

Chapter One



The First House

There are houses on the coast built right to the cliffs, with breathtaking views of sea and sky. What would life be like being born into such a home? Or how different might one's perspective be, starting out in the desperate tangle of a South Bronx tenement, or a bleak stretch of the Australian outback? As in life, in astrology, one's birthplace has a shaping power. *When* you're born arranges the planets into signs and degrees. *Where* you're born drops them into particular houses. It assigns you an altogether different celestial citizenship than someone born at the same moment in another part of the world.

Location counts. And it makes its strongest statement in the 1st house of your chart. If you could have stepped to the hospital window when you were born and scanned the skies on the Eastern horizon, you might have seen the cluster of stars and space that marked your Ascendant, or 1st house cusp. The 1st house suggests your overall vitality, your height, your weight, the shape of your jaw, the expectations you have of beginnings, how you interact with others, your overall approach to life. Some say it's the house most descriptive of personality. John Frawley in *The Real Astrology Applied* calls the 1st house “the title-page of the chart,” with all the other houses expanding and amplifying its text.¹ How does one's birth environment translate to all of this?

It's holistic. Imagine that you began life in a box. As you grew, your body might adapt to its shape, becoming stooped or squared. You'd probably like to hold on to things, and meeting others, you'd be closed and secretive. Likely you'd enjoy working in the dark. The Ascendant is a symbolic description of the psychic container you first entered, when you left the womb for this world, and with your initial gasping breaths realized, “I've landed somewhere new.” The 1st house holds first impressions -- the ones you make on the world, and the ones the world makes on you.

More than country, town, or street, family may be the strongest environmental pressure. As a child, your family *is* your world. The psychological school of astrology reads the rising sign as the role one plays in this first environment. Family systems theory argues that each child inevitably adopts a unique position in the family system, driven less by the child's true nature, than by the needs of the whole. Family dynamics might require the first-born become its hero, the third-born its

¹ John Frawley, *The Real Astrology Applied*, (London: Apprentice Books, 2002), p. 154.

scapegoat. Cancer rising may need to be the family caretaker; Virgo, its goody two shoes; Pisces, its lost child; Sagittarius, its clown.

Eventually children leave their families for more spacious environments, with new possibilities and pressures. Their initial web expands, but its center remains the same. The 1st house role is an enduring location. No matter where you go, it conditions what you see and how you instinctively respond.

This is useful information to have about people. If I think the world is hard like rock and everybody ought to climb, and you think the world is fluid like water and everybody ought to swim, what's going on when I tell you that *your* problem is you aren't ambitious enough, or you tell me that *I'd* be happier if I would just go with the flow? Do you think we're really "communicating"?

My mother and her sister haven't spoken to each other in years. The particular coal that sparked this fight has since faded and cooled, so that now, when one talks about the other, their pools of childhood memories are stirred for grievances. When they speak I swear they're talking about strangers instead of the women I know. Says my mom of her Scorpio rising sister, the aunt I've always known to be sensitive, tenacious, and perceptive, "My sister was cruel. She never wanted me to have anything or be happy." Says my aunt of her Capricorn-rising sister, the mom I've often heard lament her lonely, latch-key childhood—"Your mother was spoiled rotten. Always the center of attention, got everything she wanted."

Do you think they share the same reality? They came from the same family, but born seven years apart, along different horizon lines, they were spun into the family on different webs, growing up in vastly different worlds.

Not only is Capricorn rising in my mother's chart, her 1st house holds Saturn in Aquarius. With Saturn in Aquarius one can suffer a fear of insignificance, of not being noticed, of disappearing into the crowd. My mom was conceived late in her mother's life. For months my grandmother thought she had a tumor, not a baby growing in her womb! It's not really Saturn's fault that my mother is so short, over a foot shorter than either her brother or sister, but it's certainly part of my mother's metaphysical gestalt. A psychic once named my mother's life mission as "to stand up and be counted." It's a phrase my mom often repeats.

My mother grew up in a 1st house Saturn/Capricorn world, full of adults and loneliness. Being sensitive to the Depression years of her childhood further refined her Capricorn lenses. Though ambitious and quite successful, my mom still fears not having enough. She's forever strategizing about how to earn money beyond the retirement she kept postponing, worried she'd become a bag lady wheeling a shopping cart through the town. She still has goals, keeps making plans and lists. And all this, good and bad, filters into her daughters' charts as a kind of astrological inheritance: as a Moon/Saturn square in my chart and a Capricorn Moon in my sister's.

The year I gave birth to my son, my solar return mirrored my mom's 1st house, with Capricorn rising and a Saturn in Aquarius. It was as though I walked in my mother's shoes that year; I found I could empathize with her more deeply than before. Being a new mom and sharing her natal 1st house brought a poignant, bittersweet experience of seeing the world through her eyes.



Years ago I attended a party full of astrologers. The talk had turned to rising signs. "He's a Scorpio rising, so you better watch your back... Well, of course, she's got Leo on the Ascendant, always the drama queen..." Generalizations like this are the bread and butter of astrology, but they make me queasy. Along with intelligence, empathy, and a certain technical expertise, a good astrologer must see people as people, and endeavor to find the person in the chart. Individuals are reduced, labeled, and treated like objects most everywhere they go, but in an astrologer's office, they should be seen in their fullness, as alive, complicated, gifted, and whole. The Ascendant suggests the key to working this way.

The rising sign is one of the most tender doorways into an individual's psyche. This was where, as a child, they were all wax and impressionable, where they first discovered the need for a mask, and so constructed one. The next time you read a chart, try starting by entering its 1st house depths.

Immerse yourself in its elemental basis, water if it's in Scorpio, fire if it's in Leo. Imagine being a child enveloped by this element. Invite your intuitive mind to tell you a story from this person's past. What might have wounded them? What made them feel safe? How were they encouraged? Stay with your imagining until that person's Ascendant mask begins to replace your own. Grow them up again. What does the world now look like from their eyes? Look across to their 7th house of partnership. What sort of people do they meet? How do the career challenges of their 10th house feel from this vantage? Once you've fully experienced the chart from its 1st house point of view, you'll be able to honor the person in the chart with more gifted sensitivity.

Some astrologers believe the Ascendant offers a truer, more intimate portrait of an individual than the Sun sign. Sun signs are the same for everyone born within a 30-day period--while Ascendants differentiate within this group, being more precisely tied to each one's

birth moment. In the Sun-versus-Ascendant argument, I'm more inclined to agree with Howard Sasportas, that our Ascendants lead us toward the identities promised by our Suns. "The Ascendant may be the way we hatch but what we grow into is the Sun sign. ... The Sun is why we are here; the Ascendant is how we get there."²

The 1st house represents the starting point on the path to self-discovery. It's a comfortable, but early identity. Like a well-worn coat, and much like the South Node, it's a cache of mental habits and survival mechanisms that got you going in life, but can eventually hold you back. I've noticed that the people who seem most frustrated in fulfilling their destiny are often invisibly bound by the web of their 1st house. I'm thinking in particular of a Gemini friend, who puts Gemini activities--social interaction and the discussion of new ideas--at the top of his list of life's most meaningful activities. And yet, his Scorpio rising persona inhibits him from mixing in social gatherings. He'll stand silently to the side and watch, protected. We've attended a number of workshops together (the Gemini in him wouldn't miss it), yet invariably, at the first break I'll find him in the defenses of Scorpio. He is angry and distrustful. "The speaker is too charismatic and false. He's manipulating the audience," he scowls.

Then there's Paul. He called me from his car phone; his words kept fading in and out. "I saw your picture and felt you could help me, I'm used to getting psychic impressions of people ... now I need focus ... goals ... I don't know ... I'm at a crossroads ... my relationship just ended ... maybe I'd like to develop my skills as a healer ... I'm also into the arts."

It's not my habit to guess someone's chart from their conversation (the game's much richer the other way around), but when I saw Paul's

² Howard Sasportas, *The Twelve Houses* (Wellingborough, Great Britain: The Aquarian Press, 1985), p. 40.

chart I wasn't at all surprised. Paul spoke straight from his Neptune in Libra Ascendant.

Before Paul's session, I thought about his chart and what he wanted from the reading. Should you give a Neptune rising "focus" and goals? *Can* you? Or could you sooner move the heavens and put Pluto or Saturn there instead? I entered his Ascendant. I saw fog. I meditated on fog. Can you focus on the distance while traveling through fog? Do you see the destination ahead of you? No. You can see the hand in front of your face and that's about it. When you're driving through fog you must go slowly, alert to what's near rather than what's far. You must use an almost sixth sense of trust to feel what exists in the shrouds. If I were to be of much help at his present crossroads, it was this skill that I needed to raise for Paul.

I found Paul to be an intelligent, creative, compassionate man. As he spoke about growing up in his family, I understood why the boy Paul had to draw on the chameleon-like ability of his Libra Neptune mask to balance and blend in. To survive, he became whatever anyone needed him to be. The cost, of course, was that the authentic, creative and passionate Paul, the Paul of his Sun Pluto conjunction, had to check out. And each time he dissociated from his present reality, his desired future slipped further away.

Paul wanted to talk about options --- going back to school, or apprenticing with a master, perhaps relocating to a different part of the country. I wanted to talk about his present. I asked him, if he focused on where he was, making his choices from his present feelings, did he trust he would reach the place he'd always wanted to reach, whether it was going to school or making art, in this part of the country or elsewhere? His voice came a bit more deeply into his body: "Yes... When I can quiet my mind... I know this is true." For the rest of the reading we talked about his relationship, the one that had just ended. Even Paul could

sense through his pain that this was best, for both of them. His chart agreed.

Two weeks later I got another call from Paul's cell phone. His voice was softer, fading in and out again. He'd just called his old girlfriend, who was already living with another man. He'd begged her to take a vacation with him, to that magical place where they'd first fallen in love. "She said she'd call me back ... she was confused ... she didn't want to hurt me ... she didn't know what to do." Paul had lost his way in the fog again. He'd slipped out of his present feelings (the agony of his loneliness) and into the faraway fantasies of his Neptune mask.



This brings us to the crucial 1st house question: How do we keep this early container from becoming our prison? The Jungian psychologist James Hillman once said, "You have to give up the life you have to get to the life that's waiting for you."³ This was the secret message coded in the stars on the Eastern horizon at your birth. Newly born, you'd just proven the truth of it: you had to relinquish the womb in order to reach the new life awaiting you. This is a natural law of development. Understanding this is the key to mastery of your 1st house.

Writing about the 1st house, astrologer Dane Rudhyar stresses the need to separate yourself from its early influences, the personal, social and cultural conditioning that mothered you.⁴ The work of the 1st house is

³ Quoted from *Sacred Contracts* by Carolyn Myss (New York: Harmony Books, 2001), p. 2.

⁴ Dane Rudhyar, *The Astrological Houses* (New York: Doubleday, 1972),

to keep birthing yourself, which means to keep separating, to keep honoring what's different about you. Your "difference," says Rudhyar, is not the same as a self-involved burden of alienation ("Nobody understands me"). Rather it's about accepting the gift of being distinct. On a deeply spiritual level we may recognize we're all one, interconnected and interdependent. Yet it's also true that the whole does its most productive and creative work through individuals. When you embrace your individuality, you come closer to fulfilling your destiny. You gain access to more inner resources. You become more authentically formed.

The sign on your Ascendant isn't the goal of individuation, it's rather the means. It's less the authentic person and more the persona, the style through which you express your spirit in the world. This image is more properly a work-in-progress, a becoming that continues throughout your life. See your Ascendant as a flexible, elastic covering, that can stretch and reshape as you grow. Imagine for a moment that your 1st house, its sign and planets, are a mask you can take off and study. Put it on the table in front of you. What does it look like? What expression does it wear? How might a person wearing such a mask maneuver through the world?

Notice this mask is made of pliable material. How might you alter its expression? Without tearing the whole thing apart and installing a different rising sign, how would you redesign this persona so it could get you more of what you want? Pick the best qualities from the sign, its ruler, and any planets in your 1st and decorate your mask anew. How different does it look from the mask you first put on the table? Does it more successfully express what's distinct about you?

pp. 58-59.

Consciously or unconsciously, this is the work you're doing when progressed and transiting planets cross into your 1st house. Celestial logic requires these planets transit the 12th house first. This is the house of endings. During 12th house transits, the old approach unravels. You're emptying out, so that you can inhale fresh spirit and recreate your mask, when this transit moves into 1st house.

I learned astrology using the contemporary "alphabet" system, which teaches that Aries, Mars and the 1st house are the same astrological letter. This makes Mars the natural ruler of the 1st house. Its spontaneous, impulsive, energetic, and assertive energy suits the feeling we can have when a transiting planet enters our 1st house. We're urged by modern texts to take initiative and put ourselves out there, cook up new opportunities, go after what we want. It was initially disorienting then, when I learned that traditional astrology makes Saturn the 1st house ruler. But as John Frawley points out, Saturn rules doors and boundaries, and there may be no stronger boundary than the Ascendant in defining what's alive from what is not.⁵

Mars may suit our 1st house urge to begin, but Saturn describes its essential task. Saturn rules form. And during 1st house transits we are reforming – both ourselves and the world we see. Saturn rules both separations and society – the two forces that collide—or collude—in this house. We meet the world here, and under its pressure, we discover our difference. Traditional astrologers also give Mercury special dignity in this house. It "joys" here, understandably, because as we redefine ourselves in the 1st house, we also recharacterize our surroundings. We do Mercury things: we name what we see, we tell stories.

⁵ John Frawley, *op cit.* 152

During 1st house transits we get a chance to reinvent our self-image and retool our perceptions of the environment. Recently I spoke with Julie. The Sun was transiting through her 1st house. Though astrologers don't often talk about solar transits, I've found the Sun's annual circuit through the chart to be quite profound. It names our personal seasons, the months where each house's work becomes important. Julie knew very little about astrology, but when I explained what the Sun in the 1st house meant, Julie laughed in recognition. "So that's why!"

As a child Julie had crooked teeth. This imperfection made her feel insecure, wary of smiling or laughing too loud. Perhaps it was from having no money or perhaps it was indifference, but her mother never took her to an orthodontist. "My mom always said I looked fine, but I knew otherwise." This year, when the Sun entered Julie's 1st house, this 45-year-old woman made the appointment herself. She was finally going to have her teeth corrected. This physical change hailed a separation from her past, and a birth into a brighter, more confident persona. May you make good use of your 1st house transits too!



