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Strengths and Shadows: Using the Enneagram in the Classroom

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Strengths and Shadows: Using the Enneagram in the Classroom

Abstract

"It is best to use the Enneagram in a context of spiritual direction and discernment, one that provides space for people to do the work that only they can do in response to the Spirit's leadership."

Posting about the usefulness of personality tests from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/strengths-and-shadows-using-the-enneagram-in-the-classroom/>

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Comments

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in all things

Strengths and Shadows: Using the Enneagram in the Classroom

Justin Bailey

Confession: I have always loved personality tests. In the nineties it was the DISC profile. In the aughts it was Myers-Briggs. I never caught on to Strengths Finder, but still have used all three instruments (DISC, Myers-Briggs, and Strengths) with students in the classroom, leadership teams in ministry, and of course, myself. Thus, it is no surprise I was drawn to the Enneagram, even if I have some reservations about the ways it is sometimes used.

For those who have somehow missed the cultural phenomenon that is the Enneagram,^{[1](#)} a brief introduction is in order. The Enneagram is a tool (some would say an ancient tool) for self-understanding. Popularly, it is used as a personality inventory like those listed above—something that categorizes a person based on their quirks, preferences, and habits. To its detractors, it is a sophisticated version of an Internet quiz, like “Which Disney Princess are You?”

In my experience, the Enneagram is taken more seriously by its advocates than any other personality tool I’ve encountered. This is primarily because it aims at the heart of things—rather than identifying clusters of traits it asks *why* we feel the way we feel, think how we think, and do what we do. It seeks our driving motivations, asking us to name our deepest fears and fixations, which work themselves out in distinct strategies for controlling the world.

The Enneagram enumerates nine different types (*ennea* is “nine” in Greek): nine mirrors for self-reflection, nine ways we get lost, but also nine ways we might be found.^{[2](#)} Christian appropriations of the Enneagram often correlate the diagnosis with the traditions of the desert fathers and mothers.^{[3](#)} Each of the nine numbers connects to one of the seven deadly sins (with fear and vainglory added to the classical list of vices).

One: the perfectionist; the deadly sin is anger
Two: the giver; the deadly sin is pride
Three: the performer; the deadly sin is vainglory
Four: the romantic; the deadly sin is envy
Five: the investigator; the deadly sin is greed (for information)
Six: the loyalist; the deadly sin is fear
Seven: the enthusiast; the deadly sin is gluttony (for experiences)
Eight: the challenger; the deadly sin is lust (for intensity)
Nine: the peacemaker; the deadly sin is sloth

I teach classes in spiritual formation and discipleship; when we talk about the desert fathers and the deadly sins, I usually introduce my students to the Enneagram. I introduce it as a form of cultural wisdom, the kind pursued and celebrated in the book of Proverbs and a result of careful observation of a world that belongs to God.

“There are people who have given their lives to understanding what makes humans tick,” I say. “Here’s what they’ve found. See if it resonates with you and if it resonates with the biblical vision of the human heart. If it’s helpful, use it. If not, drop it. Maybe it will be helpful later.”

Practically, this means assigning reading from Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung’s book on the deadly sins, as well Ian Cron and Suzanne Stabile’s well-known introduction.⁴ I also encourage students to listen to the artist *Sleeping at Last’s album of songs based on the Enneagram*. I don’t ask students to say definitively what number they are, but I do ask them to narrow it down to a few numbers. They are in an incredibly formative stage, and a lot of identity work is still going on. I am more interested in the process of self-reflection—that they are growing in their ability to look beneath the surface.

I also share three reservations with students. First, identifying what makes us tick can lead to self-awareness, but it can also lead to self-absorption. Calvin reminds us that we know ourselves so that we might know God, and so that we might know ourselves in relation to God. As we look within, we come to know the extent of our depravity; alas, it is even more pervasive than we had previously thought. But, we never end by looking inward; we always look upward to the God whose love, demonstrated in Christ, exceeds our wildest hopes. Only if we grasp the good news of Jesus can we find courage to take what might be an otherwise discouraging journey of self-discovery.

Second, identifying our type can be illuminating, but it may also lead us to excuse ourselves from taking responsibility for our actions: “The reason my relationship didn’t work out is because I am a one.” It is not for nothing that one Enneagram skeptic has called it the Christian horoscope! It can certainly be used that way. However, if we

connect the Enneagram numbers to the deadly sins, it is much harder to explain away. Consider the following adjustment: “One reason my relationship didn’t work out is because I just felt so frustrated all the time. I just can’t make life work the way I want it to, and it often came out in anger towards my partner.” That sort of admission need not be an excuse; rather it is an invitation to do some soul work, with a skilled helper and in Christian community.

Third, while knowing the various types can help cultivate empathy for others (especially in a family or when working on a team), there is always the temptation is to “weaponize” it towards others (especially in a family or when working on a team!) Overall, I consider the Enneagram to be a tool primarily meant for self-diagnosis and soul searching. It should not be used to categorize others as if they are reducible to a number. For that reason, it is best to use the Enneagram in a context of spiritual direction and discernment, one that provides space for people to do the work that only they can do in response to the Spirit’s leadership.

My students are almost always familiar with Strengths-Finder, a popular tool from the business world that helps steer students towards particular pathways that fit their strengths. There is a place for that—nothing is wrong with identifying our strengths. Spiritual formation, however, means facing our shadows. I have found the Enneagram to be incredibly helpful in naming hidden idolatries: the false sources of validation where we attempt to make our home instead of in the love of God.

FOOTNOTES

1. This is particularly true in Christian publishing circles, where books about the Enneagram are beginning to proliferate
2. This is language I’ve heard from Christopher Heuertz, who has written his own book on the Enneagram: *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth*. (Zondervan, 2017)
3. Some argue that the desert fathers and mothers are the source of the Enneagram, but that seems unlikely to me, even though there are real resonances between the two.
4. Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, (Baker, 2009); Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile, *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery*, (IVP, 2016)