

HEAVENLY NEWS

“Astronomy or Astrology?”

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When can I see Sagittarius? I was asked this the other day by my teenager who normally has no interest in astronomy whatsoever. After a moment of surprise I responded that she could see any night during the summer facing the Southern sky. A bit confused, she pointed out that she's born in November so why would her birth sign be viewable now. This is a common misconception. Most people know their astrological “birth sign” or “Sun sign”. When astrology began a few thousand years ago, the Sun sign was supposed to represent the constellation in which the Sun appeared on your birth date. However, because of precession, a gradual wobble that changes the orientation of the Earth's axis in space, this is no longer the case. Precession occurs with many rotation objects. You can see it easily by spinning a top. As the top spins rapidly, you'll notice that its axis also sweeps out a circle at a somewhat slower rate. We say that the top's axis precesses. Earth's axis precesses in much the same way, but far more slowly. Because Earth's axis has moved about 1/13 of the way through its 26,000 year precession cycle since ancient times, the astrological Sun signs are off by more than a month from the actual positions of the Sun among the constellations today.

Although the terms astrology and astronomy sound very similar they describe very different practices. Ancient astrologers hoped that they might learn how the positions of the Sun, Moon, and planets influence our lives. They charted the skies, seeking correlations with events on Earth. For example, if an earthquake occurred when Saturn was entering the constellation of Leo, might Saturn's position have been the cause of the earthquake? If the king became ill when Mars appeared in the constellation Gemini and the first-quarter moon appeared in Scorpio, might it mean another tragedy for the king when this particular alignment of the Moon and Mars next recurred? Surely, the ancient astrologers thought the patterns of influence eventually would become clear and they would then be able to forecast human events with the same reliability as astronomical observations of the Sun could forecast the coming of Spring. This hope was never realized. Although many astrologers still attempt to predict future events, scientific tests have shown that their predications come true no more often than would be expected by pure chance. Today we use ideas of gravity and energy to explain the influences of the Sun and the Moon, and these same ideas tell us that the planets are too far from Earth to have a similar influence on our lives. Of course, many people continue to practice astrology, perhaps because of its ancient and rich traditions, or just because it's just fun to say “what's going to happen to me today?”

No matter what your “birth sign” is make a trip out to the Community Observatory to view the beauty of the stars that make up the constellations. Just take a peek through one of the two 14” telescopes at the Community Observatory located behind the El Dorado Center, Folsom Lake College, which is free and open to the public (weather permitting) Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings from 8:30 PM – 10:30PM. You can find driving directions and more information about the observatory at www.communityobservatory.com