

Ah, to catch a pointed star

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS staying with a girlfriend recently, bumping into differences in neatness, privacy levels, and normal things that come up in relationships. And suddenly I thought: I wish people came with a road map. A set of instructions. A how-to manual to help us navigate this uncertain terrain.

Because no matter how much we love our friends, it's difficult to relate to the small things others do without judgment or annoyance.

The next day, I miraculously found a book on my friend's shelf that contained the how-to manual I'd been craving all my life, unique in its ability to straddle both the mystical and practical.

The Enneagram by Helen Palmer (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) - based on ancient religious wisdoms - and another on the enneagram, The Practical Guide to Personality Types by Don Richard Riso (HarperCollins, 1990), have changed the way I relate to the world.

Ironically, in asking around, I've discovered that the enneagram is fast becoming the hottest self-help system among many psychologists, healers and those committed to spiritual and personal growth.

It is believed to have evolved as part of secret, oral, Sufi teachings and was brought to the West by spiritual philosopher G.I. Gurdjieff in the 1920s, and separately by Oscar Ichazo and his disciple Chilean psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo, who taught it through the Arica Institute in the US after the '70s.

The mystical system asserts that we develop in reaction to childhood neglects or expectations. There are nine basic personality types drawn around a nine-pointed star. And the underlying premise is that once we understand our hidden motivations, then we're free to move beyond our own predictable foibles, idiosyncrasies, outcomes, and get closer to the divine.

Palmer summarises the numbers as follows:

ONE - the perfectionists: were forced to be a good little children. As adults are critical of self and others. Convinced there is one correct way. Use "should" and "must" a lot. In an evolved state can be moral heroes, disciplined teachers.

TWO - the givers: earned love by being needed. As adults, seek to be loved and appreciated by becoming indispensable to others. Manipulative, seductive. Evolved, they are caring, supportive types.

THREE - the performers: were prized for achievements and performance. As adults are competitive, obsessed with show. Confuse self with job. Type-A personalities. Evolved, they are good captains of winning teams.

FOUR - the tragic romantic artists: suffered loss or emotional neglect in childhood. Attracted to the unavailable. Melancholic, artistic, sensitive. Need to be

special. Evolved, they are committed to beauty and the passionate life - birth, sex, intensity and death.

FIVE - the observers: felt intruded upon when young. As adults maintain emotional distance. Protect privacy and don't get involved. Feel drained by commitment. Detached but perceptive. Evolved are great intellectuals, monks.

SIX - the devil's advocates: grew up afraid of those with power over them. Fearful, dutiful, plagued by doubt. Procrastinators. Identify with underdog cause, self-sacrificing. Evolved can be great team players, loyal soldiers.

SEVEN - the epicures: avoided emotional pain as children. As adults remain Peter Pan. Dance-away lovers, superficial, optimistic, gourmet approach to life. Want to keep options open and stay emotionally high. Evolved, they are renaissance types.

EIGHT - the bosses: as children they saw the weak get crushed, the strong thrive. Love a fight. Have to be in control. Make contact through sex and confrontation. Excessive way of life. Too late at night, too loud. Evolved are excellent leaders and loyal friends.

NINE - the mediators: were overlooked when young. Ambivalent. See all points of view. Tendency to narcotisation through food, television and drink. Know other people's needs better than their own. Easy-going. Evolved make good peacemakers, counsellors.

The theory is that we're one number, but strongly influenced by the numbers on either side. For instance, one actor friend is a very Three (performer) type of Four (artist).

And we are healed by moving towards the numbers opposite us on a dynamic nine-point star. The enneagram system is about growth, so the artistic Four must acquire traits of the perfectionist One to be redeemed. The qualities of an evolved One will give discipline to Four's emotional creativity. Meanwhile, Two (the giver) moves towards the heart-opened Four to learn unconditional love.

Having now read four enneagram books, I can see bosses married to mediators, and romantics attracted to detached observers for balance. Many fights make sense, including why my perfectionist One friend I stayed with kept vacuuming around me.

And though I've always been against classifying people, I believe we need all the help we can get in understanding the chaotic world around us. Amazing that it's coming from a hot "new" psychological system developed possibly 3000 years ago by the rivers of Babylon.

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