

LETTING GO OF THE **FALSE SELF**

*HOW THE ENNEAGRAM
CAN HELP YOU FIND
THE TRUE YOU*

BY ALICE FRYLING



Our daughter Elisa still remembers a terrifying moment in the produce section of our grocery store. She was young, too young for school, but old enough to be walking the aisles of the grocery store with Mommy. Somewhere between the lettuce and the grapefruit, she let go of my hand and wandered a few feet away. Ready to return to the security of my presence, she reached up to take my hand. Horrors! That was *not* Mommy up there.

She had taken the wrong hand. She let go quickly and looked around for the right mommy. There I was, checking out the apples. Running over to me, she grabbed my leg, at home again, where she was loved and protected.

As grownups, we sometimes do the same thing spiritually that Elisa did physically as a child. We walk away, just a bit, from the God who loves us, and then when we need comfort, we reach up and take the wrong hand. The hand we take does not belong to a bad person. This person looks like someone who loves us and will protect us. We think we can hang on here and everything will be all right. But eventually we start to panic, realizing that the hand we are holding does not belong to someone who can give life. The hand we are holding belongs to our false self.

The false self is the person we wish we were. It is the person we want others to think we are. It is the person who lives with the illusion that we are able to love perfectly, to be wise and all-knowing, and to be in control of life. The false self thrives on success and achievement. The false self is indeed a very impressive person. The problem is that the false self is a facade, not the unique person God created us to be. The person God created us to be flourishes. The false self languishes in pretense and in grasping for abilities and gifts that are not ours to have.

The apostle Paul called the false self “the old self” (Romans 6:6). We might say the “ego self.” To the false-old-ego self, life is all about me. My kingdom come; my will be done. The false self is competitive and defensive. It needs constant approval, wants to achieve rather than receive, and behaves in ways we think guarantee us to be accepted, needed, and admired. Living in this place is exhausting. But the temptation to hang on to the false self is constant.

In contrast, God invites us to be the person created in the image of Divine Love, reflecting the characteristics of God. This is the “new self” (2 Corinthians 5:17), a unique person who has been given characteristics, desires, and gifts that reflect who God is. As we embrace

this new self, we let go of the false self and begin to recognize our true self. According to the New Testament this person is free (2 Corinthians 3:17); lives as Jesus lived, in truth and grace (John 1:14); and manifests the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). The true self is not fragmented by the illusions of the false self but recognizes our imitations as well as God’s invitation to love others out of the gifts given to us. The true self knows it is not in charge of its own life, let alone of the world. In short the true self is God-centered rather than ego-centered.

Those of us who have undertaken the spiritual journey know that living out of the true self is very, very difficult. Richard Rohr has said that the false self is easily offended, about every three minutes. David Benner says that the false self is like the air we breathe. I have found that my own false self “masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). It looks so good to me that I can hardly believe it is an illusion. I struggle with

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identifying the false self. How do I know who is the God-Reflecting Me, and who is the Self-Serving Me?

TASTE OF THE ENNEAGRAM

One of the tools I have found most helpful in this struggle is the Enneagram, an ancient paradigm that describes nine perspectives of the false self. This paradigm, taught by many religious teachers, invites us to journey back to the true self. It has been enormously helpful to me in my own Christian journey. The Enneagram suggests that we all have been given a particular gift from God. Numbered from one to nine, these gifts include goodness, love, effectiveness, creativity, wisdom, faithfulness, joy, power, and peace. As we live with the special gift we have been given, we bump into roadblocks: we cannot do this perfectly, others do not appreciate our gifts, and others have different gifts that may look better or worse in our own eyes. When these roadblocks appear, we desperately try to affirm ourselves by exaggerating our gifts. Life becomes all about our talents, our abilities, our desires. When we become really desperate, we exaggerate our gifts to the point of compulsion.

Enter the false self. I am no longer free to offer my gifts in love. In my desperation, my gifts become the most important part of my life and my relationships. No longer free, I become compulsive about how I think I should express my giftedness and how I think my gifts should be received. Unfortunately, it is a daily (hourly?) journey from the true self to the false self back to the true self. One of the values of the Enneagram is that it not only identifies the compulsions of the false self, it also suggests the grace that invites us to return to the true self. The Enneagram identifies nine gifts, followed by nine compulsions, and then suggests nine graces to help us return home.

Lest this sounds too simple, it is. Humanity is not neatly divided into nine categories. But the simplicity of the Enneagram is part of its genius. In the complexity of our life circumstances, our private motivations, and our inner inclinations, we lose sight of the unique ways we respond to life and we forget to appreciate that not everyone responds as we do.

We begin to see ourselves more clearly in the simplicity of the Enneagram. As we explore the Enneagram, we experience a self-awareness that allows us to see our blind spots and begin to unmask our false self.

Listen to how this might play out in an ordinary conversation when my husband and I connect in the late afternoon. If my husband asks me, “How was your day?” I would probably answer with a Four perspective, which can be a bit melancholic: “The committee chair didn’t get back to me about the brochure. Now I’ll be late with what they wanted me to do. The doctor never called about my test results. I don’t think he likes me. I didn’t have time to get the groceries so we have to have leftovers.” If I were a Seven, I might be compulsively optimistic: “The committee chair didn’t get back to me. Now I have extra time to work on the brochure. The doctor’s office didn’t call, so the test results must be okay. Oh, and I didn’t get to the grocery store. Let’s go out to eat.” Or notice the underlying anger in how a One might have responded: “The committee chair didn’t call back. She should have! And I never heard from the doctor. We should switch to someone better. I would have gone to the grocery store, but lately they have so few cashiers, the lines are so long I didn’t have time.”

Each of us looks at life and relates to others within the perspective of our Enneagram space. But this does not mean that everyone in each space looks or sounds the same. Human beings are much too unique for that. Not all Fives value the same aspect of wisdom. Not all Eights want to be powerful in the same situations. And not all Twos are helpful in the same ways. But categories are still helpful. We observe categories in all of creation. Consider the great variety of roses and the many types of maple trees. Not all roses are alike, and not all maple trees are alike. But if we did not have a tree/flower category and a rose/maple category, we would not do well tending the back yard. The Enneagram simply gives words to describe nine categories of human beings.

We begin to see ourselves more clearly in the simplicity of the Enneagram. As we explore the Enneagram, we experience a self-awareness that allows us to see our blind spots and begin to unmask our false self. Self-awareness is a key component in our spiritual journey and in human flourishing. John Calvin said that “nearly all wisdom we possess... consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.... The knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.”¹

But becoming self-aware is rarely a pleasant experience at first. I found this out when I began to read about the Enneagram. As I looked over the nine spaces, I was sure I was not a Four because the compulsion of the Four is envy, and I am not an envious person. Envy sounds awful to me. I simply could not be a Four. But as I continued to explore the Enneagram, I saw that I did fit the pattern of the creative person described in the Four space. Was it possible, then, that I was envious? Yes, I realized, I was envious of what others had that I was missing—talents, opportunities, temperament preferences, and a host of other strengths that were missing in my own life. This unpleasant realization proved to be life giving.

As I returned to God for mercy, I found “grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). I began to notice how draining my envy was. And I saw that my envy was lying to me, reflecting what Jesus said about the lies of the Great Deceiver. “When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). The “native language” of my false self is to think that I need what others have and I do not have. The truth is that I do not *need* to be envious because I am *not* missing anything. I have everything I need “for

1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in Carolyn Nystrom, *John Calvin: Sovereign Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 13–14.



life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). In fact, not only am I not *missing* anything, I have been given gifts from God, especially in my ability to be creative, in writing, in my home, in spiritual direction relationships, and in life. I love that! Move over, false self, I want to be free to be the person God created me to be.

TASTE OF THE ENNEAGRAM

Let me describe what this might look like for people in each of the Enneagram spaces. This will be just a “Taste of the Enneagram.” There are dozens of good books available about the Enneagram, many from a Christian perspective. The following is a brief summary of the spaces, describing how people in each number experience the temptation to overlay their own gift, move into the compulsions of the false self, and find their way, by grace, back to their true self.

People in the **One space** are gifted with **goodness**. They do things well, very well. They are conscientious and ethical, striving for excellence. But on the journey of life, they discover that things are not always good, that they themselves are not always good. The false self convinces them that they are responsible for making life not only good, but perfect. When things are not as perfect as they think they should be, Ones experience **anger**, toward themselves, situations, and toward others. God invites Ones to receive **serenity**, which is the ability to accept things as they are and to become less reactive when things are not perfect.

People in the **Two space** are especially gifted to **love**. But as Twos journey on in life, they discover that they actually like to feel needed by others, even more than they like to love unselfishly. As they compulsively try to meet the needs of others, they deny their own needs and develop a **pride** that leads them to hover and control in the name of love. The false self convinces them that they know what everyone else needs, but no one can know what they need. The grace that leads Twos back to the true self is **humility**. As they begin to acknowledge their own needs and weaknesses, God transforms them to be better able to love others with authenticity and grace.

People in the **Three space** are gifted to be **effective**, to succeed in making things happen. But as they succeed in life, Threes may become vain about their successes. When threatened with a sense of possible failure, Threes, in their false self, give in to **deceit**, the compulsion to twist the truth to fulfill the self-image they have created. The Enneagram reminds Threes to embrace and express **truth** about themselves, their abilities, their weakness and emotions. Truth is the grace offered to Threes to experience God’s transformation.

People in the **Four space** reflect the **creativity** of God. But because they cannot always make life and

themselves creative and special, Fours give in to self-doubt, self-contempt, even self-hatred. This leads to **envy**, as they believe that everyone else has qualities that they are missing. The grace offered to the Fours is **equanimity**, which gives balance to their emotions, allowing them to feel their feelings without getting stuck in them.

People in the **Five space** are gifted with **wisdom**. They are knowledgeable visionaries. But for Fives the quest for knowledge and information is never-ending. They become protective of their knowledge and may have an air of superiority. If they give in to the false self, they experience compulsive **avarice** or **greed**, taking in more and more knowledge, but not wanting to give it out or let go of it. **Detachment** is the grace offered to Fives, allowing them to hold more loosely all that they know, and move into their true self as they engage with others, even without knowing or understanding everything.

People in the **Six space** are **faithful**. They are loyal and easily influenced by authority. But they do not trust themselves. The false self says to Sixes that the opinion of others has more validity than their own ideas, and that they should embrace truth as others see it. Because they believe they must be prepared for every possible danger, their false self is especially prone to **fear**. God offers the grace of **courage** to Sixes. In this courage, they learn to trust themselves and others, living in the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law.

People in the **Seven space** are gifted with **joy**. But as they live with this gift, they are tempted to overstate the positive and to resist anything dark or negative. They protect themselves from the stresses of life by planning and dreaming. When the false self takes over, Sevens succumb to **gluttony**, wanting more and more of everything good in order to avoid inner pain. The grace offered to Sevens is **sobriety**. This grace invites Sevens to take only what they need and live with that. In their true self, Sevens can enjoy life, even if it includes some darkness.

People in the **Eight space** are often leaders. They are gifted with **power**. But Eights may deny their own vulnerability. To cope with this fear of weakness, they come to believe that they need to dominate others: “It’s my way or the highway.” The false self demands more and more power, giving in to **lust**, an insatiable passion for power over others. God invites Eights to receive the grace of **innocence**, a childlike capacity to admit weakness and vulnerability.

People in the **Nine space** are gifted with **peace**. They are calm and content and remind us that God is peaceful. But because they fear change and conflict, Nines may become indolent, not willing to exert themselves, even for things that seem important to others. As the false self takes over, Nines can become **slothful** or **lazy**. This may lead them to become neglectful, taking the path of least resistance. God’s

grace to the Nines is **action**. In their true self, they are able to be more assertive, to state their own positions and preferences, and to become energized and involved in life.

The Enneagram shows us that the false self is hiding in plain sight—in our very own Enneagram space. The false self masquerades as the perfect, exaggerated expression of our giftedness. When we are threatened, offended, or under stress, we rev up our gifts, compulsively trying to convince others (and ourselves) that we are worthy to be admired because we are so very gifted. Or we try to protect ourselves from our fears by overplaying what we do well. When all else fails, we grab on and try to control life with the very gifts God gave us to help us love others.

RELEASING

What do we do, then, with this false self we are discovering? Like my daughter in the grocery store, we let go. But unlike my daughter, we need to let go many times a day. Thomas Keating, as well as other Christian teachers, reminds us to let go of our desire for acceptance, security, and control. When we sense we are in the compulsive grip of our own gifts, we can pray this

prayer: “I let go of my desire for affection and approval. I let go of my desire for security and survival. I let go of my desire for power and control.” Even though this prayer is not specific to the Enneagram, those familiar with the Enneagram will recognize that for people in different spaces it is particularly challenging to let go of acceptance or of security or of control. But whatever our space, we all need to pray and to practice letting go, many times a day.

It is scary to let go of the false self. The hand of the false self looks familiar and safe. To let go may seem like a death to self. But it is a life-giving death, leading to the resurrection of the true self. It is an experience God invites us to have, daily, throughout our life. Letting go is the way to life. It is the way to love. It is the way home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



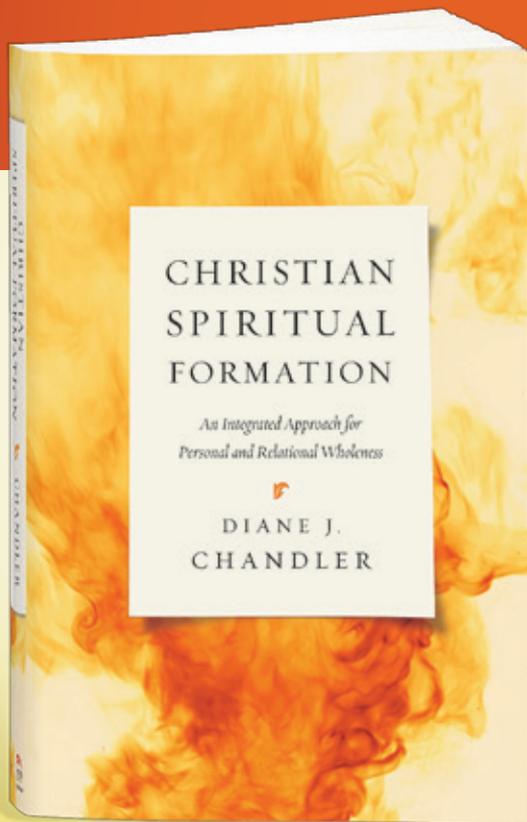
Alice Fryling is a spiritual director and author. Her most recent book is *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction*. She teaches Enneagram workshops in the Chicago area with her colleague Jessie Vicha. Alice and her husband Bob have two grown daughters and four grandchildren.

WHOLLY FORMED TO HIS LIKENESS

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