

ENNEAGRAM STYLES, COACHING, AND THE USE OF METAPHOR

Clarence Thomson

Metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic, and it seems a tool for creation which God left inside His creatures when He made them.

— Jose Ortega y Gasset

Introduction: Alice's Lesson

I learned young that you can't change someone's mind with linear logic. Alice taught me about how we are crazy. Alice was clinically, colorfully insane. I had just graduated from St. John's University with my degree in philosophy, so I was really smart. Alice was in one of the back wards of the state hospital in Fergus Falls, MN where she was, in effect, warehoused. I was a new intern and the psychiatrist was showing us around, explaining our roles. He encouraged us to talk with the patients.

Before we entered the ward, he explained that Alice was schizophrenic and though Norwegian blue-eyed and fair held the opinion that her mother was an African queen and her father a Bengal tiger. Well, as crazy as that was, and as smart a philosopher as I was, I was confident I would have little trouble convincing her that her *weltanschauung* (world view) was, well, crazy.

After a 30 minute conversation, I walked away bewildered. I hadn't shaken her opinion in the slightest. She answered every question with clear and clearly insane logic, and I was utterly defeated. I turned to my psychiatrist teacher and asked how she could be so logical, operating in an insane world. He said, "Well, logic is not what establishes us as sane. Insanity resides in our imagination, not our logic."

That's when I got my start as an effective coach. As a coach, I now understand the lesson from this experience as "Everyone lives in their own imaginary symbolic world." Alice, you, and I dwell in private worlds we mostly create. My job as a coach is to help people with their imaginations.

Occasionally I teach children. One of these times I encountered a child who was convinced there was a monster in a closet. I could have advised him logically that he was "just imagining" it, but I remembered Alice. So I told him that of course there was a monster in there, but it was only 4 years old (the boy was 7) and he was afraid to come out. Problem gone. Our Enneagram style often reflects a younger part of ourselves, a part that's not that different from the boy troubled by monsters. Some clients come to coaching wanting to deal with problems they secretly fear are monstrous.

I owe Alice a debt. She helped me to understand the political positions of particular groups that I don't agree with or understand, late-night evangelical preachers, and some of my own inner tigers. She also helped me understand how powerful the Enneagram can be in helping to discern the internal worlds of people like Alice, people I might at first misunderstand. Coaching is about helping people change, and after thinking about Alice, I conclude that the language of change is not the language of logic and syllogisms; it is the language of poetry, symbol, and metaphor.

Enneagram Style and Metaphor

An Enneagram style is structured by vague and often poorly understood metaphorical convictions. In some way every style Two understands herself as a servant and style Eight has the structural dynamics of something like a junkyard dog. Understood metaphorically, every Enneagram style is a form of insanity, and most of my clients come to me asking for help with the defining element of insanity: *repeating the same thing and expecting different results*. Their metaphor doesn't work for them but it's "how they were raised" or "what they've always done." Some even go so far as to say it is "who they are." An Enneagram style would be called an ego-state in academic psychology. Ego states are marked by rigidity, narrowness, and repetition.

Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) masters note that the solution is often the problem when people deal with issues. The reason the solution is the problem is that the solution is egotistical: it repeats the same rigid narrow patterns. When faced with a problem, Fives *think*. If that doesn't work, they think about why thinking about it doesn't work. Sevens *reframe* the situation and if that doesn't work, they try to see things differently. The number of times we repeat what doesn't work is the measure of our egotism.

The understanding of Enneagram type that works for me as a coach is the idea of Enneagram style as trance. An Enneagram trance is a temporary but habitual focus on inward realities. Stephen Wolinsky uses this example:

Anxiety is the fear of the future. [Fives, Sixes and Sevens, take note.] A client whose presenting problem is anxiety might be using a cluster of Deep Trance Phenomena to synthesize the sensation of anxiety. First comes pseudo-orientation in time as he imagines a catastrophic outcome occurring in the future and therefore experiences fear. Next he uses posthypnotic suggestions ("nothing will work")....These are reinforced by negative hallucinations, which block his ability to acknowledge other resources. (2)

Wolinsky thus explains that the Deep Trance Phenomena hold the client's presenting symptoms in place. This important conception of type bias helps us understand our Enneagram style as something we not a structural condition like brown eyes or height. And our Enneagram style is not an identity, it is not "who we are," it is a habitual trance. Because an Enneagram trance is a current patterned internal activity, we can interfere with that activity and help people with their symptoms, even if they are integral to one's Enneagram style.

Using Symbol and Metaphor in Discerning Styles

Our job as coaches will be to understand the client's structure of interpretation that will persist across time, across events, across circumstances. (3)

The Enneagram does precisely that: it describes the structures of our interpretation. Alas, there is no real world; there is only the world that we interpret. That's a bit unnerving to contemplate, but if you listen to a client as though he is from another planet, you learn a lot. It has been said that men are from Mars and women from Venus, but there are actually nine planets (I still accept Pluto). When a distraught style Four confided to me that he felt like he was from another planet, I agreed and welcomed him to mine. We fellow aliens have to stick together, even if we reside on different planets.

When a client needs help with an issue, I search for Enneagram ego-patterns. An Enneagram ego-state or trance has four components: 1) a focus of attention, 2) a flow of energy, 3) a worldview and 4) strategies. Strategies are patterns of perception and response that are largely unconscious. They are both cognitive and energetic. We perceive in patterns, looking for what we know is there because that's the way our world is, and we feel in patterns because that seems like the "correct" response to what we perceive. Then we behave out of unconsciously selected and habitually processed information.

When I try to ferret out an Enneagram style, I look for symbolic attitudes and actions that reveal the trance. I assume that every action or expression that doesn't quite make sense on the surface does make sense for them within their own symbolic world. As an Enneagram oriented coach, I look for symbolic actions that reveal the individual's Enneagram style. As long as their actions serve them well and seem normal to me (I know, that's a stretch, and every coach has an Enneagram style and so must be careful; not all normals are normal), I can't tell their Enneagram style. But if they are stuck, and most coaching clients oblige, then I look for the symbolic activity that isn't working. I treat the presenting problem as a symbol: real and at the same time pointing beyond a specific problem to a larger malfunction.

Coaching a Nine—The Presenting Problem Reveals the Style

For example, an idealistic young lady wanted some coaching. When I asked her what she wanted to accomplish, she produced a personal mission statement. The opening line read, "My mission in life is to transform humanity." When you read in Enneagram books that Nines have a tendency to think globally, that's the kind of thing they have in mind. She was having trouble taking action, and no wonder – she set herself an impossible task, as many Nines do. Business coaching manuals talk about "paralysis of immensity." That's what she had.

To ascertain an Enneagram style, a coach has to be able to decipher symbolic behavior. No person manifests all the lines of their inner map, but they act consistently with that map. Reading symbolic behavior is an art, not a science.

You can know volumes of Enneagram descriptions and still not get the style right unless you can tell from emphasis, uniqueness, and repetition, which behaviors are symbolic of their inner world and which behaviors are just effective responses to the here and now.

One reason the Enneagram is so helpful is that the Enneagram terrain gives a coach a context for the symbol. If a style Five says she is a prisoner of her parents, that's different from a style Two using the same metaphor. The Five will perhaps have an inner context of scarcity, of not being able to take care of herself and is blaming the parents. The parents may be intruding on the Five in some way. The Five may feel weak and see the parents as stronger. In contrast, the Two may see herself as strong, as having to take care of weak parents, and their weakness is her prison metaphor. One is imprisoned by weakness, the other by a false sense of power.

Using Symbolic Questions to Reveal the Enneagram Style

To ascertain quickly a client's Enneagram style, I ask a dozen symbolic questions.

- 1) If you were a room in the house, which one would you be?
- 2) I'm writing your biography. What shall I title it?
- 3) If you were to have a tombstone, what would like engraved on it?
- 4) Describe your perfect job.
- 5) Describe your "job from hell."
- 6) If you were an animal, what kind would you be?
- 7) You have a full free day. Ideally, how would you spend it?
- 8) What do you *voluntarily* do that you consider a waste of time?
- 9) What is your pet peeve?
- 10) If you could change one thing about your personality, what would it be?
- 11) Is there anything you voluntarily do too much of?
- 12) Describe everything about your perfect meal.
- 13) If you were given an unfair request, by someone important to you (boss, customer, spouse) how would you handle it?

If, and only if, you know the Enneagram thoroughly, these answers will reveal the client's Enneagram style. Sometimes the clues lie in the answers they give, sometimes in the style of answering. One afternoon I checked two sets of questions, comparing the answers to question #12, "describe everything about your perfect meal": one was a style Four. I could identify his style from his three-paragraph exquisitely chosen menu that specified the year of the wine, the cut of the meat, and the herbs for the salad. The laconic answer of the Nine was one word: "lasagna."

I have an online test and some clients take tests off other sites, but I rely more on the symbolic questions because to the client they feel more value-free than a linear test, and because symbols contain so much more emotional and unconscious (Enneagram trance) information.

Metaphors are a rich blend of conceptual, physical, and emotional information. They are like a compressed computer file containing a huge amount of information. Herein lies part of their power. In addition to the quantity of information (suggested by the computer analogy), the information has a qualitative difference that makes much more of an emotional impact. If you say a young lady pleases you, that is conceptual information. If you wax poetic and you say she “is a yellow spring flower in the dirty snow of my late wintry life,” you light up neurons all over your brain and you engage a much wider range of responses.

Metaphors are revelatory whether we intend them to be or not. Today I coached a woman who hated her job. She referred to her job as a burden about five times. Towards the end of the session she told me how much her back pain was bothering her. Her phrase, “burden” was metaphorical and later on, so was her back pain. She illustrated how one metaphor can reinforce (or correct) another.

There are no abstract principles to determine what behaviors are neurotic or healthy; a coach usually has to see how well clients’ coping skills work. A style Six scanning the environment for danger may be paranoid, but I heard a mountain climber say that the most important thing for a climber to do is constantly scan the environment to know where he is and what to expect. Even Dr. Phil, the entertainer as therapist, asks the right question when he poses the frequent query to his troubled guests, “So, how’s that working for you?” The clearer a client can get about what is not working, the clearer the symbolic world is revealed to the coach. Dr. Phil would do better if he could explore the next level: What do you think you’re doing?

A coach must integrate the conviction that everything the client does makes sense from the perspective of the client’s internal world. If it doesn’t make sense on a superficial level, it may reveal the Enneagram level. Bill Gates, a clear style Five, was asked what it felt like to have (at that time) 100 billion dollars and be the richest man in the world. He responded, “Well, it could all be gone tomorrow.” On one level, that’s the economic equivalent of a Bengal ancestor. If you or I were down to our last billion, if we’re not Fives, we’d still never think it would be gone tomorrow. Gates was not being cute or even evasive. He was answering how he felt as a style Five. Fives have a baseline conviction of scarcity and a fear that their material wealth is in constant danger. All neurotic (ego) needs are infinite. One hundred billion dollars was not enough to make Gates feel that he would never run out. The knowledge that everything a client does (or omits) makes sense gives a coach something to work with.

Because our Enneagram pattern is symbolic, we have leverage to help the client when we alter those symbols. It is important, however, to know that in addition to an Enneagram structure, every person has an individual symbolic inner structure. As Lawley and Tompkins point out in their work on symbolic modeling, “For us, symbolic means more than the dictionary definition, ‘relating to a symbol,’ it also involves *connecting with a pattern that has personal significance* (emphasis theirs). (4)

Metaphoric Coaching Interventions

I consider it axiomatic that it works better to change behavior to change feelings than trying to change feelings to change behavior. Bill O’Hanlon offers a lovely story of how Tibetan Buddhists articulate this principle.

The Dalai Lama would line the students up and tell them that once every one-hundred years, they could enter the room of 1,000 demons. Once in the room, they could not leave. The door had no knob on the inside. The demons would take the form of their deepest fears. If they were afraid of heights, they would appear to be standing on the edge of a cliff, etc. They were told that some people never make it out but stay paralyzed by these fears. Those who make it through come out on the other side enlightened. They were given two hints: remember that what the demons show you is not real. The second is, no matter what happens or how you feel, “*keep your feet moving*” (emphasis theirs). (5)

The tradition that first nourished me, medieval scholastic philosophy, had a similar approach to the mystery of life: *solvitur ambulando* (it is solved by walking). The most popular forms of therapy in recent decades have been talk. If you go to a therapist, you expect conversation. But religious traditions often have symbolic actions that bypass explanations and advice. Religious obedience, so often distorted, has an underlying therapeutic premise: if you want to have a different inner experience (faith or moral transformation), then follow these rules. Don’t do what you usually do, do this. Sometimes the injunctions were laws, sometimes traditions, and sometimes the advice of a guru, abbot, or superior. The implicit promise was “If you do what I do, you will know what I know.”

If a client has a rudimentary understanding of the Enneagram and has been to therapy, it is often difficult to get them to do anything: they prefer to talk their way out of their problem. But if you understand the Enneagram as a trance, then talking, especially telling the origins of their problem is reinforcing the imagination that got them into trouble in the first place.

My fundamental strategy is to get people to perform symbolic activities that interfere with their Enneagram fears. Every Enneagram style has an existential fear. Even a warrior Eight has a fear of being vulnerable, for example. So to keep the client’s feet moving, as the Dalai Lama suggests, I routinely suggest metaphoric behaviors or altered metaphoric understandings of current behavior (reframing).

Coaching a Three: The Metaphor of Approval Ratings

A bright successful Three told me of his travails in a coaching program. He was completing an assignment in which he was gathering a great deal of information about a client and doing a large amount of assessment work. Just as he was about three-fourths of the way through the process, the client decided to quit. My client, the Three, was devastated. He was bemoaning the fact that he had “wasted” all that time and effort. I asked him if he learned anything. “Oh, yes,” was the answer. So I asked what the purpose of the work was. After a few minutes of conversation it was clear that, from his point of view, the real and almost only purpose of the work was to fulfill requirements. Learning was secondary. Even though he learned a lot, he still felt terrible. Something other than learning is involved. I’m a veteran classroom teacher so I know that whatever students learn, they always learn the system. Damian, my Three client, had learned what my high school students know: you do the least work for the best grade – learning is secondary. “You just forget this stuff anyway.”

Learning the system is particularly toxic for style Three because Threes have one eye on their approval ratings from the cradle to the grave. Threes work for grades, certificates, trophies, and of course, money—extrinsic markers of success. Failure at age 12 is lots of red marks on your papers, at 30 the red marks are still on his soul. Many Threes, like Damian, never really graduate. (And neither does most of the United States, a Three-like culture.) So despite Damian’s woe, he accomplished what the overt message of the coaching program was. I told him to put a “mantra” on his computer. The mantra: “grade your own papers.” He told me months later how helpful he found that saying.

Metaphors correspond in a special way to the original experience they describe through isomorphism. In other words, the form of a metaphor is different from the original experience, but it has a similar organization. (6)

So when you understand the symptom to be metaphorical, you understand the dynamics of the original experience and the dynamics of the current problem. You can mend the structure of the original experience if you re-structure its metaphoric expression. For this reason it is counterproductive to dwell on the past – the past is over. But the metaphorical recreation of it is alive and well and can be altered.

The symbolic intervention of the coach has to be isomorphic, that is, it has to have the same functional structure as the problem. Damian was in a school situation, so he reverted to his symbolic world of a school boy. I explained the dynamics and gave him a school-like suggestion.

Coaching a Six: The Metaphor of Limit

A Mary Kay salesperson came to me with the presenting problem of not being able to make her sales calls. I know a bit about the Mary Kay approach. It creates paralysis. Mary Kay paralyzes salespeople by telling conscientious

housewives that “the sky is the limit.” When you have an infinite goal, you have a corresponding inner infinite task because conscientious women know they have to work for every sale.

David Allen, the popular author of *Getting Things Done*, points out that much modern work is without boundaries. Improving my coaching skills never ends, what you should read never ends, and the lack of closure to our work causes anxiety. (7)

My client was a Six. Sixes often need to know what an authority thinks, so I assumed authority. I asked her what hours were best for calling. She said early morning. So I told her to wear her business clothes and call only between Nine and Ten am and that she absolutely must not call after that. She had to make three calls at that time. I could have exhorted her and told her she just had to bite the bullet and do it, but that would have just made the problem worse. She was already scolding herself. The implicit metaphor was to change the job from infinite to finite. This made the task doable. She had no further trouble. She gave the testimonial at the next Mary Kay lecture I gave. Her energy was blocked because the task was infinite.

Coaching a Seven: A “To Do Today List” Strategy

Some of our strategies are real *and* symbolic. I coach a style Seven who tends to be scattered and over-scheduled. I have her make a “to do” list, a practice so loved by the consulting tradition. Only I have her make an “All I have to do today is” list so that the planning energy is used as a dyke against an ocean of possibilities and possible obligations. Her previous strategy was to make daily and weekly lists and written goals and they never helped. So I interrupted the strategy by reframing. As a Seven, she appreciated reframing, so it worked.

Coaching a Nine: The Mask Technique

One of the most interesting “breaking of focus” exercises I’ve conducted was with the nurse who complained that her life lacked passion. She was a Nine. Every night she came home, ate supper, and then watched TV. She came to see me right before Halloween, so I told her that watching TV was certainly fun, but because she was hiding from her life, she should watch TV wearing a mask. She cancelled the next session because she had a date! I was so delighted I tried it on the next Nine and she said that exercise was why she quit her job and is starting a retreat house.

Sometimes people discover symbolic things to help themselves. When they do, as the story below will illustrate, they shine a light on the most effective kind of symbol: something ordinary that looks functional but has a lot of emotional richness. If I stand up and shout “I hate America” in a shopping mall, people will look at me and dismiss me as crazy or perhaps think I am selling something weird. If I burn a flag at a football game, lynching is about the best I can hope

for. The symbols, a piece of cloth, at a football game, and the symbolic struggle to be the best in the world, is so powerful it could kill me. The difference is power.

Small effort, big result: “I wore bright red lipstick everywhere!”

But let’s let Ms. Ross tell us how she did it. Notice that her symbol is an ordinary item used in a symbolic way. The following story is from MSN in February:

I’m a graduate student with two children, and my makeup routine typically maxes out at ChapStick. So the first day I wore fire-engine red lipstick, I felt incredibly self-conscious. People were staring at me in traffic! And quickly I discovered that red lipstick is high-maintenance. You have to put it on perfectly or you look like a mess. Turns out it also requires white teeth, so when I should have been studying, I was digging out the Crest Whitestrips that had been hiding in my bathroom instead.

Still, having red lips made me feel aggressively feminine. Even picking up my kids from school wearing sweats, I felt like a woman, not a tired, overworked mom. My husband noticed too. He didn’t always love it (red lipstick does not go well with white work shirts), but I think he appreciated the confidence it gave me.

Now I feel bland when I go out bare-lipped. When I was wearing lipstick, I wasn’t hiding from the world—and I was totally comfortable with myself. And that’s an addictive feeling. **Big result: I got my sexy back.** (9)—Kathryn Ross, 35, Boulder, Colorado.

This worked for her because she made a symbolic intervention that corrected the way she felt about herself. She illustrates what martial artists, *feng shui* practitioners, and spiritual directors know. A small change, if it is symbolic and if it interrupts a symbolic pattern, will be much more effective than resolutions, programs, or external motivators. The Enneagram describes the symbolic patterns that need to be interrupted, and that is why it is such a superb diagnostic tool. It helps suggest what intervention might work, but most of the interventions rely on the creativity of the coach.

The symbolic interventions work best when you actively interfere with patterns of the Enneagram trance. What Stephen Wolinsky calls deep trance phenomena are your targets. If you can interrupt any of these trance strategies, you can make serious changes. For example, sometimes a simple alteration or clarification of language will change someone’s focus. A Nine was lamenting the fact that he “could not find the motivation” to do his sales job. I learned that he did not like the job at all, so I asked him to stop saying he could not find the motivation and just say, “I don’t like this job.” That sounds simple and clear – and is – but it was effective because Nines have a way of erasing themselves that in this case expressed itself as looking for motivation from somewhere outside himself. When he said, “I can’t find the motivation,” this revealed the fact that he was

looking for reasons to stay at this job he didn't like somewhere outside himself. When he claimed his displeasure, he quit his job and found a new one in less than a week. He broke the habit of seeing himself as helpless when it came to volition.

Conclusion

In closing, I will share something I learned from one of my worst failures. I was working with a Five who insisted she could not change because of her early childhood and then wanted to tell her story. If I asked her to do any symbolic activities, she would say they were impossible and ask me to be non-judgmental about her inability to change. Then she would re-tell her childhood story. From her story she made a wide variety of generalizations, all of which made her weak and good and everyone else bad and powerful, especially in their ability to hurt her because she was "so sensitive." I explained that change would be specific and symbolic. She replied grandly that "she was not interested in specifics." She wanted "general coaching." When I replied metaphorically that if you want to move, you really need a specific direction, she said "that was true of my reality." Then she withdrew and would not communicate any further. Metaphoric interventions are like depth-charges. They insert a great deal of information below the ego's conscious radar. I think she sensed that.

The patterns of distortion and generalization are often found among Fives who love abstractions. If you read metaphysical books that explain the whole universe (a brief history of everything?) they're all written by Fives. Generalizations require a lot of information, and Fives excel at both the gathering and categorizing their information.

But a metaphor is concrete and specific and shaves excess information like a sculptor shaves off excess stone to reveal the statue. Because of the emotional and evocative components of metaphors, they are both specific and accurate.

To summarize, I treat the client's information, and especially the presenting problem, as a symbolic indication of the person's Enneagram style. Once I know that, I use metaphors to interrupt what I know are Enneagram structural patterns of perception, interpretation and response. By locating and altering key metaphors, and asking the client to take some sort of action to reinforce the altered metaphor, I disrupt the repetition of the old symbolic patterns that are part of the client's baseline, and often unquestioned, internal egoic reality.

Endnotes/References

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