

What Type is She?

A Discussion between Helen Palmer and Sandie Ritter about the Enneagram

Sandie: Many people involved in the humanistic movement do not want to be labelled. Given the nature of the Enneagram, what are your views on this?

Helen: The Enneagram is a very broad system that is based in the spiritual dim-

ension, so it is not the kind of system that you would see in DSM III or pathological literature. This system is most applicable to normal people — exactly the kinds of people who would not see themselves as a 'type' — so you have to define the

Helen Palmer has been teaching the Enneagram since 1974 and is deeply concerned with maintaining the system's oral and spiritual tradition in presenting the material. Her workshops are conducted through live interviews with representatives of the different types. She is a frequent presenter at American growth centres such as Esalen and The New York Open Center. Helen is also a teacher of psychology, and Director of the Center for the Investigation and Training of Intuition in Berkeley, California. She is author of The Enneagram — Understanding Yourself and Others in Your Life (Harper/ Collins, 1991). In November 1991 Helen Palmer ran two successful workshops on the Enneagram in London, and while she was in Britain Sandie Ritter recorded this discussion for Self & Society. Sandie Ritter is a transpersonal counsellor and psychosynthesis therapist in private practice in London. She also works as a social worker. Sandie was introduced to the Enneagram in 1983. Her review of Helen Palmer's book appeared in Self & Society in March 1992.

parameters of type. For example, in homeopathy you might have types based on physical indications, in other medical modes you will find types based on glandular functioning, etc. The Enneagram identifies traits and tendencies that determine behaviour in a compulsive way only when they are highly fixated.

Sandie: These types are not like, for example, the types that a Jungian would define, they seem to be much more specific than that.

Helen: The Jungians have four types in various combinations because they are measuring a particular parameter of the human condition. The glandular expert is measuring glands and the Jungian is measuring perceptual style. The Enneagram uses type as a springboard to the dimensions of the inner life, so it's describing type traits as advantageous access points into spiritual life. The teaching is that our chief liability — in other words where we feel defended and have protected ourselves through our defense mechanisms from childhood on — can be accessed and transformed into our chief ability. So part of the objection to typing is that people see type as a way of stereotyping people — regimenting people based on behavioural characteristics, as if those could never change and were fixed and immutable.

Sandie: The Enneagram reminds me of the situation in psychosynthesis when someone first recognises a subpersonality, and it expresses itself in a distorted way. Then, the more you get to know it, the purer its form and the closer to one's spiritual nature it becomes.

Helen: Yes, it's exactly the same principle. Where the negative presentation is actually seen as good news in disguise because it's a way of recognising a higher ability trying to present itself. It does, at first, come through in a distorted way, but in its transformed aspect it is a gateway to the inner being. There is also an illusion in a lot of transpersonal circles that we are inherently free; the Enneagram would say that in potential we are free to be anything, or to have access to all dimensions of the inner life, but as a practical matter we tend to have a habit of thought and emotion — and that is what 'type' is, it is a recurring habit of thought and emotion that has been developed, for very good reason, as a childhood strategy of defence. According to the Enneagram system, our defenses indicate and protect an aspect of essential nature so, for example, following the parallel to psychosynthesis, if somebody comes over with a great deal of machismo, it often covers fear. Fear is a manifestation of courage trying to shine through in a distorted way. There are definite organisations, habits of thought and emotion that can be discerned, and we tend to stay with our own familiar habits over the course of a lifetime.

Sandie: I know you are familiar with astrology. How does the Enneagram differ from astrology? For example, you could say that somebody with several planets in Scorpio would have issues of jealousy that would predominate in their character, but it may not be their chief feature — how would you make a distinction?

Helen: The Enneagram's jealous type would not be seen as someone who is sim-

ply sexually jealous or possessive. The jealous type is seen as having a habit of attention that is based on comparisons of oneself with others: 'How am I doing? Am I doing better or worse than . . .' Jealousy is an organisation of perception, of thought and emotion, that is based on certain recurring points of attention. The jealous type in the Enneagram terms is more compatible with the Buddhist concept of comparing mind, judging mind, where you compare your own best efforts to impossibly high standards, so that you are inevitably angry at yourself because you miss the mark. You are always measuring yourself against perfection, always measuring yourself against the achievements of others. In the sexual area you might be comparing yourself unfavourably to someone also, but that is only one illustration of comparing mind, which is a much more general organisation of attention.

Sandie: So it is very important for people to explore the area of consciousness that they are attuned to.

Helen: It is very important. Most people do not understand about the organisation of their own thought. For example, when asked the question 'Where does your attention go?', most people would think their attention gravitates towards a topic like 'I want to buy a car'. They probably won't recognise their own habit of mind unless they observe themselves at length. It is a great jump in consciousness when we can accurately describe our own habit of mind. I would say that the Enneagram is most appropriate to people who are at the self-observing stage of development.

Sandie: It sounds as though this could be very helpful to many people who feel stuck in their lives, who have been involved in self development and want to continue to develop.

Helen: That certainly seems to be the case. For example, there is an Enneagram type that has very low self-esteem. We could rely on the reports of people who operate from this fixation of attention because they are living experts on the esteem issue. In their world view, esteem is *the* trigger to their psyche. Other types of people may well have esteem related concerns, but for the type whose daily life hinges on the perception that others are more worthy than themselves, whose view is systematically biased by 'the capital sin' of envy, a shift in self-esteem can expand their entire perception of reality. When we have the right trigger point, substantial change can be made; not just remediation of a single issue out of many, but a quantum change in level of awareness.

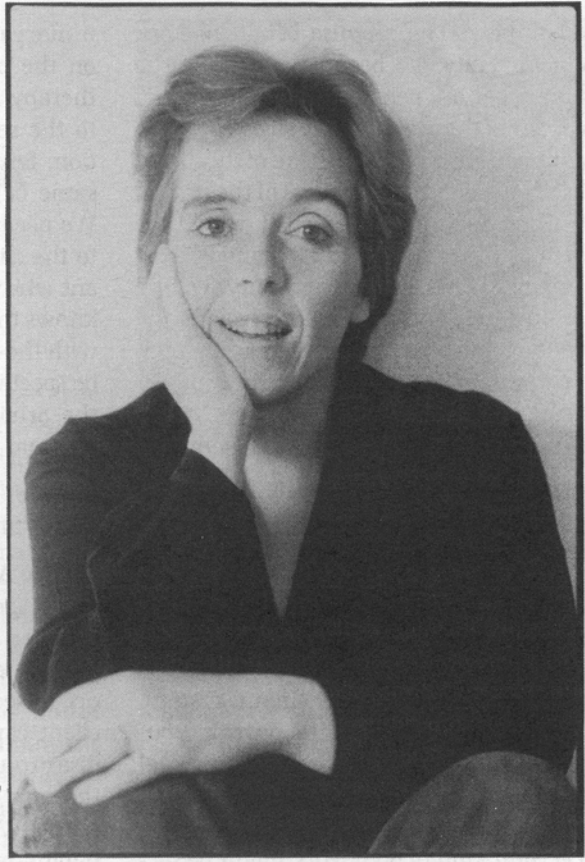
Sandie: So does the Enneagram have these triggers for every type?

Helen: Yes, the system describes some profound trigger points, and if these are brought into awareness we have an immense amount of relief from secondary symptoms.

Sandie: Once someone has recognised their type, perhaps from reading your book, how do you suggest they move on?

Helen: I would be very happy if the level of self-observation in the general population were high enough to discover their type from books. I am pleased that I can

now go into a new city and announce from the stage, for example, 'Are there any performer types [three on the Enneagram] willing to come up and be interviewed in public?'. I can now regularly fill small panels of speakers from those who have recognised their type from a book. The other people in the hall then have the great advantage of being able to listen to self-observant representatives of the types, and to question them directly. By listening to the stories of the Threes they can recognise 'I am like this, I am not like this; my parents are like this, they are not like this'. The books don't do it justice, it's only through the living presence of people who inhabit those points of view that you really get the material.



Helen Palmer

Sandie: Do people need to attend workshops on the Enneagram then?

Helen: To self-identify your type, it's good to hear the stories of people who are culturally familiar to you and who can describe what they think and how they feel. I hope that workshop formats can eventually be replaced by videos of speakers who inhabit the nine points of view. Then this material could be viewed in people's homes for less cost and with less difficulty.

Sandie: Although the Enneagram is spiritually based, it seems accessible to everyone.

Helen: It is a spiritually based system that uses preoccupations of thought and emotion as a springboard to the inner life. Its basis is similar to the psychosynthesis view that our chief preoccupation of attention, where defenses are organised and we tend to go 'on automatic' and become mechanical, can be turned to

advantage. The premise being that our chief liability can become our asset. The nine types are personality platforms that consist of the seven deadly sins of Catholicism, plus two. The structure of the model itself indicates the workings of the trinity, (Father, Son and Holy Ghost), which are seen as the three forces that underlie ordinary events, affirming, denying and reconciling. These forces are seen as the building blocks of every religious system. However, you need not buy into a particular spiritual persuasion in order to take advantage of the Enneagram teaching.

Sandie: Is there anything that you want the humanistic community to know about the Enneagram?

Helen: I would like them to know that the Enneagram is a model that can be verified through people's own self-observations. Any good treatment system, whether it is based on bodywork, acupuncture, psychotherapy, or spiritual practice, is an advantageous application and addition to the system. For example, a certain kind of bodywork might be recommended for each of the types. A particular spiritual practice is best for each of the types. Particular interventions are advantageous for each particular type, and others would be counterproductive. This is a marvellous human development model for the high functioning person — people who have a job, have a family and who need to understand themselves, people who realise that they are stuck in a recurring loop tape of thought and emotion and who want to grow out of it. It is

a marvellous model for self-recognition on the part of the client, and whatever therapy modality the practitioner brings to the session can be useful. In meditation, for example, not everyone gets the same benefit from the same technique. We need a meditation that is appropriate to the client's habit of mind. When a client who is a good self-observer and who knows their own tendency is put in touch with the correct practices, the results can be spectacular. The practitioner then has the privilege of supporting the client's spiritual opening.

Sandie: It sounds like you need a good support network for that to happen.

Helen: Absolutely. I have a problem with New Age techniques that momentarily awaken insight and that can offer a glimpse of chakra functioning. Without organised support for that opening the client can have a futile abreaction or a disastrous counterreaction. We need all the help we can get in the integration phase. When you change any significant habit you have to be supported, because you go without defenses for a while and nothing is familiar. You have accomplished something that was previously threatening, and you are momentarily undefended — a great deal of new material can surface, and integrating the new view into a form that is acceptable to the personality is vastly underestimated. Humanistically oriented therapists are a great support because they tend to see change as both a psychological and spiritual event.