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## WESTERN SIDEREAL ASTROLOGY

### AN INTERVIEW WITH KENNETH BOWSER

By Colleen Mauro

Kenneth Bowser has studied both astrology and ancient history for over thirty years. He began his astrological studies as a tropicalist, but within two years switched to the sidereal camp. He is known for his careful scholarship in the field of ancient astrology.

Ken was a personal service astrologer and long time columnist for *American Astrology Magazine*. His articles have also appeared in *The Siderealist*, *The Traditional Astrologer*, *Continuum* and *Realta*. He is at work on a book on western sidereal techniques, and is deeply involved in a long-term study of stock market trends. His web site, [www.westernsiderealastrology.com](http://www.westernsiderealastrology.com), includes a detailed course on sidereal astrology.

Ken works as a full-time astrologer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He recently sat down to talk with me about the origins of sidereal astrology and its modern day practice, the tropical/sidereal debate, and how tropical astrology came to dominate the West.

***Q: For those who don't know, can you explain the difference between tropical and sidereal astrology?***

In the sidereal system the positions of celestial bodies were reckoned from the stars in the ancient world—it was an entirely stellar frame of reference. In the tropical system the positions of celestial bodies are reckoned from the equinoxes and solstices—it's a seasonal frame of reference. The tropical zodiac is known as the 'moving zodiac' because it's continuously moving against the background of the stars. There are two schools of sidereal astrology: Eastern or Indian astrology and Western or Babylonian astrology. Western sidereal astrology is the rediscovery of ancient astrology that was originally practiced in Babylonia and Assyria and spread throughout the Near and Middle East and the Mediterranean World.

***Q: You started your astrological career as a tropical astrologer. What caused you to switch to the sidereal camp?***

I met a number of sidereal astrologers in the 70's who were good interpreters—the best I had run into up to that time and I wanted to know what they knew. But what impressed me most was that the sidereal premise addressed the issue that had perplexed me most about tropical astrology. I had been unable to understand why the tropical signs

don't correspond even approximately to the constellations when you look up from horoscope in hand to the sky. The sidereal zodiac immediately put that issue to rest because the sidereal signs are anchored to the stars. In other words, you can look at a sidereal horoscope and then look up at the sky and see that the sidereal signs do match up pretty well to the constellations. I had already had some problems reconciling my experience of character traits and personality in the people I knew with what the tropical signs are supposed to be about. I was also profoundly impressed at the accuracy of sidereal solar and lunar returns, which timed and described what actually happened to people and how they felt about it better than any predictive technique I had tried.

I read voluminously—still do—and sought out people who knew more than I did and attended lectures by people with reputations, but mostly I did a lot of horoscopes. There's no substitute for that. I did astrology all the time—clients, family, friends, co-workers, famous people—everybody became a learning experience. My kids hated astrology because they felt like they were in competition with it for my attention.

***Q: What did you read?***

Among the siderealists I read Cyril Fagan's *Astrological Origins, Zodiacs Old and New* and *Symbolism of the Constellations* and Rupert Gleadow's *Origin of the Zodiac*. Fagan revived the sidereal zodiac in the West in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his work made eminently good sense to me. Fagan's books led me to Otto Neugebauer's *History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy* when that three volume work appeared in 1975; and from there I felt I had enough under my belt to tackle Ptolemy's *Almagest*. The references I followed up from these books got me into the habit of regularly studying academic journals. I would look for the current issues of publications like the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, *Centaurus* and the *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* the way some people look for the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. I was guided by the bibliographies, references and notes in the books I read. Those things led to the inescapable conclusion that the sidereal signs based on the constellations were invested with meaning in the ancient world long before the tropical zodiac showed up. It became clear that the authority of the sidereal signs had been usurped in the Greco-Roman world by advocates of the tropical signs, whether by mistake or by design is not clear.

***Q: You mention Fagan first. I know he is considered the father of modern western sidereal astrology. Can you say more about him?***

He was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1896 and died in Tucson, Arizona in 1970, a few months before I took up astrology. Cyril Fagan was hands-down one of very few astrologers of the first rank in the past hundred years. He took up astrology in 1916 as a tropicalist, naturally, since, in the West, that was the only game in town. His vocation was British civil servant but his true calling was astrologer-extraordinary. He was an avid student of the material that had been dug up in the Near and Middle East in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and translated and published in the second half. He saw that all the Babylonian astronomical and astrological material that found its way into print was sidereal, which I assume didn't go down very well because he was a long-time tropicalist, but it made him think and investigate the matter further. In 1944, after many years of private study, Fagan was forced by the evidence to conclude that astrology was originally

sidereal in the ancient world until the Greeks decided to use the equinoxes and solstices to reckon celestial positions, probably around the time of Hipparchus of Rhodes. Hipparchus's dates are unknown but his work spanned the period 146-127 B.C. The Greek calendar was reckoned from the summer solstice, which probably served as a ready-made precedent in astronomical matters.

Fagan wrote a monthly column beginning in 1953 in *American Astrology Magazine* that did more to put western sidereal astrology on the map than his books. The column ran until his death and then appeared for several years afterward in reprint form in the magazine. Virtually all modern western siderealists cut their teeth on Fagan's columns and books. His main point was that trait characteristics emanate from the sidereal signs, not the tropical signs. This matter is at the heart of the disagreement between tropicalists and siderealists. Some, but very few tropicalists have maintained that both positions could be true, but most tropicalists and all the western siderealists I know will have none of that argument. It's one of the major points at issue in astrology today. Both camps have entrenched positions and there is no resolution in sight. Actually the protagonists used to be more strident than they are now because there are no editors left who will let the tropicalists and siderealists insult each other in print (*laughs*). The siderealists are definitely in the minority in the West but there has been since 1950, with the publication of *Zodiacs Old and New*, a modest but continuous flow of defectors from the tropical ranks to the sidereal position. Almost nobody in the West begins their astrological studies as a siderealist. Becoming a siderealist is an act of apostasy (*laughs*).

***Q: How does Hipparchus of Rhodes enter the picture?***

Hipparchus was the greatest of the Greek astronomers of Classical Antiquity. He's best known for his discovery of precession of the equinoxes by comparing Babylonian observations from the eighth century B.C. with his own second century B.C. observations. Precession is the mechanism that produces the division between tropical and sidereal. It's the slow westward drift of the equinoxes with respect to the zodiac that makes different parts of the sky appear on the horizon and in the meridian for the same civil dates over long periods of time. Hipparchus was convinced of the immobility of the earth. That's why he maintained that the sky was moving with respect to a fixed earth; but it's actually the earth that's precessing with respect to an essentially fixed sky. The proper motion of the stars is so small that as a practical matter they haven't moved at all since the beginning of recorded history which is about 3000 B.C. Hipparchus apparently thought the whole sky was moving as a unit.

Consider, for example, that Antares, the brightest star in Scorpio had a proper motion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of a little more than 2 seconds of arc. That's not annual motion—it's the motion of the star in 100 years. At that rate it would take nearly 170,000 years for Antares to move one degree from the vantage point of the earth. In contrast, Antares' tropical longitude increased by just short of 5000 seconds of arc in the twentieth century; but the star didn't move that much with respect to the zodiac; it moved that much with respect to the Northern Hemisphere spring equinox. In 170,000 years Antares' tropical longitude will increase by about 2,360 degrees or six and a half precessional cycles in terms of tropical zodiac reckoning. You can't look to an old tropical position of a star or natal planet and find it where it used to be. That's how Hipparchus realized the earth-sky relationship isn't constant, that there was movement in

what the Greeks called the eighth sphere. Aldebaran, the defining star in the sidereal zodiac had a proper motion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of about 4 seconds of arc. At that rate it will take 900 centuries, which is 90,000 years, for Aldebaran to move one degree. You can see why ancient astrologers didn't have to take proper motion into account: you can't see it without exceedingly fine instruments. The sidereal zodiac is reckoned from the Aldebaran-Antares axis because they're directly opposite each other in the zodiac and Aldebaran is the brightest of the first magnitude stars close to the ecliptic.

***Q: Are you saying that the fixed stars aren't fixed?***

That's a bit of a misnomer. The Greeks referred to the planets as "wandering stars," versus the background of stars that are fixed or stationary. They meant some lights in the sky move and some don't. The ones that move are worlds unto themselves and the ones that don't are distant suns, but that is modern knowledge unknown in the ancient world. So yes, the stars are not really fixed in space, even though most siderealists think it's quibbling to argue the point in view of the immense time spans involved in this matter. In any case, the proper motion of individual stars is irrelevant because the formal definition of the sidereal zodiac excludes proper motion completely. The beginning of the sidereal zodiac was the point forty-five degrees west of Aldebaran, the brightest star in Taurus, for the epoch 1950.0 A.D. It corresponds very closely to the ancient Babylonian zero point.

Some people have said, incidentally, that the Babylonians were aware of precession, but as far as I know, there is no evidence for that assertion. You have to be aware of the true geometry of the solar system to understand that and also to reckon positions from equinox to equinox. If you reckon positions from star to star you won't see precession, and the Babylonians paid no attention to the equinox as a planetary marker. The equinox is a moving point in relation to the zodiac, and right down to the Roman Imperial period, the equinox was defined in terms of the sidereal signs, not the other way around. The earliest tropical astrologers variously said the equinox occurs in eight, five or three degrees of the 'signs' which demonstrates the effect of precession. They were clearly speaking of the sidereal signs because the tropical zodiac by definition begins with zero Aries.

***Q: Did the Babylonians know about the equinoxes and solstices?***

Of course. The Babylonians took note of the vernal equinox for three non-astrological reasons but it was always computed and not observed. First, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers overflowed their banks in March during the first millennium B.C., from upstream snowmelt. Babylonia and Assyria are in a desert and near desert climate where you could only count on about 150 millimeters of annual rainfall. It takes 200 millimeters of annual rainfall to bring in a barley crop—the staple in the area because it requires less water than wheat—so it was essential for the Babylonians to capture as much of the spring flood as they could in dikes, canals and catch basins to supplement the often inadequate rainfall. If the canals were damaged and not repaired, the area immediately returned to desert. Second, the New Moon nearest the equinox, on either side of it, not the equinox itself, was the beginning of their civil year; they added an additional month every three years to keep their lunar calendar in sync with the solar year. Thirdly, before the latitude-longitude grid was invented, the latitude of a place was

reckoned from the ratio of the longest to the shortest day of the year. The day of the equinox when day and night are equal was the zero point for that measure. But the Babylonians and Assyrians, and the people who were influenced by them until the Greeks, were rigidly connected to the stars with respect to the measure of celestial longitude. People don't stop to think that this was for a good reason: it's hard to measure the equinox. All of Ptolemy's observations of it are wrong, although in fairness, some of them only by six hours or so. It wasn't a good practical tool in the ancient world for measurement purposes.

***Q: What are the origins of sidereal astrology?***

The only text that can be dated to the early part of the second millennium B.C. is a table of Venus observations that were compiled during the reign of a Babylonian king by the name of Ammizaduga. Sometimes even astronomical pegs are hard to nail down, as in this case. The range of possible beginning dates for the Venus Tablets extends from 1702 B.C. to 1582 B.C. The resolution of the dating of these tables has been pending for more than a century, but they're Old Babylonian Empire material and a record of long-term systematic observations that led to the slow discovery of the immutable reality of the zodiac. Some people think the zodiac is an anthropomorphic projection onto the sky. The siderealists maintain that the zodiac is a real thing — an archetype that exists independent of anybody's opinion about it. An archetype is not invested with meaning simply because people want it to be true. The earth was never flat despite the one-time conviction that it was so. A projection, however, agreed upon by at least some people, is a stereotype, which is how the siderealists see the tropical zodiac.

The classical period of astrological development in Babylonia extended from 1400 to 900 B.C. and includes records of observations of first and last appearances of planets, stations, oppositions, and daily risings, settings and culminations of stars and planets. Those are the kinds of things you need to construct a model of the sky. The Babylonians also built astrolabes that date from 1100 B.C.

***Q: How old is the zodiac?***

That's hard to say exactly except that the Babylonians had definitely become aware of it in the second millennium B.C. and probably earlier. Its constellations were of unequal lengths, and included the twelve that we use today plus Auriga, Orion, Perseus, the Pleiades and they split Pisces into two distinct constellations, the eastern fish and the western fish. The Egyptians, while fairly sophisticated astronomically, had no zodiac in the second millennium. They emphasized the celestial equator, which is the earth's equator extended out into space. Some early Babylonian material also emphasized the equator as a reference plane, but the development of the zodiac required ecliptic emphasis, which they embraced exclusively fairly early on. It's hard to know what the Indians were doing because they have no written records from that time, only an oral tradition. Still, they make some fairly extreme circumstantial claims from the hymns in the Rig Veda that have not resolved the matter of when they became astrologically sophisticated.

The era that really spawned modern astrology did not appear until mid-first millennium B.C. after the Babylonians had transformed their unequal length constellations into the twelve equal division scheme that has been used since then. The

evidence comes from Babylon, Nineveh, Ur, and Uruk in what is modern Iraq. By then the Babylonians had done an amazing thing. Their very long-term observations provided them with the raw data from which they devised the first mathematical model of the sky that worked. This is really important. Let me put it another way: the Babylonians invented a cinematic model of the sky that allowed them to construct ephemerides that could predict future positions of the planets. That model is hailed by historians of science as one of the great technical achievements of antiquity and yet almost nobody in astrology knows about it. That is the beginning of modern astrology. The evidential materials are centuries of observations, the mathematical models whose parameters are expressly delineated and the procedure texts for the construction of ephemerides. All of those things are preserved on clay tablets that can be examined, held and read. There are no leaps of faith, no convoluted inferences, no disputed or implausible assumptions about this issue. The zodiac is a Babylonian discovery subsequently adopted by the entire Western world and India too.

I've found no Greek contribution in bringing the zodiac to light. Apparently they just adopted it, and significantly the oldest horoscope found so far is Babylonian. It dates from 410 B.C. The Babylonian model of the sky was predictive long before the Greek model that was merely descriptive until the Greeks adapted Babylonian astronomical parameters to epicycle theory in the second century B.C. The Greeks took a mother lode from the Babylonians: the labor of centuries; in particular, they took the zodiac, the Babylonian astronomical parameters, even the sexagesimal (base 6) number system. The Greeks certainly advanced astrology due to the techniques they invented. But the position that modern astrology begins with them is not universally embraced, especially in academia, where the Babylonians are given their proper due.

***Q: I've heard Babylonian omen astrology dismissed as something other than 'real' astrology? Did it relate to people as well as purely mundane events?***

Omen astrology is the granddaddy of all astrology. What can you call astrology if not divination by the sky? Any other term is just a fancy name for that, although modern astrologers are anxious to cast themselves in a different role. Omen astrology constitutes the recognition that there is a correspondence between above and below, that celestial configurations are symbolic of what happens on the ground. Dismissing omen astrology is like maintaining that a Model T Ford is something other than a real car. But there's no getting around the fact that the Model T, though old in automotive terms, is nonetheless a complete automobile with all the fundamental attributes of modern cars. Until the advent of individual astrology, which appeared later in the first millennium B.C., well before the earliest Greek horoscopes, the only person who got the benefit of astrological advice was the king. There are books devoted entirely to the astrological advice given to Assyrian and Babylonian kings. The essential thing is that the Babylonians had long recognized the intrinsic natures of the planets. Accordingly, great spending and building projects were undertaken when Jupiter was exalted in Cancer; they made war when Mars was dignified in Aries; they negotiated political matters when Mercury was exalted in Virgo; they were fearful of famine when Saturn was ill-disposed. They understood the intrinsic natures of the sidereal signs and the planets. If that isn't astrology, I don't know what is.

***Q: Then when does tropical astrology appear?***

The oldest Greek horoscope that has survived is the coronation of Antiochus I of Commagene from 62 B.C.—that’s in modern Turkey. I don’t know quite what to make of it because Jupiter was portrayed in Leo in this inscription and frieze monument but it was well into Cancer for that date, both tropically and sidereally. There is a tropical horoscope mentioned in a literary source, not an original text, from 72 B.C. and that’s it. I’m not aware of anything tropical that’s older. It’s noteworthy that the date when you can begin talking about tropical astrology based on actual horoscopes is as recent as this. People are constantly talking about the enormous antiquity of astrology as though there were evidence for it right and left. But there isn’t all that much material until late antiquity, and then after the fall of Rome, there’s almost no astrology in the West until the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

***Q: How did tropical astrology come to take precedence in the West?***

That’s a big question and requires a little preliminary explanation. It’s crucial to note that the equinox rotates through all the constellations over the course of 25,800 years. Taurus was in the Northern Hemisphere vernal equinox when Egypt became established as a regional power in the third millennium B.C. Aries appeared in the vernal equinox during the first and second millennia B.C. Pisces has appeared in the equinox for most of the last two thousand years and when the Age of Aquarius begins centuries from now, that constellation will rise at the time of the vernal equinox. The astrological ages are sidereal phenomena. They have nothing whatever to do with the tropical zodiac. That fact dethrones Aries as the permanent resident at the doorstep of the vernal equinox; furthermore, the duration of the seasons is constantly changing, and finally, since in the Southern Hemisphere, March 21<sup>st</sup> is the autumnal equinox, the seasonal rationale for the tropical zodiac breaks down completely. That’s at the crux of the tropical-sidereal controversy. The siderealists maintain that it’s a mistake to define the zodiac in terms of the seasons.

It’s also essential to note that once every 25,800 years tropical and sidereal reckoning coincide. That happened in A.D. 221 shortly after the Roman Imperial Era, which ended in A.D. 180 with the death of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Consider that Ptolemy’s dates are conjectured to be A.D. 100 to 175 with the *Almagest* written in the 140’s and 150’s. At the time of his likely death the difference between tropical and sidereal reckoning was less than a degree which nobody can eyeball without a reference star nearby. So for practical purposes, tropical and sidereal reckoning were the same during Ptolemy’s time. And at the time of the equinox you couldn’t tell without instruments whether 0, 1 or 2 degrees of Aries rose with the sun because the sun’s glare washes out the stars near it. My point is that a little more than a generation after the death of Ptolemy, tropical and sidereal reckoning were exactly the same and had been nearly so for more than a century, and were for yet another hundred years, very close. Ptolemy was writing about what you could see if you turned your head from a horoscope to the sky in his own day. The rate of precession is one degree per seventy-one and two thirds years. So in a modern lifetime you can only see a difference of one degree in the displacement of the sky with respect to the spring equinox. But the Romans have a dismal record of observations after Ptolemy—almost surely nothing that would allow somebody to say between Ptolemy’s death circa A.D. 175 and three hundred years later when the last nominal Roman emperor in the West was deposed, that four degrees of

precession had accrued in that time. Only an assiduous observer with instruments and three hundred-year old records could note that. I haven't heard that anybody brought up the matter.

You have to remember too that literacy was at a low level during that time. The high water mark for literacy in the West has been estimated at about 10% during the Roman Republic and it only went downhill from there during the Empire. By the end of the fifth century, literacy was common only among the clergy—who disparaged astrology—and for most of them probably not beyond the modest level of craftsman's literacy...and that was in Latin. Ptolemy wrote in Greek. Ptolemy's *Almagest* wasn't even translated into Latin until 1160. So who was reading the *Almagest*, or the *Syntaxis* and *Tetrabiblos* before the Arabs began calling them *al magesti* (from the Greek superlative, μέγιστος, "greatest")? Not many Romans, I think, even among the few literati of the day, and almost certainly no western provincials. Astrology barely survived in the Byzantine world. It was all but extinct in the West but fared better in the Islamic world.

In the Latin West, the tradition that is the direct ancestor of Western Europe and the U.S., there was a tremendous shortage of people who were literate, numerate or educated in any but the most perfunctory way. Astrology requires literacy, numeracy, some technical skill and especially experience. Those people were at a premium in the West. Taking note of the difference between tropical and sidereal was a totally unreasonable expectation of the handful of people who were barely hanging on to the new Ptolemaic tradition, much less the older, original form of the art.

The tropical zodiac took over because Ptolemy's *Almagest* was the last major technical work in a western vernacular revered in the Latin West and Byzantium before a cultural implosion of staggering proportions made the West a backwater for six hundred years. The Dark Age in the West represents a much lower level of sophistication than Classical or Late Antiquity. The only institution that survived the Dark Ages was the Catholic Church which strongly discouraged rational inquiry. There was almost no law or federal authority beyond the strongest sword arm and what is important to us as astrologers, there is almost no evidence of astrology, and or celestial observations until the very minor Carolingian Renaissance in the late 8<sup>th</sup> and early 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century when twenty degrees of sidereal Pisces was rising at the time of the vernal equinox, only the Arabs had enough astrological skill to note it; but still two thirds of each tropical sign were in the constellations of the same name. Yet by the time of, say, the Restoration in England in 1660, ten degrees of sidereal Pisces rose at the spring equinox; only a third of each tropical sign was in the constellation of the same name by then, and now five Pisces rises with the Northern Hemisphere spring equinox. One sixth of the territory of the signs of Ptolemy's day are still in the tropical signs. When the Age of Aquarius begins everything will be thirty degrees out of sync with Ptolemy's era.

The 'vernal equinox equals Aries' maxim gained currency in the Hellenistic World when that condition was near to being right in Hipparchus' time and it was firmly entrenched by Ptolemy's lifetime when it was all but exactly true. Then the lights went out in the West and astrology with it. When the lights came back on with the revival of learning in the 11<sup>th</sup>, and especially, the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the western authority people turned to was Ptolemy because he wrote in Greek. Westerners, who were slowly becoming literate again, were inclined to learn Latin and Greek above all other languages after their



own vernaculars. Akkadian, the language of the Babylonians, though it's similar to Hebrew and Arabic, had become a dead language, perhaps completely unknown in the West of A.D. 1000 even though there is much more ancient astrological and astronomical material written in Akkadian than Latin and Greek.

Babylon was replaced as a regional capital during the Seleucid Period in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., and without the money for municipal repair and maintenance, it fell into decay and finally ruin. The last Babylonian almanac to which a date can be attached is from A.D. 75. However, a large number of horoscopes have been uncovered from a former Greek colony in Egypt over the past several years. They are written in Greek on papyrus and are almost uniformly sidereal. They span the first through the sixth centuries A.D. so it's impossible to say that the sidereal zodiac was extinguished when Babylon had fallen to ruin.

In sum, there was a three-fold assault on the sidereal zodiac—two of which came from the Greeks—that supplanted it in the West when tropical and sidereal reckoning coincided at the end of the Age of Aries: first, a mistaken notion of the geometry of the solar system, that is, the acceptance of a geocentric or earth-centered universe; second, the conviction that the earth has no motion of its own—no rotation, revolution, precession or nutation; thirdly, the catastrophe of the Dark Ages, which hamstrung the Western intelligentsia. The tropical zodiac became institutionalized when Rome was at her height and remained undisturbed as the medieval darkness settled over Europe. The curtain didn't come down instantly but illiteracy accelerated it. Once the Dark Age was fully upon us in the West, the matter of tropical versus sidereal couldn't be argued until sufficient time had elapsed (centuries) for western observers to note visually that the zero degree of sidereal Aries no longer rose with the equinox. The reason is that the level of astronomical sophistication during the medieval period was so abysmally low that nobody was in a position to contest Ptolemy. I think it's quite noteworthy that Ptolemy's work wasn't critically evaluated in the West until the fifteenth century by Johannes Muller, better known to astrologers as Regiomontanus. In a nutshell, that's how the tropical zodiac gained ascendancy in the West.

***Q: How does the actual practice of tropical astrology differ from western sidereal astrology?***

They are not radically different except insofar as the zodiac issue places them poles apart. Siderealists use aspects, houses and planets just like the tropicalists, although the western siderealists tend to use houses, derived houses and house rulers much less. Western siderealists also pay close attention to individual stars. They are very aspect oriented and especially appreciate that aspects exist in more than one coordinate system. Some tropicalists do this too, but a siderealist is more likely by training to take into account aspects in the prime vertical and equatorial system as readily as aspects in ecliptic coordinates. It's gospel among siderealists that planets get power from their elevation in the horoscope, propinquity to the angles, closeness of their aspect relationships and especially by their dignities. In addition to these, siderealists use transits, primary directions, secondary progressions and solar and lunar returns as their main tools. It's important as well, to note that the angles—the ascendant and mid-heaven positions of solar and lunar returns—are not the same in tropical and sidereal returns.

Even tropical astrologers agree that sidereal solar returns are superb timing devices. That's why many tropical advocates use precession corrected solar returns.

***Q: Some people say sidereal astrology is best for the timing of events but that tropical astrology better describes trait characteristics. Do you agree?***

No, I strongly disagree. My view, and I'm sure I speak for the western sidereal community on this, is that you can't have it both ways. The matter is basic: if you have competing propositions, it's possible for one to be right and the other wrong, or they can both be wrong but they can't both be right. There is no question but that sidereal astrology is very effective for events because it disposes of the timing problems associated with precession. The problem is how to make somebody like Dick Cheney, our current vice president, into both a sidereal Capricorn, and a tropical Aquarian. Can he be seen as liberal, bohemian, egalitarian, humanitarian, counter-culture oriented or a rebel? I don't see it. It's like saying that someone could simultaneously be primarily liberal and primarily conservative or simultaneously primarily emotional and primarily intellectual. My experience is that you don't get two diametrically opposite persons, in terms of character, in the same body.

A tropicalist and a siderealist with similar experience in the art, who both understand the intrinsic natures of the planets, will tend to say much the same thing about planet combinations. The parting of the ways comes when someone who has the sun in tropical Aquarius but sidereal Capricorn is evaluated according to what those positions mean to a tropicalist and a siderealist. The contrasts are pretty sharp.

Another glaring issue that bowls over former tropicalists who make the leap to the sidereal zodiac is how the dignities and debilities come alive in a sidereal context. Astrology is mostly a matter of reading character and I submit that to do that, the tropical and sidereal twain cannot meet.

***Q: How can people find out more about the practice of western sidereal astrology?***

My web site includes a foundation course on sidereal astrology. It consists of eleven lessons, designed to help the student understand the fundamentals of sidereal astrology as a body of axioms, techniques and interpretation. It includes an historical overview, lessons on the zodiac, the sidereal signs, astronomical concepts and horoscope calculation, natal interpretation and solar returns. The advanced course will be available next year. It will cover primary directions, secondary progressions, lunar returns and various methods of directing the angles. The site also includes many articles I've written over the years on topics such as politics, predictive techniques and natal interpretation. I would also highly recommend reading Fagan's books and articles.

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*Colleen Mauro was the founding editor of INTUITION magazine. She is also the author of Spiritual Telepathy, Awaken Your Higher Mind, to be published in 2005.*