

OVER
A MILLION
SOLD

THE
ROAD
AN ENNEAGRAM JOURNEY
BACK
TO SELF-DISCOVERY
TO YOU

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A CURIOUS THEORY OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN

One Saturday morning, my cell phone rang at 7:00 a.m. Only one person in the world dares call me at that hour.

“Is this my youngest son, Ian?” my mother said, pretending to be unsure she’d called the right number.

“Yes, it’s me,” I said, playing along.

“What are you working on?” she asked.

At that moment I wasn’t working on anything. I was standing in the kitchen in my boxers wondering why my Nespresso was making end-of-life noises and imagining all the sad ways an early morning conversation with my mother could end if my coffeemaker broke and I was deprived of my day’s first cup.

“I’m thinking about writing a primer on the Enneagram,” I said, gratefully watching a black stream of coffee love fill my mug.

“The sonogram?” she shot back.

“No, I said the—”

“The anagram?” she said, firing a second round before I could stop her.

“Enneagram. *Enneagram!*” I repeated.

“What’s the any-a-gram?” she said.

My mother is eighty-two years old. For sixty-seven of those years she has smoked Pall Malls, successfully avoided exercise and

eaten bacon with impunity. She has never needed glasses or a hearing aid and is so spry and mentally acute you'd think nicotine and inactivity were the keys to a long and happy life. She'd heard what I said the first time.

I smiled and continued with one of my Enneagram elevator speeches. "The Enneagram is an ancient personality typing system. It helps people understand who they are and what makes them tick," I said.

There was a long, utterly airless silence on the other end of the phone. I felt like I had been suddenly flung wildly into a black hole in a far-off galaxy.

"Forget the angiogram. Write a book about going to heaven and coming back," she said. "Those authors make money."

I winced. "They also have to die first."

"Details," she purred, and we laughed.

My mother's tepid response to the idea of my writing a book about the Enneagram gave me pause. I had my own reservations about the project as well.

When my grandmother didn't know what to make of something she would say it was "novel." I suspect that's how she'd describe the Enneagram. No one knows for certain when, where or who first came up with the idea for this map of the human personality. What is clear is that it's been a work in progress for a long time. Some trace its origins back to a Christian monk named Evagrius, whose teachings formed the basis for what later became the Seven Deadly Sins, and to the desert mothers and fathers of the fourth century, who used it for spiritual counseling. Some say that elements of the Enneagram also appear in other world religions, including Sufism (the mystical tradition within Islam) and Judaism. In the early 1900s an undeniably strange teacher named George Gurdjieff used the ancient nine-pointed geometric figure, or enneagram, to teach esoteric subjects unrelated to personality types. (I know, I know: if I end

the story here I could add Harrison Ford and a monkey and have the backstory for an Indiana Jones movie. But wait, the plot thins!)

In the early 1970s a Chilean named Oscar Ichazo happened upon the Enneagram and made significant contributions, as did one of his pupils, an American-trained psychiatrist named Claudio Naranjo, who developed it further by weaving insights drawn from modern psychology into it. Naranjo brought the Enneagram back to the United States and presented it to a small group of students in California, including a Catholic Jesuit priest and educator on sabbatical from Loyola Seminary named Father Robert Ochs.

Impressed with the Enneagram, Ochs returned to Loyola, where he taught it to seminarians and priests. It soon became known among clergy, spiritual directors, retreat leaders and laypeople as a helpful aid to Christian spiritual formation.

If its sketchy origins weren't enough to spook the mules, there is no scientific evidence that proves the Enneagram is a reliable measurement of personality. Who cares that millions of people claim it's accurate? Grizzly Man thought he could make friends with bears, and we know how that turned out.

So what led me to believe that writing a book about an archaic, historically questionable, scientifically unsupported personality typing system was a good idea?

To answer this question I need to introduce you to a tall, bespectacled monk with knowing eyes and a tenderhearted smile named Brother Dave.



For ten years I served as the founding pastor of a church in Connecticut. I loved the people, but by year seven our average Sunday attendance was running five hundred people, and I was running out of gas. It was clear the church needed a pastor with different gifts, someone who was more a steady-at-the-helm type than an entrepreneurial spirit like me.

For three years I tried everything short of surgery to transform myself into the kind of leader I thought the church needed and wanted me to be, but the project was doomed from the start. The harder I tried, the worse things became. I made more missteps than a guy running through a minefield wearing clown shoes. There was no shortage of confusion, hurt feelings and misunderstandings by the time I left. For me, the end was heartbreaking.

Following my departure I felt disillusioned and confused. Eventually a concerned friend encouraged me to see Br. Dave, a seventy-year-old Benedictine monk and spiritual director.

I first laid eyes on Br. Dave, in his black habit and sandals, standing on the grass-covered roundabout at the end of the monastery driveway waiting to greet me. Everything from the way he used both his hands to grasp mine to the way he smiled and said, “Welcome, traveler, can I make you coffee?” told me I’d come to the right place.

There are monks who pass their days in their monastery’s gift shop selling votive candles and giant wheels of homemade cheese, but Br. Dave isn’t one of them. He is a wise spiritual director who knows when to console and when to confront.

During our first few sessions Br. Dave listened patiently as I rehearsed the litany of miscalculations and mistakes I’d made in my ministry that in hindsight baffled me. Why had I said and done so many things that seemed right at the time but, looking back, were clearly senseless and at times hurtful to myself and others? How could someone have that many blind spots and still be allowed to drive a car? I felt like a stranger to myself.

By our fourth session I had begun to sound like a lost, half-crazed hiker looking for the path out of a forest while loudly debating with himself how the heck he came to be lost in the first place.

“Ian,” Br. Dave said, interrupting my meander, “why are you here?”

“I’m sorry?” I said, as if someone had just tapped me on the shoulder and awakened me from a daydream.

He smiled and leaned forward in his chair. “Why are you here?”

Br. Dave had a knack for posing questions that on the surface seemed almost insultingly simple until you tried to answer them. I looked out the leaded windows lining the wall behind him. Through them I saw a giant elm, the tips of its branches bending toward the earth under the weight of the wind. I struggled to find words to express what I wanted to say but couldn’t. The words that came to me weren’t my own, but they perfectly captured what I wanted to express.

“I don’t really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do what I hate,” I said, surprised a guy who regularly had trouble remembering his cell number could pull Paul’s words from Romans 7 out of his hat.

“I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway,” Br. Dave responded, quoting a verse from the same chapter.

For a moment we sat in silence, considering Paul’s words as they spun and glimmered in the air between us like motes in a shaft of sunlight.

“Br. Dave, I don’t know who I am or how I got into this mess,” I confessed, finally breaking the reverie. “But I’d be grateful if you could help me figure it out.”

Br. Dave smiled and sat back in his chair. “Good,” he said. “Now we can begin.”



At our next meeting Br. Dave asked, “Are you familiar with the Enneagram?”

“A little,” I said, shifting in my seat. “But it’s kind of a crazy story.”

Br. Dave winced and laughed as I told him about my first encounter with it in the early 1990s, when I was a graduate student at a conservative seminary. While on a weekend retreat I came across

a copy of Fr. Richard Rohr's book *Discovering the Enneagram: An Ancient Tool for a New Spiritual Journey*. In it Rohr describes the traits and underlying motivations that drive each of the Enneagram's nine basic personality types. Based on my life experience and what I'd learned in my training to become a counselor, Rohr's descriptions of the types were uncannily accurate. I felt sure I had stumbled on an amazing resource for Christians.

On Monday morning I asked one of my professors whether he'd ever heard of it. From the look on his face you'd have thought I'd said *pentagram*. The Bible condemns incantations, sorcery, horoscopes and witches, he said—none of which I recalled being mentioned in the book—and I should throw it away immediately.

At the time I was a young, impressionable evangelical, and though my gut told me my professor's reaction bordered on paranoid, I followed his advice—except the bit about throwing the book in the garbage. For bibliophiles, this is the unpardonable sin that grieves the Holy Spirit. I knew exactly which shelf held my dog-eared copy of Rohr's book in the bookcase in my study.

"It's too bad your professor discouraged you from learning the Enneagram," Br. Dave told me. "It's full of wisdom for people who want to get out of their own way and become who they were created to be."

"What does 'getting out of your own way' entail?" I asked, knowing how many times I'd wanted to do just that in my life but didn't know how.

"It has to do with self-knowledge. Most folks assume they understand who they are when they don't," Br. Dave explained. "They don't question the lens through which they see the world—where it came from, how it's shaped their lives, or even if the vision of reality it gives them is distorted or true. Even more troubling, most people aren't aware of how things that helped them survive as kids are now holding them back as adults. They're asleep."

"Asleep?" I echoed, my face registering confusion.

Br. Dave briefly gazed at the ceiling and frowned. Now he was the one searching for the right combination of words that would unlock the answer to a seemingly simple question.

“What we don’t know about ourselves can and will hurt us, not to mention others,” he said, pointing his finger at me and then at himself. “As long as we stay in the dark about how we see the world and the wounds and beliefs that have shaped who we are, we’re prisoners of our history. We’ll continue going through life on autopilot doing things that hurt and confuse ourselves and everyone around us. Eventually we become so accustomed to making the same mistakes over and over in our lives that they lull us to sleep. We need to wake up.”

Waking up. There wasn’t anything I wanted more.

“Working with the Enneagram helps people develop the kind of self-knowledge they need to understand who they are and why they see and relate to the world the way they do,” Br. Dave continued. “When that happens you can start to get out of your own way and become more of the person God created you to be.”

After learning his afternoon appointment had canceled, Br. Dave spent extra time with me to talk about the importance of self-knowledge on the spiritual path. How, as John Calvin put it, “without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God.”

“For centuries great Christian teachers have said knowing yourself is just as important as knowing God. Some people will say that’s feel-good psychology when actually it’s just good theology,” he said.

For a moment I thought about all the Bible teachers and pastors I knew who had done things that had blown up their lives and their ministries, often on an epic scale, because they didn’t know themselves or the human capacity for self-deceit. They studied and knew the Bible inside and out, but not themselves. I thought of how many Christian marriages I’d seen fall apart largely because neither spouse understood the inner splendor and brokenness of their own souls.

Then I thought about myself. I had always believed I was more self-aware than the average person, but if the last three years had taught me anything it was that I had plenty of growing to do in the self-knowledge department.

Br. Dave looked at his watch and slowly stood up. “I’m away leading retreats for the next month,” he announced, stretching to get the blood flowing again after our nearly two-hour seated conversation. “In the meantime, dust off your copy of Rohr’s book and reread it. You’ll appreciate how he looks at the Enneagram more through the lens of Christian spirituality than psychology. I’ll email you the names of a few other books you can read as well.”

“I really can’t thank you enough,” I said, rising from my chair and slinging my backpack over my shoulder.

“We’ll have plenty to discuss the next time we meet,” Br. Dave promised, embracing me before opening his office door to let me out. “God’s peace!” I heard him call down the hallway after me.



Since I was on a long-overdue three-month sabbatical with more time than I knew what to do with, I took Br. Dave’s advice to heart and threw myself into learning the Enneagram. For weeks, nearly every morning I walked to the coffee bar at the end of our block and pored over the books he had recommended, taking notes in my journal. At night, I gave a report of everything I was learning from the Enneagram to my wife, Anne. Intrigued, she began to read up on it as well. In that season of our lives together, we had some of the richest, most meaningful conversations in all of our marriage.

Do we *really* know ourselves? How much does our past interfere with our present? Do we see the world through our eyes or through those of the children we were? What are the hidden wounds and misguided beliefs we pick up as kids that continue to secretly

govern our lives from the shadows? And how exactly would wrestling with questions like these help us better know God?

These were some of the questions I eagerly lobbed at Br. Dave when he returned from his travels. Sitting in his office, I described for him a handful of the many “aha” moments I had experienced while studying the Enneagram.

“How did you feel when you discovered your type?” Br. Dave asked.

“Well, it wasn’t all ‘hats and horns,’” I said. “I learned some painful things about myself.”

Brother Dave turned around and grabbed a book off his desk and flipped to a page marked by a red sticky flag. “To know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around. The first product of self-knowledge is humility,” he said.

“That sums it up pretty well,” I said, chuckling.

“It’s Flannery O’Connor,” Br. Dave said, closing the book and placing it back on his desk. “There’s not a lot she doesn’t sum up well.”

“And Anne?” he continued. “What’s it been like for her?”

“One night she read a description of her type to me in bed and she cried,” I said. “She’s always struggled to find words to describe what it’s like to live inside her skin. The Enneagram’s been a gift to her.”

“Sounds like you’re both off to a good start,” Br. Dave said.

“It’s been incredible. What we’ve learned from the Enneagram so far has already begun changing the way we think about marriage, friendships and parenting,” I said.

“Just remember, it’s only one tool to help you deepen your love for God and others,” Br. Dave cautioned. “There are plenty of others. What’s important is the more you and Anne grow in self-knowledge, the more you’ll become aware of your need for God’s grace. Not to mention, you’ll have more compassion for yourselves and other people.”

“I want to read you this Thomas Merton quote I found,” I said, leafing through the pages of my journal.

Br. Dave rubbed his hands together and nodded. “Ah, Merton, now you’re swimming in deep waters,” he smiled.

“Here it is,” I said, finding the page where I had written down the quote. I cleared my throat. “Sooner or later we must distinguish between what we are not and what we are. We must accept the fact that we are not what we would like to be. We must cast off our false, exterior self like the cheap and showy garment that it is . . .” I slowed, surprised by the knot in my throat that was making it hard for me to continue.

“Go on,” Br. Dave said quietly.

I took a deep breath. “We must find our real self, in all its elemental poverty, but also in its great and very simple dignity: created to be the child of God, and capable of loving with something of God’s own sincerity and his unselfishness.”

I closed my journal and looked up, flushing from embarrassment at how emotional I had become.

Br. Dave tilted his head to one side. “What was it Merton said that moved you?”

I sat quietly, uncertain how to answer. The monastery’s church bells rang outside, calling the monks to prayer.

“I feel like I’ve been asleep for a long time, but maybe now I’m beginning to wake up,” I said. “At least I hope so.”

Whenever I said something Br. Dave thought was significant he’d pause to close his eyes and reflect on it. This was one of those times.

Br. Dave opened his eyes. “Before you go, can I pray a blessing for you?” he said.

“Sure,” I replied, sliding forward in my chair to get close enough for Br. Dave to wrap both his hands around mine.

May you recognize in your life the presence, power, and light of your soul.

May you realize that you are never alone, that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.

May you have respect for your individuality and difference.

May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique, that you have a special destiny here, that behind the façade of your life there is something beautiful and eternal happening.

May you learn to see your self with the same delight, pride, and expectation with which God sees you in every moment.

“Amen,” Br. Dave said, squeezing my hands.

“Let it be so,” I whispered, squeezing his hands in return.



Br. Dave’s blessing made a difference in my life. Over the years my work with the Enneagram has helped me to see myself “with the same delight, pride, and expectation with which God sees me in every moment.” Learning and now teaching the Enneagram has shown me something of the “crooked timber” from which my and others people’s hearts are made. The self-understanding I have gained from it has helped me put an end to a few childish ways and become a more spiritual adult. I’m certainly not there yet, but now and again I sense the immediacy of God’s grace and for an instant catch a glimpse of the person I was created to be. In the spiritual life that’s no small thing.

A few years after my encounter with Br. Dave I accepted an invitation from a woman named Suzanne Stabile to speak at a conference she was hosting at Brite Divinity School. We instantly connected and knew that if left unsupervised by responsible adults, we could get into all kinds of trouble if we became friends.

So we became friends.

When Suzanne told me our mutual friend Richard Rohr had been her spiritual mentor for years and had personally trained her in the Enneagram, I became curious and decided to attend one of her workshops. After an hour of listening to her lecture, I knew Suzanne wasn’t just an Enneagram teacher—she was a ninja-level-

Mr. Miyagi-from-*The Karate-Kid* kind of Enneagram teacher. To my good fortune Suzanne picked up where Br. Dave had left off in my life years earlier, kindly taking me on the next leg of my journey toward understanding and applying the wisdom of the Enneagram to my life as a Christian.

Many of the insights and anecdotes on these pages were taken from Suzanne's lectures, while others come from my own life and from what I have learned over the years by attending workshops and studying countless books by renowned Enneagram teachers and pioneers such as Russ Hudson, Richard Rohr, Helen Palmer, Beatrice Chestnut, Roxanne Howe-Murphy and Lynette Sheppard, to name a few. More than anything, however, this book is the product of my and Suzanne's deep affection and respect for one another. It's the only way we know how to throw our two cents of experience and knowledge toward the effort to create a kinder, more compassionate world. We hope it succeeds. If it doesn't, well, we still had a blast doing it.

To be clear, I am not a foamy-mouthed Enneagram zealot. I do not stand uncomfortably close to people at cocktail parties and tell them I was able to guess their Enneagram number based on their choice of footwear. People who do that are an evil begging to be overcome.

But even if I'm not a fanatic, I am a grateful student. To borrow a quote from the British mathematician George Box, "All models are wrong, but some are useful." That's how I see the Enneagram. It is not infallible or inerrant. It is not the be-all and end-all of Christian spirituality. At best, it is an imprecise model of personality . . . but it's *very useful*.

That said, here's my advice. If you find that this book supports you on your spiritual path, great. If not, don't throw it away. Put it on your bookshelf instead. It might come in handy one day. Life hands us a challenging syllabus. We need all the help we can get.

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