

**THE DELIGHTS OF TYPING:  
A RESPONSE TO TOM CONDON’S  
“THE TROUBLE WITH TYPING”**

*By Susan Rhodes*

*“The Enneagram is easy to learn but difficult to master.”*

— Tom Condon

Last year’s *Enneagram Journal* featured a particularly interesting and provocative essay by Tom Condon entitled “The Trouble with Typing,” in which the author discusses several troubling trends he has observed about the way people work with the Enneagram, particularly when typing themselves or other people. In the present article, I’d like to discuss some of the questions Condon raises, in an effort to explore these issues at greater length, as well as identifying some issues about which intelligent people may disagree.

Overall, I thought this was an excellent essay on the Enneagram, one of the most thoughtful I’ve read. Tom Condon is a gifted writer and a subtle observer of human behavior, so it’s not surprising that his comments on the typing process should be more than a little interesting. The determination of type is indeed one of the thorniest issues involved in using the Enneagram, whether this is the typing of ourselves or others (the latter process involving additional ethical issues that are both significant and unavoidable). So despite the title of my essay, I’m sympathetic to the position that it is not easy to talk intelligently about type. As Condon observes, it is always a balancing act, demanding specificity on one hand and sensitivity on the other. If we get too specific, we end up stereotyping people (“putting them in a box”); if we aren’t specific enough, then we end up talking about the types in ways that are too abstract to be useful.

The issues raised in Condon’s essay are important ones and merit further discussion. My object is to take the discussion a step further by talking about these issues from a somewhat different angle—hence, the title of this essay.

**Articulating the Problems**

“The Trouble with Typing” presents us with a highly articulate description of the problems that ensue when people work with the Enneagram in a way that (a) encourages overgeneralizations which easily devolve into stereotypes (pp. 147-149); (b) tempts people to excuse bad behavior on the basis that it’s type-related (149-151); (c) focuses more on type-related behavioral tendencies than the motivation that gives rise to them (pp. 151-153); (d) turns the Enneagram into a “mini-religion” that encourages us to think of Enneagram teachers as

spiritual gurus (pp. 153-157); and (e) fosters co-dependency by setting up a system where people go from expert to expert, never discovering their type (pp.157-158). Anyone who works with the Enneagram (especially in a public setting) will recognize these tendencies as some of the key shadow aspects of Enneagram work. Thus, Condon has done the Enneagram community a service by describing them so clearly, as well as providing multiple examples to drive home his points.

Not to leave us hanging, he also describes techniques designed to help us minimize or avoid the problems associated with typing/mistyping. For example, he encourages Enneagram beginners to focus on the central pattern associated with each type (to avoid getting lost in too much information) and/or to start by focusing on the “underlying feeling” (i.e., anger, drama, or fear) (p. 158). Another recommendation is to look beyond behavior to underlying motivation (which helps people distinguish look-alike types) (p. 159). A third is to approach typing someone respectfully, so that we don’t tell people their type but rather suggest possibilities (p. 159).

On a broader note, Condon discourages us from viewing the Enneagram too objectively (in the sense of believing that it is possible to generate an objectively correct description of each type), noting that all descriptions are inherently subjective, which is why different Enneagram teachers generate different type descriptions—or assign to famous people different types (p. 160). He reminds us that the Enneagram is only a model, not a literal entity (“No one has ever photographed an ego;...[the Enneagram] is just a description”; p. 160). He also encourages even experienced teachers to continue to hone their typing skills, confessing that every time he thought he’d reached the point where he fully understood the Enneagram, “a trapdoor opened, and I was dropped into a new and unsuspected depth” (p. 160). He ends by citing Milton Erickson as saying he didn’t know how to answer the question, “What is hypnosis?” because he’d been studying it for only 50 years!

### **A Few Reservations**

Despite my overall admiration for Condon’s insightful essay, I do have a couple of reservations about some of his assertions and assumptions.

The first reservation concerns Condon’s assertion that “in a way, all generalizing about personality [is] akin to bigotry” (p. 148). This statement occurs within a section labeled “Educated Bigotry.” The focus here is on the common tendency to over-generalize when placing people in categories, whether the categories relate to personality, race, psychiatric diagnosis, or anything else. He makes the important point that we have to be careful to avoid conceptualizing people in terms of our stereotyped notion of their type. But he goes on to say that “the Enneagram describes how we make ourselves one-dimensional” (p. 149) and that “the Enneagram studies egos and presents a sometimes withering portrait of their efficiency, like a negative cost-benefit analysis” (p. 151).

I would argue that this way of conceptualizing the Enneagram and the types actually invites stereotyping because it rests on the assumption that the nine types really *are* one-dimensional in nature (i.e., that they are nothing more than ego defenses, fixations, etc.). If that is what we believe, then we impose negative expectations upon them—the kind of expectations that are associated with negative stereotyping. The alternative view is to think of them as simply personality types, motivation types, or ways of moving through life. This kind of approach encourages us to develop multidimensional models of the types and discourages stereotyping.

Of course, there is a certain amount of stereotyping about people that is unavoidable, although in cognitive psychology research, it is usually referred to as *prototyping*, and prototyping is regarded as the process by which we make sense of the world around us. Research psychologist Eleanor Rosch has extensively written on this topic; see Rhodes (2007, 2008) for a summary of Rosch's research and how it can appropriately inform our ability to categorize individuals by Enneagram type.

Enneagram beginners will inevitably over-generalize based on their limited knowledge of the Enneagram; over time, most of them will become more discriminating about how they characterize people based on type knowledge. Even those who continue to over-generalize—and they do of course exist—are not really bigots in any real sense of the word. Most often, they are individuals who just aren't especially sensitive to the nuances of psychology. It's not realistic to expect everybody who works with the Enneagram—even for a long time—to continue to grow in their ability to make subtle distinctions among the types. Some people do; some don't. I do think, however, that anyone who studies the Enneagram would develop richer, more elaborated models of the types if they were to think of them more as markers of individuality than neuroses.

A second, more serious reservation concerns Condon's comments on the relationship between the Enneagram and spirituality, which he discusses under the heading "Gilded and Gold." The section starts out with the story of a cat who was so mesmerized by a finger pointing at the food that he failed to notice the location of the food itself. Condon comments that "if the Enneagram points to the location of our true nourishment, there are still a number of ways to mistake the finger for the food, to grow overawed or distracted by the system itself" (p. 153).

What exactly does this mean—to be distracted by the system itself? We soon discover it has to do with focusing so much on the system from a spiritual point of view that we "deprive" ourselves of its "true nourishment"—which clearly seems to be something psychological, not spiritual, as is evidenced by the subsequent discussion.

Condon starts by distinguishing the Enneagram of Personality from the Enneagram of Everything (his terminology), the latter of which is usually called

the process Enneagram (the one introduced by G. I. Gurdjieff). Condon says that The Enneagram of Everything

presents the Enneagram as a purveyor of universal law, a “Symbol of All and Everything,” a skeleton key that unlocks and explains fundamental cosmic principles. This law is thought to govern all human behavior and contexts as well as things like musical scales. The result is a sort of metaphysical Theory of Everything derived from Gnosticism, Neo-Platonic philosophy, the works of George Gurdjieff, J. G. Bennett, Oscar Ichazo, Claudio Naranjo, A. H. Almaas, as well as Theosophy and Transpersonal Psychology (p. 153).

He goes on to observe that although some people appear to get “considerable value” from using the Enneagram of Personality “against the spiritual backdrop of the Enneagram of Everything,” “the Enneagram of Everything can give the Enneagram [of Personality] a theological cast, turning it into a kind of mini-religion” (p. 154). Over the next three pages, Condon discusses the nature of religion in a mostly unfavorable light, associating it with dogmatism, absolutism, fundamentalism, and idolatrous thinking. Discussing the “mythos” of the Enneagram figure, he expresses skepticism as to its status as a universal symbol, or even the idea that universal symbols really exist. In his words, “symbols don’t ripen and drop from the trees; people make them up” (p. 155).

I found this a rather startling statement. Is this all symbols are—something that people make up? Does that mean that the Enneagram is just something somebody made up? If so, that person must have been exceedingly clever, to come up with a symbol that has as much explanatory power as the Enneagram—something that can convincingly explain so many things. The process Enneagram, for example, has the ability to explain the nature of life processes, the structure of narratives, the path of human intention, and (as Condon points out) the esoteric significance of the musical scale. The personality Enneagram can explain the nature of human individuality and the core motivation that drives it (not to mention how the types interact, their relationship with the wing types, and the effects of the energy center associated with each type).

So no, I was not convinced by Condon’s arguments to accept the notion that the Enneagram is just a made-up symbol (perhaps just a psychological system dressed up in spiritual trappings?). And I was similarly unimpressed with his efforts to link religion (i.e., “religious absolutism”) with the defense of ego (see especially p. 155). However, I *was* impressed by the way Condon challenges the spiritually-minded reader to ask himself some rather searching questions about his motives for using the system:

If you use the Enneagram for a spiritual or theological purpose, the usual questions apply: Does doing so make you more compassionate? Kinder? More self aware? Less dogmatic? Less self important? More directly connected to what is beyond yourself? More able to think for yourself? More personally free? More able to discover and follow your own inner truth? (p. 156).

I was also impressed by the way he questions the idea that Enneagram teachers are more personally evolved or spiritually enlightened than other people (p. 156). In a field where too many people have historically gotten involved in some pretty bloody fights over who's entitled to the spiritual high ground, I found his questions and observations on this topic a breath of fresh air.

So when it comes right down to it, my main criticisms of this section come under the heading of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” Yes, I agree that spirituality and religion can be corrupted and co-opted for non-spiritual purposes. Yes, the Enneagram community has historically been riddled with internecine conflicts (especially spiritually-rooted conflicts) that have been more divisive than productive. And yes, the tendency to promote Enneagram teachers to the level of spiritual gurus has been problematic.

What is harder to accept is the idea that these problems can be solved by divorcing the Enneagram from its spiritual roots. Aside from the fact that this is impossible (because the Enneagram is, in fact, a spiritually-based system), a more secularized Enneagram will not eliminate the problems to which Condon alludes, because they are not caused by spirituality or religion, but by fear.

This fear arises as the result of encountering a system that has the power to probe rather pointedly into the depths of the human psyche. It is this very power of the Enneagram to “go deep” that can make it such a challenging tool to use; it's like catching a tiger by the tail.

While we all want to know ourselves a little better, the Enneagram can provide such a penetrating look at human motivation that it can bring forth our deepest fears about what we will find when we look in the mirror. (And this is true even when we see the types from a relatively benevolent perspective—how much truer is it when we identify them as ego fixations!)

Although we are usually consciously unaware of these fears, they are nonetheless powerful influences that elicit defensive responses designed to ensure the integrity of the psyche. That means that these fears are rational, not crazy; people intuitively know when they are not-ready-for-prime-time when it comes to major-league shadow work. If they're faced with deep waters and aren't sure they can swim, it's not surprising that they seek out a way to stay in the shallows. Stereotyping, projecting, and turning teachers into gurus are just a few of the ways that people use to make their Enneagram experience more psychologically manageable.

### **Transforming Fear into Trust**

From my perspective, the best way to address the problems to which Condon alludes is by assuaging the fears that create them. Fear causes contraction and the tendency to reject new input. If we want to stop contracting and start relaxing, we need to envision our fears in a way that allows us to befriend them.

The purpose of a depathologized view of the types is to make it okay to befriend those parts of the self that we so often reject. The more we pathologize these rejected parts, the more defenses we require to keep them at bay.

Whatever our imperfections, at our core, we are strong, not weak. We are loving, not hateful. And we are smart, not dumb. Seeing our core self—our core *type motivation*—as essentially okay allows us to trust ourselves, develop discernment (so that this trust is not blind), and let go of the notion that we're inevitably locked into an internal civil war.

### **Typing as Delightful (Rather than Frightful)**

When we no longer view the types as a problem, typing really *can* become a delightful process. One of the best parts of discovering our type is the liberating effect of realizing that we don't have to be like other people (our parents, our friends, or our image of the cultural ideal), because we have an inner motivation that is not the same. It's helpful, as well, to finally understand the reasons why some relationships are tougher than others—and to gain insight on the precise dynamics involved.

It can also be delightful to help other people discover *their* type—to enable a Two to finally understand why she wants to be a stay-at-home mom instead of a career woman; or a Nine to realize why it's so hard to stay on track; or a Six to lose the sense that he is a “defective Three.” These real-life examples remind us of how satisfying it can be to introduce people to a system that can help them feel more in sync with themselves.

Seeing type motivation as a form of innate potential doesn't bar us from looking at the shadow side of the types—it just makes the shadow one aspect of our inner landscape, rather than its distinguishing feature. It gives us the ability to engage in shadow work *on our own terms*—when we feel ready for it.

Condon notes on p. 158 that not everybody is quite ready to look at the unsettling aspects of their Enneagram style. His conclusion is thus that “the Enneagram is not for everybody.” But I would argue that the Enneagram *is* for everybody (at least for everybody who is interested)—not just for people who can tolerate seeing their type described mainly in negative terms. The “you have a problem” approach is simply too overwhelming for most people; it produces the kind of instant fear and shame that creates resistance, not receptivity.

Whatever path we take in the pursuit of greater wholeness, it has to be path we can live with, that is more gentle than harsh—the kind that encourages us to continue all the way to the end.

### **Last Thoughts**

When loving parents introduce the world to their children, they instinctively do so in a gentle way. Gentleness returns us to the state we experienced before we learned to worry, over-analyze, or self-criticize.

So I was especially captivated by the story at the end of Condon's essay, "The Book of the Grotesque," about an old man recalling a time when people were young and there were many truths in the world, not just one.

"All about in the world there were the[se] truths, and they were all beautiful."

But then, the people grew too narrowly attached to their favorite truth, so that it was no longer a truth, but its opposite. This is how people became "grotesques." The old man is said to have avoided this fate by remembering the Young Thing still inside of him.

Tom Condon suggests that we who work with the Enneagram might do well to keep alive that Young Thing inside of us. This we can do, he says, by remembering to see other people in their totality (not just as Enneagram types).

That's a great suggestion. But maybe we could go one step further, seeing not just the *person* in her totality, but the *type* in its totality, too (i.e., as having many dimensions, not just one). Allowing the type to be more than a fixation helps to minimize stereotyping and other defensive behaviors.

The nine types are powerful shapers of destiny. But our *beliefs* about the types are also powerful. When they are negative, they can generate negative stereotypes that are potentially destructive. But there's one great thing about beliefs that makes them more powerful than types. Beliefs, unlike types, can change.

### **References**

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