-mutation of bird flus into human viral forms as well as the poverty and lack of understanding that make disease take such a large toll in the third world. This is very much the intent of the UN in its current attempts to unite the nations of the world against poverty.

Will there be another pandemic?

The simple answer is yes. As long as viruses mutate, and as long as humans congregate, there is the potential for another pandemic. The danger is greatest where health conditions are poor, although a novel mutation of a human virus could threaten anyone regardless of environment, and anyone who is unaware can contribute to its spread. This drives home in real terms that what affects one of us affects us all. We are all dependent on each other, whether it is

the family in Asia who have no choice but to live with their chickens, or the American parent who is forbidden to stay home from work to care for his flu-infected child and so sends her to school.

Kolata, Gina. *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus That Caused It*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1999.

“Secrets of the Dead: Killer Flu”, interview with Jeffery Taubenberger, http://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/case_killerflu/interview.html

Chart: 8/28/1918, Boston, MA. Data from Kolata, p. 13. Time unknown but cast for noon.