

The Enneagram of life: the 9 stages of personal development

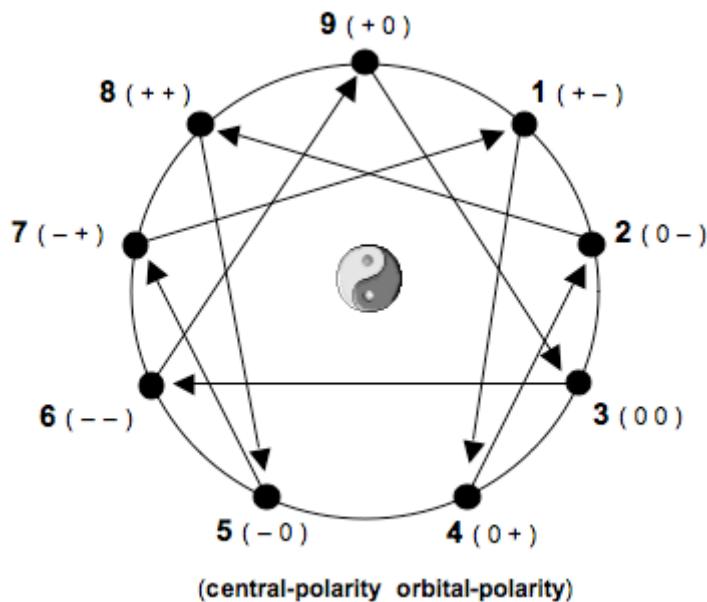
Richard K. Moore

rkm@quaylargo.com

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I visited Crete some years back, and one of the afternoons was spent at a cultural center, where they showed the kinds of dwellings that were traditional in Crete, plus various displays and demonstrations explaining traditional life and culture. One item that caught my attention was a chart, showing nine stages of life, from infancy up to old age. The chart was not in the form of an Enneagram, and the folks running the center didn't know anything about the Enneagram, but it seemed to me the chart was probably symbolizing a perspective that was originally developed based on an understanding of the Enneagram. This article is an attempt to rediscover that missing Enneagram.

The process Enneagram



The Enneagram diagram can be used in two different ways. On the one hand, it can represent nine distinct, stable configurations, such as the nine personality types. It can also be used to represent the nine stages of a process, as explored, for example, in J.G Bennett's *Enneagram Studies*. Our life Enneagram is a process model, and knowledge of the polarity pairs makes it much easier to figure out how to characterize the nine stages, and to accurately map the process onto the Enneagram model.

The *central* energy field in this case changes as life develops. In the first few stages, the family or the mother is the central energy field, while later other fields take over. The *orbital* energy field is always the same – the person who is growing and developing. In process Enneagrams, point 9 always represents both the starting point and the endpoint of the process.

The nine stages of personal development

Stage 1 – Embryo

Point 9 (**+ 0**) represents the moment of conception, and Point 1 (**+ -**) represents the moment of birth. Stage 1 is what happens in between – *gestation*. The *active* central energy field is the mother and her biological processes. The energy field of the egg-cum-embryo-cum-infant is *neutral* at the point of conception, and by the time birth occurs is *responsive* to the energy of the mother. No surprises here. By the way, with apologies, I'll be using male gender for our developing person, to simplify the language.

Stage 2 – Infant

Stage 2 proceeds from birth (**+ -**) until Point 2 (**0 -**), where we see the mother's energy changing to *neutral*. We can call this interval *infancy*, and it represents the time when the mother is *actively* seeking to establish a routine for the baby. That is to say, her attention is actively engaged in guiding the *development process* of the infant – seeking to establish a stable pattern of sleep and feeding. Once a routine is established, then the routine itself supports the ongoing development of the child. The establishment of a routine frees the mother's active attention to deal with other things.

Stage 3 – Toddler

As we go from Point 2 (**0 -**) to Point 3 (**0 0**) we see the child's energy going from *responsive* to *neutral*. This represents the toddler stage, when the child is engaged in learning how to crawl, to stand up, to walk, to use language, to get what he wants from Mommy, etc. The child is *developing* by *responding consciously* to things around him and *adjusting his responses* based on the consequences of his actions.

When Point 3 is reached, neither the mother nor the child are any longer giving primary attention to the development process of the child. The mother follows her evolving routine with the child, and the child has by then stabilized on a way to behave, and in particular a way of behaving with respect to the mother and family dynamics generally. When Point 3 is reached, the basic personality of the child, in the sense of the Personality Enneagram, has been established.

Stage 4 – Child

Stage 4 is that long childhood era that parallels being in primary school. It's basically an extended Point 3, where (**0 0**) prevails as regards attention to personal development. Development is happening, of course, but it's routine – school itself, plus accumulating experiences. As we get to point 4 (**0 +**), we see the child's attention turning toward the next stage of development. The central force involved, however, is no longer the family environment.

Stage 4 – Teenager

Point 4 is the onset of puberty – the beginning of the teen years. The central force field is the outside world, adjustment to which now becomes important to the child. He's becoming aware that he will need to find a way to leave the family nest and survive. At first, his focus is typically on peer relationships, being accepted by his peers, finding a social niche, a *crowd*, a space of emotional security in the non-nest world.

His attention is also on his future, skills, training, and choice of career – a way to survive economically in the non-nest world. This is why teenage suicides increase in the face of economic uncertainty. When cognitive perception sees little hope for the future, then what would have been a mild case of depression is magnified many fold.

As we get to Point 5 (**- 0**), we see the teenager's attention relaxing as regards his future development, and we see the outside world responding to his developmental needs. This represents the teenager deciding on what he'll be doing in the world, and beginning to avail himself of the available opportunities, either in higher education, a first job, or pursuing some business or creative venture.

Stage 5 – Apprentice

The first few years out in the real world, whether it be as an undergraduate, new employee, or whatever, can be seen as *apprentice years*. He is learning the ropes, of one kind or another, as regards both *doing the job*, and *dealing with the politics*. Apprenticeship itself is the routine, and that's why the apprentice's attention is neutral as regards his development, even though development is exactly what's happening during this stage.

As we reach Point 6 (**--**), we see the apprentice *responding* to the forces of the real world. What this means is that our apprentice has reached that stage of understanding and competence where he can begin to consciously shift his role in life. He might be going into management, becoming a professor, launching a startup, becoming a partner in his firm, pursuing creative research, starting to sell paintings, or in some way moving into a position of greater freedom and effectiveness, stepping onto the beginning of his career's plateau.

Stage 6 – Contributor

Stage 6 represents the most productive years of our person's career, and when he would be likely to be married and raising a family. The polarity pair (**--**) indicates cooperative synergy between his own energy and the energy of his environment. In the *Life Cycle of Creative Endeavors*, an earlier EM article, Stage 6 is where the *work gets done* in an endeavor. In our current model, Stage 6 is where the person's *work gets done*, as regards career and family.

As we reach Point 7 (**- +**), we see his energy turning active, just as we did at Point 4. At Point 4, he was realizing he would need to leave the home nest; at Point 7 he is realizing that life itself will come to an end.

Stage 7 – Seeker

Stage 7 is when he begins facing such questions as, *What is my life really about?* He's been spending his life doing what he seemingly needed to do, what was expected of him by society, and now he's wondering, *Is that all there is? Am I ready to meet my maker? Is there anything I really want to do while I'm still here?*

The central energy field during Stage 7 (**- +**) is inside the person himself; it's his inner voice, his *real self* yearning for expression. This energy is *responsive*: when the person begins to really seek, the inner voice will help, with intuition, with dreams, with energy to follow new paths and new learning.

For some, the seeking may be a spiritual path; for others it could be a second, more rewarding career, belated pursuit of a creative passion, or volunteer work for a cause that is close to the heart. For some it is being a grandparent, giving the unconditional love that was so elusive in the parenthood years.

As we reach Point 8 (**+ +**), we see the emergence of a new, *active*, central energy field. As at the beginning, with Point 9, this energy field is *biological processes*.

Stage 8 – Elder

Stage 8 is when old age begins to knock at the door, and when he must begin to slow down, whether he wants to or not. He fights back (**+**) however, not going quietly into that dark night. In a sane society, elders are valued for the wisdom they've accumulated, in their *contributing* years and in their *seeking* years.

Point 9 (**+ 0**) is the moment of death, when biological forces take over, and he gives up the ghost.

