**How Do You Create Change Through the Enneagram?**

**By Beatrice Chestnut, PhD**

I have a theory. While many people like the Enneagram and talk about it on social media, only a small percentage of the individuals who say they “use” or “know” the Enneagram, or profess expertise in it, are really using it to create substantive inner shifts.

The Enneagram system of personality has the potential to offer life-changing insights, but I wonder how many people really sign on to do the work it takes to make use of the symbol and its archetypes to go beyond the dominion of the personality?

Of course, people are going to use the Enneagram superficially—as something to play with or talk about at parties. And those of us who don’t like this and would like to stop them, can’t control what they do. And while I don’t like that people do this, because I can’t stop them, I would like to at least request that whoever does this admit (to themselves and others) that this is what they are doing. They are using a delicate, complex, ancient tool for reaching our higher potential as a blunt instrument. They are playing with something that is not a toy.

If you talk about the Enneagram when you have a limited knowledge of it and you haven’t done deeper work with it, it’s best to be clear that that’s the level at which you are engaging with the system and not believe (or imply when talking to others) you’re doing something larger than that. The Enneagram gets a bad name very quickly when it’s casually thrown around by people who aren’t sincerely using it for deeper inner work–the kind of work for which it was intended.

Most importantly, if you are only using the Enneagram as a social media hobby, or a stereotypic classification system, or a bit of fun, or as a means to feed your ego somehow, that’s your business–but you shouldn’t speak about it with authority, teach it, or use it professionally with other humans.

If my theory is right, that a large majority of people use the Enneagram in a light-hearted, shallow way, without doing the work with themselves to back up what they say and do, this state of affairs weakens the whole Enneagram movement. And it turns the Enneagram from a potent symbol of perpetual movement–something that has the power to initiate real inner transformation when used well–into something that doesn’t work to alter anything at all.

If people talk about the Enneagram and promote it (and sometimes themselves through it), without really doing the deep inner work it necessarily requires, it leads to sub-par Enneagram teaching, learning, and practice. And when the Enneagram is not communicated well, or the spokespeople who would speak for it it aren’t high-quality, people may view it as just another fad or just one more “woo woo” typology, with no real power to help people develop.

Here are some issues I see today in the way the Enneagram tends to be used that support my theory that many people are using it at a shallow level. (And because of these issues, the Enneagram might actually help people stay stuck in the personality, and not change, since just “speaking Enneagram” may make people believe they are more advanced on their growth path than they actually are.)

Diagnosis over Depth

I see many people identifying themselves using Enneagram language in multiple ways. It’s common for people to introduce themselves as being a type with a wing and a subtype and an instinctual subtype sequence and three different fixations in three different centers. But are they really using any of that information to move the needle on how ego-centric they actually are in everyday life? I don’t know. Is it possible to be seriously “working on oneself,” when you are focused on all these different metrics? I’ve been working with the Enneagram for nearly 28 years, and I haven’t really gotten too far beyond my type and subtype (meaning observing my passion and my dominant instinct). I can’t help wondering if all the different elements of Enneagram diagnostics end up being a massive distraction from really doing the work for many Enneagram enthusiasts.

A Multitude of Mistypings (or the Blindness of Blind Spots)

Finding your correct core type can be a difficult experience for many very good reasons. You may not know yourself as well as you think you do. You may identify with who you want to be instead of who you really are. You may be blind to some key blind spots. You may have received poor guidance or instruction from a “teacher” or practitioner. You may have received poor guidance, but not realize it (it can be hard to know) and so at the same time have deep respect for your guide. You may not know the system very well. You may have been typed by someone whose own blind spot got in the way of seeing you clearly. And your defenses may get triggered by an element of a type description you don’t like that makes you think, “that can’t be me!” when it actually is you.

The Enneagram is complex and there’s a learning curve to it that influences the ease with which people find themselves in an archetype described by the model. And it can be hard to be aware enough to know how self-aware we are. So, I understand discovering your real type (and subtype) can be a lengthy and important process. But I also think you can’t mine the true depths of the Enneagram’s power if you don’t have your type right. When you find your actual type and subtype, and get an accurate window into how you are really operating—that’s when the real work can begin!

You Must be Motivated to Really Move

When you embark on any growth path, to really achieve progress, you need to really want to change. If you aren’t very motivated to address your issues and do what it takes to let go of old patterns and create newer, healthier ones, you aren’t going anywhere. You may be able to “talk the talk,” but if you can’t walk your talk, what are you really doing? Not very much. Building the momentum to change your behavior means doing the hard work of self-observation, self-examination, self-inquiry, and learning to lower your defenses and allow yourself to be vulnerable. And I’m not sure everyone who talks about knowing and using the Enneagram is really doing this—or actually wants to. And you have to want it.

Confusing Knowing the Enneagram with Doing Real Psychological Work

I love the Enneagram because it’s helped me and the people I work with so much. But it’s not a stand-alone tool. It’s not a growth path all by itself. It’s a model that provides a structure or a map through which we can gain great insight into our specific growth tasks, but doing those tasks requires more than just the Enneagram.

Really doing the work the Enneagram points out for you to do means you have to then go find some support and some modality or methods for actually carrying out the developmental work the Enneagram helps define for you. This means that if you’ve studied the Enneagram for 10 years, but you haven’t done any kind of therapy, or spiritual work, or coaching, or group work, or anything, you aren’t doing the work. You aren’t really going to be growing. We need to be humble about where we are and what we know and what we can (or should) do.

People Don’t Need Credentials (Real Expertise) to “Teach” the Enneagram

One of the reasons people may think they are using the Enneagram in a serious way to do inner work when they really aren’t, is because their Enneagram teacher hasn’t done their work or doesn’t have the training necessary to convey the Enneagram at a deep level with any authority. To teach the Enneagram well, a person really needs some credentials—some real education, training, and experience—in one of the following fields: psychology, spirituality, organization development, or something close to or contained within these areas of study and practice.

Today, you can teach a workshop in or write a book about the Enneagram without a degree in psychology, experience as a therapist, experience as a spiritual director, or experience working directly with people psychologically or spiritually over a significant period of time. This has the effect of lowering the quality of the Enneagram-inspired work being done in the world and the reputation of the Enneagram as a growth tool. It also potentially creates invisible barriers to individuals making real progress that stem from many Enneagram practitioners’ lack of deep understanding about the model and the complexities of human development and the relevant experience working with people.

Finally…

I do not mean to say that everyone or even most people who teach the Enneagram are doing it badly. And I believe that many people who teach it are doing high-quality, legitimate work with it. What I’m really saying is that when we work with a tool that highlights blind spots so well, we need to make sure we exploring our own egos and blind spots in an ongoing way—and guard against letting our ego and it’s blind spots cloud our judgment about whether or not we are doing inner work–and what that means for how we talk about and use the Enneagram.

I give thanks to the many people who work with, teach, and write about the Enneagram from a place of real authority—who have deep experience backing up their work, walk their talk, use the model with humility, and have helped bring this remarkable system into the world as an effective resource. And I remind all of us who work with the Enneagram in any way to continue to make sure we are doing our own inner work—and maintain an attitude of humility—to support the integrity of the system and what it can teach us.

Website: [beaticechestnut.com](beatricechestnut.com)