

The Trouble with Typing Others

By Barbara Whiteside, copyright 2010

In the beginning stages of learning about the Enneagram, a very common temptation for everyone is to type others. I know I did this myself fifteen years ago when I first was learning the system. I now cringe to see how often I was wrong.

Many of you have emailed or talked with me about spouses, children, parents, and others in your lives, starting by telling me that they are a certain Type. There are many concerns I have around this and I'd like to caution you about misusing what I am presenting in this introductory course. My hope is that your main focus will be to use what you learn to look within yourself, which is the only real way to create change. As Gandhi put it, "We have to be the change we want to see in the world." I think that applies to our world of family and friends, and not just nations.

Notwithstanding its apparent simplicity, the Enneagram is quite nuanced and complex. We cannot Type people based on observable behavior, as this is a system that looks at deeper motivations. One must get "inside someone's skin" to determine their motivation. It is not a matter of simply looking at behaviors. In fact, we all often behave like Types other than that which we are. And in our families, it can be so tempting to type children, but children are often acting the way they do because of their developmental stage, not because of Type.

The Enneagram is about seeing oneself and others clearly and with compassion. We are all highly influenced by unconscious motives - hence, the need for all Types to bring the light of awareness to those parts of ourselves that we have relegated to the basement (our unconscious). Very little about the way people behave needs be taken personally because so often people are actually "reacting" as their Type would predict rather than acting from conscious awareness. The Enneagram helps us tease apart the patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that constitute Type. When we understand ourselves better and become conscious of where we are coming from (for example, how we get triggered, which is our responsibility), we can really transform our relationships. But this is not because we can change others...instead, we start to look within to change ourselves taking into account our own patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving. When this happens, we treat others differently, and they will change too, whether or not they know the Enneagram. The Golden Rule thus becomes a Platinum rule: "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them."

I hope this is clarifying. Don't berate yourself if you find yourself thinking in class, "I think my mother-in-law is a "whatever" Type." Instead, just notice how your focus is on others - are you gaining compassion for your mother-in-law or holding the Type against her? And, please don't judge yourself for judging - just notice it and bring compassion to yourself as well. Breathing into your belly helps - it gets you out of your thoughts and feelings and into the present moment. When you find yourself not liking whole groups of people, saying to yourself "I can't stand Ones! (or Twos, Threes, Fours, etc.)", it is an indication about the work you need to do, and not the other way around. Darn! It would be so much easier if everyone else would change to our satisfaction!

In a nutshell, if you really want to turn your friends and family *off* of the Enneagram, the very best way is to start telling them what Type you think they are. Nobody wants to be categorized and put into a box. Instead, you might want to try talking about what you have learned about *yourself* with this system. You could also give them a book or share your handouts, but let them enjoy their own journey of discovering their Type. If they follow your lead to learn about themselves in this way, it will be so much more meaningful to them.

I am so delighted that so many of you have taken an interest in working with the Enneagram. I know how transformational this work can be and I hope that you all find the liberation you want, as well as compassion for yourself and others, and much improved relationships with those around you.