**Falling into the Looking Glass**

**The Perils and Pitfalls of Teaching the Enneagram to Younger People**

The majority of students and clients in my Enneagram workshops, presentations, study groups and counseling sessions are between thirty-five and fifty years of age—right in the middle of the chronological Bell Curve. However, more and more precocious young people under the age of thirty, often children of spiritually aware parents, are attending Enneagram events and I have begun to notice potential problems, even dangers, arising for these students. Before I explicate what I see as the three major issues I want to begin with a recent student from my own teaching files. For purposes of confidentiality the name and many of the details have been changed.

Jennifer, a bright, attractive and vivacious 25 yr. old is from a small town in Oregon. She graduated from high school and then tried to fit in at a mainstream college in California. Having been raised by highly intelligent, well educated, and spiritually aspiring parents of the 1960s generation she was unsatisfied with mainstream academia’s offerings, and ended up at a well-known, alternative, and spiritually-oriented institution in Boulder, CO. There she encountered many spiritual traditions and practices, including Buddhism and the Enneagram. Jennifer graduated and, like many young people these days returned home not knowing what to do next. Because I was teaching the Enneagram in the local area she became acquainted more deeply with the system and easily typed herself. She studied several Enneagram books, sat on type panels at a couple of workshops, and joined a monthly study group. Yet as the months and years passed she had increasing difficulty finding a stable work situation, a place to live away from her parent’s home, and an appropriate relationship.

More importantly, knowledge of the Enneagram seemed only to contribute to heightened self-absorption and an inflated subjectivity, mood swings and emotional outbursts, and the tendency to psychologize and over-analyze almost every situation that personally affected her. Eventually, I strongly suggested to Jennifer that she refrain from further Enneagram study for at least several months, perhaps for several years. I recommended that instead she simply get out into the world of love and work and get some actual life experiences under her belt before she continued on her type-specific journey of self-observation and self-remembering. This was the first time in my nearly twenty years of public teaching that I had felt compelled to do this with a student or client, but I have a feeling it will not be the last. So, what’s up here? In the words of Anderson Cooper, “Let’s dig a little deeper!”

Recently, I serendipitously came across a passage in a book byarchetypal psychologist James Hillman called *The Force of Character and the Lasting Life,* onethat speaks about this potential peril of the path:

Memoirs, autobiography, and the deep investigations of long term psychoanalysis probably shouldn’t be touched before sixty. Yet kids in high school are asked to write about their memorable experiences and extract a lesson learned. Their therapies review their childhoods, which ended scarcely five years prior; their bull sessions and chat rooms focus on family difficulties and influences. Premature life review produces inflated subjectivity, not character, the empowerment of one more big fat “me” graduating from high school into a world that, already crowded with expanded egos, rather needs the modesty and reticence of the apprentice embarking on an adventure (91).

Bearing this in mind, it would seem that Enneagram teachers need to employ skillful means in our instruction to the under-thirty crowd. We need to know when self-observation coupled with knowledge of type is truly useful to our student or client and when it is developmentally inappropriate and potentially detrimental to the evolving soul. In my experience, younger people can use the Enneagram in three non-skillful ways.

**Peril #1**: The first peril has to do with using study and practice of the Enneagram in order to consciously or unconsciously avoid engaging in normal, age appropriate, tasks and goals. To give a simple example, a college student might need to study for her final exams or the GRE, but instead is so taken with the Enneagram system and its depth, power, and beauty that instead she reads Enneagram books, and is busy processing herself and others. She writes about her insights in her journal, talks incessantly about the wonders of the system with her friends over meals, in the car, at the gym, and on her walks. She tries to type her best friend, her parents, and even some of her teachers. Perhaps the young woman signs up for an Enneagram workshop on her Spring Break rather than spending time building her relationship with her new, and first real boyfriend. More significantly, she begins to view people and situations only through the lens of the nine types and their issues, thereby diminishing rather than augmenting her ability to appreciate and navigate through the complexities and ambiguities of life. No doubt the reader can come up with numerous examples of this kind of behavior.

To personalize this discussion, I myself did something similar almost forty years ago with Transcendental Meditation, which I encountered at age seventeen in my final year of high school. I then spent my college years at the University of California meditating, studying spiritual texts, and experiencing numerous altered, even ecstatic states of consciousness. Unfortunately, being young, overly enthusiastic, and rather unbalanced I also avoided many daily activities that would have helped me to stay connected to and in sync with my own cohort, emotionally, socially and vocationally.

**Peril #2:** A second and related possibility has to do with the psychological phenomenonon now known as “spiritual bypassing.” In what I consider to be an important online article for Enneagram teachers and students, “Embodying Your Realization: Psychological work in the Service of Spiritual Development,” transpersonal psychologist John Welwood writes that:

Spiritual practice involves freeing consciousness from its entanglement in form, matter, emotions, personality, and social conditioning. In a society like ours, where the whole earthly foundation is weak to begin with, it is tempting to use spirituality as a way of trying to rise above this shaky ground. *In this way,* spirituality becomes just another way of rejecting one's experience. When people use spiritual practice to try to compensate for low self-esteem, social alienation, or emotional problems, they corrupt the true nature of spiritual practice. Instead of loosening the manipulative ego that tries to control its experience, they are further strengthening it. Spiritual bypassing is a strong temptation in times like ours when achieving what were once ordinary developmental landmarks—earning a livelihood through dignified, meaningful work, raising a family, sustaining a long-term intimate relationship, belonging to a larger social community — has become increasingly difficult and elusive. Yet when people use spirituality to cover up their difficulties with functioning in the modern world, their spiritual practice remains in a separate compartment, unintegrated with the rest of their life (available at [johnwelwood.com](http://www.johnwelwood.com)).

All that is required for our purposes is to substitute “the Enneagram” for “spiritual practice” and “spirituality.” Then we can see the potential perils and pitfalls for younger people in the psychological arena. Since the Enneagram is primarily, at least in my estimation, a map and guide for spiritual work and development, we can see how a younger student with little life experience and wisdom, perhaps weak ego strength, and a strong and generally unconscious identification with his type structure, could misuse knowledge of type and, more fundamentally, misunderstand the meaning and purpose of the system as a whole. This is especially likely to happen if he is studying the Enneagram primarily through books and discussions with peers. The person may be trying to grow spiritually, but actually is avoiding psychological issues. Ironically, this usually leads to spinning around and around at the psychological level, polishing, and probably elaborating and embellishing, the ego with its limited identity, felt sense of existential separateness, narcissism and defensive behaviors. All of this is at the expense of genuine spiritual growth, with its potential for both self-transcendence and self-actualization.

Another and related occurrence is that the student will use a superficial knowledge of type to justify type-related attitudes and behaviors. This usually involves an unconscious collusion between a person’s defense mechanism and his or her Passion and Fixation. So for example, a Two’s repression of personal needs conjoins with his Pride and the tendency to Flatter. This of course serves to keep the psychological self-identification firmly locked into place. This dynamic can occur of course at any age, and I am neither saying nor implying that every younger student is necessarily more susceptible than his or her elders to this form of entrapment and endarkenment. However, in my experience it is more common for people under thirty to have trouble staying out of these self-limiting, ultimately neurotic and generally painful scenarios.

**Peril #3:** The final concern is harder to discuss, but may at the end of the day be the most important one to bring to light and keep in mind when working with younger people, especially since outside of Jungian circles so little has been written on this topic. The Enneagram has sometimes been called God’s Wisdom Mirror, and for good reason. It has the potential to reflect back to those who dare look deeply into her depths not only the light, pleasurable and “spiritual” sides of life, but also the dark, painful and “evil” parts of the individual and society. In Jungian terms, with continued study we are eventually invited to explore the repressed contents of both our psyche and the Cosmos--in other words our personal shadow and, on rare occasions, the collective unconscious. The latter is an especially challenging and potentially risky venture, one that takes at any age enormous strength, courage, discernment and skillful means, and one that not everyone is cut out for, especially earlier in life. By most accounts even the great C. G. Jung was lucky to have emerged from his “confrontations with the unconscious” and its archetypal figures and energies with his health and sanity intact—and he began his personal crisis in his late thirties. In Depth Psychology “shadow work” is very tricky and risky because it operates at the intersection of psychology and spirituality and, once conscious, always contains implicit moral and ethical demands. To complicate matters, from the perspective of the young and inexperienced persona it can also be an entry point into awareness of the collective unconscious, with its numinous light and dark archetypes. For those not that familiar with the concept, I offer the following lines from the Wikipedia entry for **Shadow (Psychology):**

The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself, and represents ‘a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well.’ If and when an individual makes an attempt to see his shadow, he becomes aware of (and often ashamed of) those qualities and impulses he denies in himself but can plainly see in others — such things as egotism, mental laziness, and sloppiness; unreal [fantasies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fantasies), schemes, and plots; carelessness and cowardice; inordinate love of money and possessions — [and the need for a] painful and lengthy work of self-education.

The shadow may appear in [dreams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dream) and [visions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vision_(religion)) in various forms… The shadow's appearance and role depend greatly on the living experience of the individual, because much of the shadow develops in the individual's mind rather than simply being inherited in the [collective unconscious](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_unconscious). *Nevertheless some Jungians maintain that the shadow... contains, besides the personal shadow, the shadow of society ... fed by the neglected and repressed collective values…*

Jung also made the suggestion of there being more than one layer making up the shadow. The top layers contain the meaningful flow and manifestations of direct personal experiences. These are made unconscious in the individual by such things as the change of attention from one thing to another, simple forgetfulness, or a repression. Underneath these idiosyncratic layers, however, are the archetypes which form the psychic contents of all human experiences. Jung described this deeper layer as ‘a psychic activity which goes on independently of the conscious mind and is not dependent even on the upper layers of the unconscious—untouched, and perhaps untouchable—by personal experience.’ *This bottom layer of the shadow is also what Jung referred to as the*[*collective unconscious*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_unconscious)*.*

*The encounter with the shadow plays a central part in the process of*[*individuation*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Individuation). Jung considered that ‘the course of individuation...exhibits a certain formal regularity. Its signposts and milestones are various archetypal symbols marking its stages; and of these “the first stage leads to the experience of the SHADOW.’ 'If ‘the breakdown of the [persona](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persona) constitutes the typical Jungian moment both in therapy and in development’ it is this which opens the road to the shadow within, coming about when ‘Beneath the surface a person is suffering from a deadly boredom that makes everything seem meaningless and empty ... as if the initial encounter with the [Self](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self) casts a dark shadow ahead of time.’ *The dissolution of the persona and the launch of the individuation process also brings with it the danger of falling victim to the shadow ... the black shadow which everybody carries with him, the inferior and therefore hidden aspect of the personality… of a merger with the shadow.*

According to Jung, the shadow sometimes overwhelms a person's actions; for example, when the conscious mind is shocked, confused, or paralyzed by indecision… Individuation inevitably raises that very possibility. As the process continues, and ‘the [libido](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libido) leaves the bright upper world ... sinks back into its own depths...below, in the shadows of the unconscious,’ so too what comes to the forefront is ‘what was hidden under the mask of conventional adaptation: the shadow,’ with the result that ‘[ego](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Id,_ego_and_super-ego) and shadow are no longer divided but are brought together in an — admittedly precarious — unity.’

(edited, with references removed, italics mine).

An important point to note is that although each journey of individuation is lived out uniquely according to the individual’s biography, constitution, current needs and the *zeitgest*, it also has recognizable stages, and that “the encounter with the shadow plays a central part in the process of [individuation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Individuation).” Traditionally, this encounter occurred most frequently sometime between the ages of thirty-five and fifty. But as mentioned at the beginning of this article, this may now be changing, at least in particular sectors of our population, which can lead to recognizable problems. For as the Hobbits in Middle-Earth learned to their chagrin and near demise, dark places and forces truly exist out there in the wider world, and the guidance and protection of elders (in their case the elves, good wizards, and wise men and women) is often necessary to survive the external and internal upheavals of circumstances and consciousness.

It may seem to some irrational, even a bit paranoid, to be so concerned about the collective unconscious when working with the Enneagram, but I have witnessed even older students at a certain stage of their spiritual journeys begin to naturally and spontaneously see into and experience the negative, painful, or dark sides of not only their own psyche, but also of society and the farther reaches of the Universe. This state can easily lead to psychological states such as depression, cynicism, ennui, and paranoia.

To put this in theological terms, it is possible, with deep and sustained practice, to have powerful experiences of what Christians call the “fallen state of the world,” and Kabbalists “the shattering and brokenness of the Cosmos.” The ethical response to this in the Kabbalistic tradition has been to engage in *tikkun olam*, the conscious and heartfelt reparation of self and the world. In the Buddhist world it is to take the Bodhisattva Vow and work to benefit all sentient beings. In the Christian world some say it is to become Christ-like in qualities and behaviors. These tasks, however, were not generally enjoined upon people under the age of thirty-five, and certainly not under twenty-five. Students were not introduced to higher spiritual study, such as Kabbalah with its Tree of Life or Mystical Christianity or Theosophical understandings until much later in their path of development. Rather, they were expected to study ethics and whatever life skills they needed to acquire in order to earn a living and start a family. To do otherwise could conceivably lead to some combination of all three potential perils and pitfalls. If nothing else, a premature encounter with the dark half of existence could rob a younger person of the naivete necessary to enter the wider world with openness, curiosity and courage.

By way of conclusion, let me say that Jennifer, the young woman mentioned above, is now employed part-time, in a stable relationship, and living away from home in a nearby city. These days she is holding her process gently and with more self-compassion. She is being more patient and skipping fewer necessary steps on her journey of individuation. After taking a break from workshops and study groups, from intense self-observation and self-analysis, Jennifer is now back on track building a life for herself in her late twenties. I have faith that her soul will know when she is ready to move forward in slower, safer and less dramatic ways.