

The Enneagram of Individuality

HOW TYPE SHOWS US WHAT WE AREN'T, WHAT WE ARE, AND WHAT WE CAN BECOME

by Susan Rhodes, July 31, 2008

(Originally published in the Sept. 2008 issue of the *Enneagram Monthly*)

Most of us who read the *Enneagram Monthly* are pretty ardent fans of the enneagram. We know firsthand its power to reveal hidden dimensions of ourselves. While it's common to think that the chief thing revealed is how our personality defends itself, I see it as revealing something much more basic: our quintessential individuality. The enneagram doesn't reveal everything about our individuality, but it does reveal our core motivation, which is such a key element of who we are.

Individuality has always fascinated me. A lot of my interest originally came from trying to understand myself and how I'm different from other people—especially why I found it so difficult to understand my parents. Well, I'm a Four and an only child; my dad was a Six, and my mother a Three. Anyone who knows the enneagram will understand why I felt like a third wheel.

When I grew up, I wanted to understand why. But I was also interested in understanding individuality for its own sake. In graduate school, I saw the effectiveness of the scientific method, especially for revealing general tendencies among people, such as people generally respond to a drug, how people generally respond to stress, when toddlers generally reach developmental milestones, etc.

Well, fine. But I kept noticing how often general findings didn't quite capture the whole truth. I kept noticing all the exceptions that didn't fit the rule—and how the current research methods we use tend to give a false impression of “how people are” because they focus on how people are *on the average*. They focus on the norms, not the exceptions.

I wanted to know how individual differences affect our reaction to a drug, how we respond to stress or when we begin to walk, talk, or develop moral sensibilities. I particularly wanted to know what factors had the greatest impact on study results. How did individual differences like age, gender, education, or socio-economic status produce different patterns of response?

The more I studied, the more I saw just how much people varied in their responses to virtually any stimulus. People are so incredibly diverse, I thought. Why isn't science doing a better job at highlighting this diversity? Why do all the studies focus solely on the general trend and so often ignore the variations in response?

Why indeed? I still don't have an answer to that question. But my interest in individual differences never abated. So when I later encountered the enneagram, I was elated. What an elegant and powerful system for learning how we differ not only in perspective, but in core motivation.

This focus on core motivation is what makes the enneagram unique among systems: its ability to reveal the actual impetus for our acts, to show us what is energizing them. I am intrigued to see how well the enneagram shows us not just how we differ superficially (i.e., in personality) but in ways that speak to our deeper identity as a person and as a participant in life. As such, it reflects the motivation that arises out of the very depths of our *soul-self* or *psyche*, and which rises to the surface to support us in daily life.

Enneagram Types <> Personality Types

Because the core motivation of our enneagram type comes from such a deep place within us, our type is more intimately connected with the “deep self” than the “surface self.” Thus, although we tend to call our enneagram type a personality type, it's really not. Although both personality

and type tell us something about individuality, type tells us more—it tells a deeper, more mythic story. Type reflects our individuality in a potentially archetypal level of the psyche whereas personality reflects our individuality in a less global, more functional sense. Moreover, type helps create personality; personality does not create type. So to put it bluntly, type is fundamentally more basic—more elemental—than personality.

It's for this reason that it is neither accurate nor useful to think of our enneagram type as a personality type. We'd do better to think of it as, e.g., a *soul type*, *psyche type*, *energy type*, *motivation type*, *intention type*, *dharma type*, or *individuality type*—just about anything except a personality type!¹ Any of these terms is a better descriptor than *personality type*.

Our type helps make us who we are, even as small babies. As soon as individuality is present, type is present.

And when is this? At what point in development can we be called individuals? Well, certainly from the moment of birth (if not before). From the moment we come into this world, we are an individual. And from that same moment, we have an enneagram type, as Hameed Ali (aka A.H. Almaas) pointed out in his 2004 IEA address. Ali went on to say that this is why we will always have our type, even after we have achieved a balanced personality.

This could not be true if type were only a personality defense mechanism. It can only be true if type is something more basic to human nature.

In my view, type represents a transpersonal or archetypal energy of mysterious origins. It comes into the psyche at a very early stage in development, defining its contours in a profound yet subtle way. Its influence is not only profound, but pervasive. It affects many things—how we perceive the world, but how we make value judgments about what we perceive, and how we translate those value judgments into action.

Thus, type actually functions as a cognitive-perceptual filter. This might lead to the assumption that it is type that actually causes our consciousness to be cognitively limited. But it is not our type that imposes limitations—it's our physical body, which (for some reason) cannot handle more than a trickle of information at any given point in time.²

Our type simply gives us a stable point of reference that enhancing cognitive processing by helping us maintain a relatively consistent focus. Without such a focus, we would be unable to develop a stable sense of self or consistent point of view. Life would seem like a random collection of sensory impressions that we couldn't really sort out. This is the fate of people with serious personality disorders like schizophrenia.

Our enneagram type helps us avoid that fate by giving us a point of orientation that serves as a kernel around which our individuality can further develop. At birth, we possess a nascent form of individuality that keeps developing as we develop. What we call personality represents a later developmental milestone in the “individuality development” process.

Developing Individuality: Temperament > Personality > Character

We are individuals for our entire lives. And yet who we are at the beginning of life is clearly not who we are by the end. So how does individuality unfold over the course of a lifetime? And what role does our enneagram type play in the process?

In brief, individuality shows up for us in three ways: as temperament, as personality, and as character. We start with our basic temperament—our inborn tendencies. This serves as the basis for the development of personality, which in turn is the basis for character development. Let's take a look at each of these in turn.

Temperament is the kind of individuality with which we are endowed prior to life experience. It is our innate disposition or psychological tendency, based on both known (e.g., genetic)

and unknown factors. Temperament serves as the basis for the development of a full-fledged personality, which begins to develop right away but is not fully developed until sometime during late childhood or adolescence (depending on what kind of criterion we use to make that determination). In a sense, personality is never entirely developed, in that it continues to change (in at least minor ways) as long as we're alive. But the basic matrix is laid down during the first two years of life.

Scientists did not used to believe that newborns possessed any real individuality. During the mid-20th century, behaviorists like B.F. Skinner confidently proclaimed that infants were a “tabula rasa” (blank slate); most psychoanalysts likewise viewed young infants as essentially undifferentiated from their mothers.

But we now know that infants are not a tabula rasa. With the help of modern technology (aided and abetted by some really ingenious development psychologists), we can now detect individual differences in even the tiniest babies. While newborns may not be able to speak or even move, it turns out they are already individuals in ways that science never dreamed of when I was growing up.

Personality is the kind of individuality with which we are most familiar. It is “ordinary” individuality—the kind we see in adolescence and adulthood. It gives us the ability to function with relative autonomy in daily life. The matrix of our personality is formed by around the age of two, but continues to be fleshed out for another couple of decades. After that, it does not significantly change (barring mental illness, brain disease, or some other kind of radical transformation).

Personality is formed during the first couple of decades of life. Although temperament contains the kernel of personality, the fully-fledged personality is more than just temperament—it's temperament in combination of other key factors: physical development, environmental influences, and personal preference.

Physical development has a very significant effect on personality development. Obviously, changes in brain anatomy and physiology have a tremendous effect on the developing personality, especially changes in the centers of the brain that affect cognitive reasoning, emotional differentiation, and moral judgment. But physical development affects us in other ways, e.g., how our we perceive our bodies and how we are perceived by others.

Interactions with the environment includes any all kinds of interactions, not just the immediate impressions made by parents and other caretakers. During the heyday of behaviorism, we focused rather myopically on this one factor, to the exclusion of many others: the effects of history (when in time someone is born), place (the country and general culture into which they are born), religion, family culture, birth order, socioeconomic status, and many others. We have also overlooked the effect of the developing infant on his environment, how he changes it—how he changes the lives of his parents and how they in turn respond to these changes.

Babies are not automatons, mechanically responding to the dictates of either their genes or environment. They are active agents, interacting freely with their environment, shaping it just as it shapes them. Although they are incredibly vulnerable—I wouldn't suggest otherwise—their very vulnerability and innocence often confers on them an ability to influence their caregivers in a way that the rest of us cannot.

Personal preference (free will) isn't often mentioned in developmental psychology circles, probably because it's something more often of interest to philosophers and theologians than to psychologists. But we would be remiss to leave out the role of free will in personality development, because even the tiniest babies express individual preferences that reflect at least an nascent form of decision-making. They makes choices, even very early in life.

Generally speaking, choice implies responsibility, although obviously not during the earliest months of life. But as babies grow into toddlers, the ability to make appropriate choices is better informed, which is why they are asked at the age of 3 or 4 to begin to take some responsibility for their acts. The obligation to act responsibly gradually grows from that point until adulthood, when people are required (both legally and morally) to be fully responsible for what they do.

Character. The term *character* is sometimes used as a synonym for *personality*; that's how Eli Jaxon-Bear uses the term in his books and articles. However, I see *character* as something distinguished from personality. I prefer to use the term the way it is traditionally used: to describe that quality of individuality that implies depth, wisdom, and personal integrity. (One online source, for example, defines it as "the inward disposition to do what is right.")

At the same time, character is not something independent of personality. It is, rather, the mark of a *mature personality*. The personality possessing character is stable (but not rigid), flexible (but not flaky), responsive (but not reactive) and ethical (but not self-righteous). A person with character is someone we tend to respect, admire, and trust. In psychological terms, we would call such a person well-balanced or high-functioning. In Maslow's hierarchy, the person would be a self-actualizer.

Unlike temperament or personality, character is not something that we develop automatically. Character comes slowly, if it comes at all. It is the outcome of living life in a way that is truly in accordance with one's innermost or core values. We could say it represents full flowering of our inner wisdom, so that a person gradually becomes a living example of what she values most.

So individuality starts with our inborn disposition or temperament, which contains within it the seed potential for personality development, which in turn contains the potential for the development of the mature personality—the personality with character.

Enneagram Type and Individuality

You might be wondering at this point, Just where does our enneagram type come into the picture? How does it affect individuality and when does that influence begin?

Let's start by reviewing what we know about the enneagram. First, we know it's a universal system. This means that its principles should be applied to every human being. Second, we know that the enneagram is notable for its ability to pinpoint which of nine distinctive energies is motivating a human being. Third, we know that the enneagram type not only motivates is but also filters incoming information. Fourth, just as type influences how we see things, it also affects how we evaluate and respond to them.

Based on these observations, we can see that our enneagram type is going to have a profound influence on our individuality, because it affects our motivation, perception, judgment, and actions. While it is not the only thing that determines individuality, it's a major factor.

And as I noted earlier, according to A.H. Almaas, that influence begins from the moment we're born. Our enneagram type is innate, not acquired. So that means it does not originate during infancy, toddlerhood, or early childhood. This also means that type does not develop in response to early childhood wounding.

This may surprise some readers—it's common in enneagram circles to hear that type develops in response to early childhood wounding. At times, I've heard it repeated in a way that sounds almost like a mantra. But if we rouse ourselves to think critically, it becomes a difficult position to defend if we actually believe that type has anything at all to do with motivation.

Motivation is not something that arrives when we're two or three years old. Motivation has to be with us from birth. Otherwise, how could we account for individual differences in newborns?

Also, type influences the development of the perceptual filtering mechanism. It affects the saliency of perceptual information, such that percepts that are more salient (as determined in part by the type) are more likely to be noticed than percepts that are less salient. In plain English, this means that babies tend to notice things that make the most sense to them, given their type—e.g., an Eightish baby may notice a chance to grab something more than a (generally) more mellow Nineish baby, who may be more keen on opportunities to bond.

Thus, our type gives infants a stable foothold for perceiving and interpreting incoming stimuli, so that they feel safe and secure in their earliest explorations of the world.



So it's apparent that type is intimately related to temperament. But are type and temperament the same thing?

No, they are not. While both are innate, temperament is a more encompassing concept. It is more diverse than type*, which is why people (or even babies) of the same type are not carbon copies of one another. Just because they have the same type does not make them exactly the same.

However, type *is* central to temperament. I think of it as a sort of “motivational wellspring” at the center of the psyche around which the nascent personality develops. As such, type both shapes and sustains the developing personality.

Is Personality a Problem?

The way I've defined personality is as the way that individuality shows up in everyday life. So I'm using the term *personality* in a way that is essentially value-neutral. But in real life, the term is seldom used in a value-neutral fashion. *Personality* is used either to describe something positive (dynamic and appealing, as in “She has a great personality”) or something negative (narcissistic and neurotic, as in “She has way too much personality”). Well, which is it—is personality good or bad?

Boy, is that ever the question of the hour, especially for people who work with the enneagram. We talk about personality all the time, and the discussion is seldom dispassionate. For enneagrammers, personality is usually bad. Why? Mostly because we've inherited a paradigm that tells us personality is bad.

But how many of us really believe this—believe it down deep? I ask you: How many of us actually think having a personality is bad when we want to get a job, give a talk, or impress a potential partner? Do we try to minimize our personality in those situations? I don't see anybody trying to do this, not even in the enneagram community. Also, how much do we enjoy being around people without personality? I don't see many personal ads saying “Wanted: a 30-something, trim female without much personality.”

Wouldn't it be tiresome even to spend time alone on our own, if we really had no personality? Why be alone with somebody who lacks appeal?

Granted, there are people who have personalities that are narcissistic, egocentric, and generally obnoxious. But there are also people who have personalities that are lively, engaging, and full of joy. Or personalities that are passionate, artistic, and probing. Or personalities that are dignified, upright, and refined.

What I'm trying to get across here is that personality is just a matrix—a matrix for our individuality. And this individuality can manifest in a way that is wonderful or horrible. It is more often the former than the latter, thank God.

But individuality is a powerful energy. If we lack discernment or self-control, it can create

chaos in our lives. But that's not always such a bad thing—at least in moderation. A little chaos keeps us guessing—it tends to wake us up. After all, personality is not supposed to be perfect. It's supposed to be dynamic, so we can really respond to life in the present moment.

Everyone likes the idea of being in the moment. Well, what part of us is actually having that experience? It's our personality self. It's our personality that acts as a window on the soul.

So to answer my own question, "Is personality a problem?" No, it is not. The only thing that's a problem is our *self-consciousness* about personality—our tendency to worry and fret about its little imperfections. When we occupy ourselves with this kind of thinking, we lose the ability to notice what else is going on around us. And that's what being present in the moment is all about.

Personality as the Crucible for Character

It's also easy to miss the value of personality as a crucible for character development. That's because we tend to think of personality in relation to a hypothetical spiritual state (i.e., "ego vs. Essence"). But there's another way to think of personality—in relation to our inner nature and values. It's possible to ask ourselves, "How well does my personality—as reflected in my actions, attitudes, and goals—reflect the values that matter most to me?"

In a sense, it's a similar sort of comparison, except that when we take the "ego vs. Essence" position, we assume that ego/personality has an adversarial relationship with Essence: we assume that if ego is present, Essence is not. In the latter case—what we could call "Essence via ego" position—we are comparing the extent to which inner values (i.e., essential values) are expressed outwardly, via the ego/personality. From this point of view, the relationship between ego and Essence is not adversarial, but complementary.

At the same time, it's not an easy thing to do. We are building a bridge between the inner and the outer worlds, so that our acts are congruent with our essential nature. This takes discipline and perseverance, and the willingness to change the personality so that it aligns with inner values (rather than the other way around). We need the courage of our convictions to stand up for core values in the face of opposition and the humility necessary to admit when we are wrong.

This is what makes character a rather elusive quality. It is not given; it must be earned. The word *earned* is key here, because character is not a quality that develops on its own. Like fine wine or a classic garden, it must be cultivated. It develops gradually, as the result of making a steady and sincere effort to honorably resolve life's problems. That's why it's something we typically see in people who are older rather than younger—because character can only develop in the crucible of daily life, with its problems, disappointments, and ethical dilemmas.

I once got stuck at the airport because my flight was delayed for two hours. To pass the time, I started chatting with the lady next to me, an youthful-looking older woman. She looked about 65 (but turned out to be almost 20 years older!) She was nobody important—just a homemaker with now-grown kids. But after talking with her for a while, I started to realize she was something special—a person of great wisdom and character. She was kind without being controlling, funny without looking for laughs, and gentle without being a pushover. Although she mainly talked about ordinary things—mainly her family—I realized that she was probably one of the most spiritual people I'd ever met. It's hard to say how I knew this, it was just something about the way she moved and the way she spoke. This woman had the kind of character that made me remember her years later.

People with character live what they believe. Even when their values remain unstated, they shine through the personality like a light through clear glass. These are people who are at peace

with themselves. They have not only met the challenges they were given, but done so in a way that does not betray their core values. Or if they have betrayed them, they have been willing to see this, admit their error, and make amends. They are not perfect people (God forbid), but they are certainly people of substance.

Character and Enlightenment

Earlier I mentioned that we often see personality as a problem for transformational work, when it's really lack of personality control that's the problem. A good spiritual teacher will try and instill values and prescribe practices that improve both control and judgment. But when we work on our own, lack of control can be a problem.

I once read a New Age tale of a woman who was adept at astral projection, which she enjoyed immensely. She apparently enjoyed being out of her body more than she enjoyed being in it. One day, after a long out-of-body excursion, she returned to her body only to find that she couldn't get back in. The author of the book—who said he was out of *his* body at the time—informed her that she couldn't get back in because she had left for so long that the body had died.

Whoops.

We worry about getting too attached to matter, but it appears we can also get too attached to spirit.

That's why spiritual aspirants often spend years cultivating good habits—habits that help them keep their priorities straight and develop inner strength and character.

With character development, the personality does not disappear—it just *matures*, becoming less narcissistic, more deep-rooted, and better able to deal with the vicissitudes of life. However, in so doing, it may look like it's disappearing. Why? Because it tends to change in a way that attracts the development of more subtle aspects of individuality—the kind that are harder to see with the naked eye.

We hear in spiritual circles that “the ego has to go,” but I am skeptical about taking this idea too literally. It may have to go—at least for a time—but it also has to *return*. Otherwise, how could we follow the advice of the Zen masters—“Before Enlightenment, chop wood carry water; after Enlightenment, chop wood carry water”?

What do we think that means, anyway? I confess, I always thought it sounded a bit like punishment. As in, “Hey, you get to experience bliss, but not for long! Then you get stuck with having to come back to the same old grind.”

Kind of disappointing, isn't it?

Well, it *is* disappointing in that it's painful for a human being to move from an expanded state of consciousness to a more constricted state. It's natural to prefer freedom to constriction.

But it's character that enables us to experience such a move in terms of preference rather than necessity. To prefer expanded consciousness is natural, but what happens if preference becomes a need, or even an obsession? Then the quest for higher consciousness becomes untempered by other considerations, like our responsibilities in life.

Character gives us the grounding necessary to temper our desire for freedom with our sense of responsibility, both to ourselves and others. As the phrase *strength of character* suggests, it's character that gives an individual the necessary strength to act with decency and honor, even in difficult situations. At the same time, the development of character does not signify a lessening of individuality, a shrinkage of personality, or an attitude of self-abnegation. It just represents the ability to achieve a dynamic balance between personal desire and personal responsibility.

Will the Real Personality Please Stand Up?

The problem is that achieving balance is a challenge. Jung was aware of this when he discussed the development of personality in a book of the same name (1954/1981). From his perspective, we don't even have any sort of personality until we do:

“There can be no personality without definiteness, wholeness, and ripeness...the achievement of personality means nothing less than the optimal development of the whole individual human being” (p. 171).

Here Jung is using the word *personality* to basically describe what I mean by character. That's why he views true personality as an *achievement*. Until we achieve this, he says, we have no personality—just the tendency to go along with the herd. Our seeming individuality is not individuality at all, but simply a habitual response to the dominant currents within the Collective.

Jung's observations may help us realize how we've come to a place in the enneagram community of distrusting personality so much. Maybe it's because we, like Jung, sense that personality is not always what it's cracked up to be. Although all people *look* like individuals, how many are really what they seem to be? Does their personality embody something genuine or is it just a false persona?

The idea of people having a false persona is disquieting, even disturbing. Why? Because it means that what we see is not what's really there. And this realization can make the world seem like a scary place. Also, if many people have false personas, then maybe we do, too. Maybe we don't even know ourselves. And if this is so, that's an even scarier idea!

So these kind of thought tend to evoke a lot of anxiety, whether or not we're consciously aware of it—anxiety that we somehow have to quell. So how do we try to do this?

Well, one way is to assume that all personality is false. That way, we can't be fooled. We know for sure who to trust: *Nobody* (including ourselves)! Thinking of personality as inherently false also relieves us of the need to reform our personality—to figure out what is false and throw it out. If we assume that all personality is false, then there's really nothing we can do about the situation except make the best of it. Taking this position has the added advantage of allowing us to come together as a group and commiserate. That way, we feel a little less vulnerable.

Is this starting to sound familiar? It should, because it's something that we see a lot if we work with the enneagram. In our community, the common view is that personality is inherently false. That's why we believe it separates us from Essence.

But personality becomes false only when we don't bother to cultivate it. Then it's like a wild garden full of weeds. But if we decide to weed the garden and plant something new, our personality can bloom, just like a beautiful garden.

This might be hard to believe, especially if we have a lot of weeding to do! But like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, we have more power than we know. We always have the power to shed the false in favor of the true. We don't have to be forever stuck, trapped within a false version of ourselves.

So just how do we do this? How do we exchange a false personality for a real personality?

Becoming Real

I think we begin becoming real by reframing our thinking. The first thing is to realize that there really is such a thing as real personality—what I am calling a personality with character.

A cynical person might say otherwise, mocking the idea that anyone possesses true character. I can imagine the argument: “Yes, an altruistic act might look like it's the result of character, but there's no real altruism involved. In the end, everything people do is all about self-interest. Didn't

that fellow Dawkins even write a book about it—about how mothers protect their children not out of love but out of the need to make sure their genes survive?”

If somebody wants to take this view, there’s nothing I or anybody else can do about it. I certainly can’t argue them out of it. I can only say that this is not my experience.

Common sense tells me a different story. And the story is this: In my life, I’ve met people whose lives evoke in me the greatest admiration and respect—who are real heroes and heroines, whether or not their deeds are the kind that draw public acclaim. These are people I would love to emulate. Or even just imitate, if that’s all I can manage. They inspire me with their genuineness, courtesy, kindness, and unselfishness. I feel like royalty when I’m around them. Once I meet a person like this, I never forget him. Even the memory of our meeting sustains me in difficult times.

None of my heroes are perfect. They are human beings, and come with assorted quirks, idiosyncrasies, and annoying habits. But then perfection is besides the point—the goal is to be a person of substance, one who does not easily wilt or break. This is what it means to possess character—the genuine, 14-carat gold kind.

So the first step toward becoming a real person is to know that real people actually exist!

The next step is to overcome the idea that they are somehow different from us—that we are ordinary while they are extraordinary. This is a stubborn belief, one not easily dislodged. But it’s also a false belief. The truth is that these “real” people may well be extraordinary. But if they are, so are we. We are made of the same basic stuff; we have the same basic potential.

I myself couldn’t accept this idea for many years. Actually, I didn’t even realize how little I believed in myself. I only knew that I saw myself as different from the people I admired. I thought there was an unbridgeable gap that separated me from them. Then one day I read a book with a passage that hit me right between the eyes. The author said that anybody could change their lives. And for some reason, for the first time, I believed it. (Actually, I didn’t quite believe it, but I thought that there was actually a slim possibility it *might* be true, that I *might* possibly have the “right stuff” to become the person I always wished I could be. Even the idea that it might be possible came as a tremendous but welcome shock.)

That passage changed my life. It didn’t exactly make my life wonderful (to be honest, it made it more difficult), but it did free me of that awful sinking feeling that my life had no real substance, no real center. I finally knew what was missing, and what was missing was *me*. I knew I had to find myself, and now I had the incentive to do so.

We never know when we’re going to encounter such a passage. I read a lot of encouraging books through the years, but none of them ever got through to me before. Why did this one change me? Lots of reasons, I imagine, but the most important one was this: I finally believed it was actually possible to change. Knowing it was possible made all the difference.

It’s like the story of the Velveteen Rabbit, the one who was so loved by a little boy that the boy took him everywhere he went. One day the boy went outside but left the rabbit by mistake in the garden. The velveteen rabbit saw something he’d never seen before: real rabbits. Rabbits who could hop and eat and play. The velveteen rabbit was eventually retrieved and brought indoors. But he never forgot those living rabbits. And one day, he became real, just like them.

We can become real, too. We can develop those qualities that we always admired in others. But only if (a) we know they are real and (b) believe we can eventually embody them.

A third thing we need to know is that investing our energy in developing these qualities does not take anything away from us spiritually. It does not make us separate from other people,

other living creatures, or life itself. It does not make us unable to experience non-dual states of consciousness, either. We only think this way because we are used to evaluating everything in terms of tradeoffs, i.e.: “If I stand up for myself, no one will love me,” or “if I have a family, I can’t have a career”—or “if I act like an individual, then I can’t experience communion with God.”

If life were really dualistic in nature, then these might be genuine dilemmas. But life is not dualistic. Such dilemmas are not real, but false, because they are based on misconceptions about what is actually possible.

The truth is that life is holonic—it’s not an “either/or”, it’s a “both/and”. This means that we can stand up for ourselves and still be loved. We can have both a family and career, if we manage it properly. And we can experience both autonomy and communion—we don’t have to sacrifice one for the other. In fact, the two actually go together—the more of an individual we become, the more we realize just how we are part of something greater than ourselves.

A lot of times we think things are not possible simply because we fall into “either/or” thinking, create a false dichotomy, and then sacrifice one thing we value because it’s the only way to get something we value even more. That’s one of the main reasons we so often sacrifice individuality—because we think it will separate us from other people.

But as Jung points out, this doesn’t get us communion—all it gets us is conformity. When we lose ourselves in order to be accepted by the group, we don’t really gain anything in the end, because all groups eventually turn on those who overidentify with the group. The only way to fruitfully participate in a group is as someone with a well-articulated sense of individuality—then both the group and individual benefit.

Developing Understanding

So let’s say we’ve come to the point where (a) we now know that it’s possible to develop a real personality, (b) see that we personally might just have what it takes to do this, and (c) understand that this work is not going to separate us from Spirit and might actually infuse Spirit more into our daily lives. Is there anything else we need at that point?

Yes—we need understanding, so that we can distinguish falsehood from truth.

And this is where the enneagram comes in. The enneagram helps us separate truth from error by giving us the information we need to see the difference between who we *think* we are and who we *actually* are. It affords a deeper type of insight than most personality inventories, because it reveals not only *how* people differ, but *why* they differ—how their motivations differ. It thus gives us a powerful tool for examining ourselves and our potential. Working with the enneagram, we learn basic but critical things about human nature:

- people really do differ in their points of view
- these differences are not just skin-deep but based on a nine distinctive core motivations
- all types are created equal (no type is better than any other)
- each type has characteristic strengths and weaknesses

This initial understanding serves as the basis for further self-exploration. As we get deeper into the enneagram, we learn how each type is related to one another and that we can use the system of 27 subtypes to get a really specific understanding of the type (in terms of our instinctive orientation to the world around us). The process of determining our own type makes us really reflect on our point of view and inner motivation. The discovery of our type allows us to start exploring our core motivation, blind spots, and gifts.

I'm finding that discovering my type means more than discovering my number—or even means more than learning what experts have written about my number. It provides a framework for noticing things in a new way. So the understanding I get from the enneagram is not static, but dynamic.

The Enneagram of Individuality

Developing ourselves is not an easy process. I've identified four key stumbling blocks that get in the way:

1. thinking that it's not possible for anybody (due to a generally cynical point of view about human nature)
2. thinking it's not possible for me (because it's too hard, I'm not good enough, it will create a big ego, etc.)
3. thinking it's not worth it (because of the belief that it requires unacceptable tradeoffs)
4. having difficulty discriminating what is real vs. false (because of the need for more self-insight)

Notice that three of the four of these stumbling blocks are false beliefs—beliefs that limit us in ways that are totally unnecessary! And the fourth barrier can be surmounted (at least in part) by a knowledge of the enneagram. Anyone reading this article probably already knows about the enneagram, so that leaves us with the first three barriers: our false and limiting beliefs about ourselves.

Life is not perfect, and neither are we. We may start out as velveteen rabbits, living a life that is not fully real. But do we need to end it that way? Do we need to stay stuffed bunnies forever or can we let ourselves be tempted to imagine something better than that?

We all have it within us to further develop our individuality. And as far as I can see, there's no good reason not to. This doesn't mean becoming an "individualist"—someone who insists on going their own way, damn the consequences. It just means becoming who we really are *to the fullest extent possible*.

My purpose in proposing an Enneagram of Individuality is to set forth a model that stresses human potential rather than human limitation. By emphasizing individuality—rather than personality pathology—I'm trying to use language to reframe our thinking about ourselves, our potential, and the enneagram. This is not the same thing as asking people to ignore their weak areas or gloss them over. It's a call to look for ways to transform them or at least lessen their negative impact.

We each have special qualities that are ours alone. And it's not that hard to rediscover them. We can do it in simple ways—by trying to be present in the moment, by accepting ourselves as we are right now, and by looking for little ways to make life better for ourselves and other people.

Every once and a while, there are bigger challenges that require more fortitude. None of us look forward to these events, but they do become the crucible in which character is forged.

Individuality matters. Why? Because *we* matter—*we* are worth developing. We are more than a collection of conditioned impulses, animal instincts, or selfish genes. We are more than an avaricious or defensive ego. We are even more than just a potential candidate for Enlightenment. We are individuals who can develop not just a personality, but a *mature* personality—a personality with character.

Endnotes

¹ By using the word *soul*, I'm not trying to get mystical or suggest a self that is fallen or unredeemed, e.g., a *lost soul*. I'm using the word in order to describe the incarnated self that underlies, transcends, and includes the personality self. I could also have used the word *psyche* to describe the same thing, but one thing I like about the word *soul* is the way it focuses our attention on the self as embodied consciousness. *Psyche* does not do this—in fact, it does just the opposite, which is why I often use *psyche* when I want to keep the door open, to talk about self in some sort of global sense. Depending on context, I might use *psyche* to refer to self at the level of the soul or I might use it to describe the self in the most global possible sense—as the sum total of all of our lifetimes, all of our experiences, all of our Divine aspects. In the latter case, the psyche would likely encompass all of the nine enneagram types, assuming the reality of multiple incarnations and the idea that we come into incarnation as each of the nine types at some time or other. Whether this is true, I cannot say. But it makes a useful operating assumption.

² Type is often perceived as something that limits us, because it functions as a perceptual and cognitive filter, thereby narrowing our focus of attention in a particular way (so that we see the world only from one point of view). But what we miss when we take this position is the fact that it is not type that causes us to have a limited range of attention—it's *our physical bodies that impose this limitation*. This understanding is literally the cornerstone upon which the field of cognitive psychology was built, after George Miller published his landmark paper, "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on our Capacity for Processing Information," in 1956, in *The Psychological Review*.

Miller showed that people simply cannot handle very much incoming information at any given moment in time. Thus, we require a perceptual filter to regulate the amount of information flowing into the system. Without such a filter, our perceptual apparatus becomes quickly overloaded and we basically "zone out."

There is literally a raft of studies conducted over half a century that have confirmed Miller's finding. It is one of the most robust pieces of research in any branch of psychology. Given the universality of these results, it is not reasonable to take the position that perceptual limitations represent some kind of psychological pathology. Nor is it reasonable to assume that the mechanism that supports the filtering process (i.e., our type) is pathological in nature.