

Out of the Box Coaching Newsletter

Go With the Current by Clarence Thomson

Is our Enneagram style genetic? Is it rooted in biology? Marian Sandmaier (<http://www.alternet.org/story/147676/>), who seems to be a clear style Five, tells this story. Her daughter, age 22, comes home with a friend. Marian hears them and runs upstairs. She pauses, panting, and is aware she cannot help but fear the social interaction with the young women.



What impresses her is her inability to feel any other way and an equal helplessness in doing anything about the way she feels. It's as though her fear is simply not negotiable. It is a given. She describes her fear as a temperament, and decides it's permanent and she is helpless to do anything about it. She refers to some Harvard research that seems to back her up:

The new science of behavioral molecular genetics, which seeks to identify genes associated with particular human traits, has lately exploded with reports suggesting that our very cells may be imbued with tendencies toward extroversion or shyness or novelty-seeking or distractibility. At the same time that gene specialists are slicing and dicing DNA in search of predispositions, a Harvard psychology project has been quietly amassing longitudinal data on behavioral proclivities, tracking infants into young adulthood to tease out which aspects of temperament are mutable and which elements -- like it or not -- are ours to keep.

The "ours to keep" might explain why all Enneagram teachers (as far as I know) maintain that we keep our Enneagram style all our life. We develop and decay within our style, but we exercise our style permanently.

Are these Harvard-discovered temperaments our Enneagram style, though? Here's what they say; I'll let you decide if you want to equate them with Enneagram styles:

Not until the 1970s did the therapy field begin to take seriously the concept of innate predispositions. The wake-up call was sounded by New York psychiatrists Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas, whose extensive studies of young children yielded nine distinct dimensions of childhood temperament -- the tendency to approach or withdraw, adaptability to change and novelty, intensity of emotional expression, prevailing mood, distractibility level, frustration tolerance, sensory sensitivity, regularity of biological functions, and physical activity level. Analyzing these dimensions, Chess and Thomas grouped their young study subjects into one of three larger categories now familiar to most therapists: "easy," "difficult," and "slow to warm up." The researchers took pains to emphasize that each category encompassed perfectly normal variations in disposition, not continua of disorder. By unhooking biological proclivities from any notions of pathology or inferiority, Chess and Thomas took the first, critical steps toward legitimatizing the concept of temperament.

So you have nine personalities and three basic triads. All the styles "encompass perfectly normal variation, not continua of disorder." If you are an Enneagram student, this makes perfectly good sense.

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Does it “prove” the Enneagram? Wrong question. Proof is usually an argument about what constitutes evidence. (Ever try to prove your love for someone or prove or disprove the existence of God? Lots of luck on that.) It does seem to establish something powerful in our makeup that we must deal with.

The powerful influence of our Enneagram style (or the Harvard “distinct dimensions”) is what makes Enneagram coaching so effective, and even more effective because the school system, our usual education does not respect our innate dispositions. In school, the emphasis of the system (not some good teachers) was to minimize temperament and talent. If you were bad at math, you did more math. It’s called “remedial.” If you feared chemistry, you spent most of your time swimming upstream against a forthcoming chemistry test, while relying on chemistry in your cup to get you through. Meanwhile, you gave short shrift to your literature assignment because you knew you were going to get an A on your last assignment. The implicit strategy of the system was that you did the most of what you were weakest at, the least of what you were best at. The goal was standardization, because federal funding depends on achievement of standard norms.

Coaching, as Mary and I do it, is precisely the opposite. We ascertain your Enneagram temperament and then help you solve problems or develop personally by nurturing your temperament. We use your temperament to help you do what you do well even better. We treat your Enneagram style as a real strength or something that poses serious problems for you. In either case, you ignore that style at your peril. Let me give you last week’s example.

John is a supervisor who has a staff he considers incompetent in some important ways. John is a Nine, a quintessential nice guy. He dreads confrontation with his staff, finds it sooo hard to demand better work, and is afraid that perhaps they can’t do better work. His presenting problem was writing instructions for how to do the work. He thought his problem was procrastination. But everybody procrastinates according to Enneagram style. Some questions revealed that his real problem was fearing they would do what he said woodenly, following any instructions literally instead of being creative (they were in an environment that needed some creativity).

So we arrived at a solution a nice Nine could implement. He was to give them a week off from their duties and he provided them with study materials (that he said were excellent and would help them). Now his desire for their increased competence fits with his desire to be in harmony with everyone. One of the strongest abilities of a Nine is to bring an entire group along with his desires. Now he can strengthen and support his group without having to deal with conflict.



Use the strengths of the Enneagram style instead of fighting against that powerful energy. Go with the current.

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