

How a Unity Framework Supports Enneagram — informed Transformation

Author, teacher, and conscious evolutionary, Reverend Nhen Vuong, JD, MDiv., Founder of Evolving Enneagram, presents an overview of her Enneagram-informed Unity framework for transformation

Nhen's new book, [The Enneagram of the Soul: A 40-Day Spiritual Companion for the 9 Types](#) (Newburyport, MA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2025) is available now through all major book retailers.

For more about Unity, visit www.unity.org

For more about Nhen's contemplative, Unity-based approach to Enneagram transformation, visit evolvingenneagram.com

“Why meditate or otherwise turn within if you are innately sinful?”, came the question of an acquaintance of mine, a Christian pastor (we'll call him 'Mark'). Had Mark and I not come into contact through our shared volunteer service for homeless families in Missouri, I may never have received this 'insider' perspective.

As an ordained Unity minister, I'm far from an 'insider' when it comes to more fundamental branches of Christianity. In fact, we're considered heretics to much of the traditional Christian world, because we don't worship Jesus as the one Lord and savior. Rather, we believe that everyone is innately divine. We refer to this 'spark of divinity' as the indwelling 'Christ' (from the Greek word 'Christos', meaning 'anointed one'). To us, it is not just 'Christians' who have this inner light, but all people.

Pastor Mark's words prompted a revelatory moment that clarified my decades-long confusion as to why much of the Christian world has been so averse to meditation. Of course if we see ourselves as innately sinful, bad, or defective, we need to avoid our interiority, and turn instead to external authority for guidance and guardrails to keep in check our naturally corrupt tendencies.

But what if our fundamental premise was different? Rather than adopting the doctrine of original sin, Unity teaches from the foundational premise of original blessing — the idea that we are, by nature, one with 'God' and thus we are fundamentally good, whole, and divine. One of our most basic Unity principles is that the path to 'God' — which we might refer to by a multitude of names, such as Divine Mind, Source, Spirit, Truth, Ultimate Reality, or simply Love — is within.

Unity spirituality is 'Christ-based' in that we follow the teachings of Jesus. However, we see Jesus as the 'Great Example', rather than as the 'Great Exception'. To us, Jesus is a Master Teacher and a Way

Shower who taught a path of awakening to Love and Oneness as the fabric and truth of existence.

Whilst we see Jesus as someone who has, quite remarkably, awakened to the full, embodied (God made flesh) realization of his divinity (his 'Christ' potential), we do not believe this is exclusive to him. Rather, he is among countless others — such as Buddha, Paramahansa Yogananda, Quan Yin, and Rumi — to name but a few (presumably) enlightened beings throughout history. And, most significantly, we believe that just as these others have awakened and embodied this awakened state, so can we.

This Unity view is the operating premise behind all the Enneagram work I do, professionally and personally, with individuals and communities from diverse faith backgrounds around the world. As I will offer in this article, approaching our transformational work with the Enneagram from a Unity perspective supports conscious awakening.

I've been studying the Enneagram since 2002 and teaching, as well as spiritually companioning, others with it since 2007. I have been blessed to witness the fruits not of merely understanding but of applying this practical, faith-based framework in my own life and in the lives of those I spiritually companion.

In this article, I offer a brief sketch of the Enneagram-informed Unity framework I use for transforming lives from the inside out. This framework is based on turning within to awaken to our fundamental wholeness, goodness, oneness, and unity, and then turning without to embody that realization in our everyday lives. As one of Unity's fundamental principles states, it is not enough to know the truth. We must live the truth that we know.

Unity's metaphorical/symbolic approach and the Enneagram

Unity, which was co-founded by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore in 1889, teaches a 'metaphysical' (by which we mean allegorical) rather than a literal understanding of the Bible. More specifically, while we reference the Bible as our primary textbook, unlike fundamental Christians, we see the Bible not as the infallible and literal 'Word' of God, but as a spiritually inspired text composed by humans.

Whether the stories in the Bible are factually or historically accurate is not the point, for us; what is important is whether the parables, poetry, and proverbs that the Bible offers can serve to point us toward spiritual truth. As Wisdom teacher and author Gary Renard writes, "Everything except God is metaphor".

Everything in the manifest world is, as the Zen Buddhists say, but a 'finger pointing at the moon'. The Bible — especially seen allegorically — is but a finger. Our fully realized self that knows its oneness with the 'allness' is the proverbial full moon.

Picture the Enneagram circle. From a Unity perspective, this circle can be seen as symbolizing wholeness or oneness. When we are not identified with our spiritual core, we suffer the pain of separation. For the Enneagram student, this perspective helps us to see our innate connection with all of existence and, pointedly, of the types/points on the Enneagram map. This supports a more open, compassionate and holistic approach to self-discovery.

The triangle inscribed within the circle of the Enneagram helps to paint a fuller picture. Interpreting the writings of Enneagram authors A.H. Almaas

and Sandra Maitri through my Unity lens, I see the movement along the lines from Point Nine to Six to Three as representing what more traditional Christians might call the fall from grace (or what the Buddhists might, more aptly from a Unity perspective, refer to as the fall into ignorance).

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"Living from personality does not make us 'bad', but it does cause us to suffer more. To the extent that we over-identify with our personalities, we suffer from the distress of our separation from the Divine".
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Point Nine, which sits at the top of the Enneagram, can be seen as representing each of our 'falling asleep' to our undifferentiated oneness, which then serves as the foundational basis of ego development or individual selfhood.

Point Six on the Enneagram can then be seen as representing the existential anxiety that arises from this perceived separation, which leaves us feeling minuscule, exposed, and vulnerable.

Finally, Point Three on the Enneagram can be seen as representing one of nine 'I'll figure it out myself' responses to that existential anxiety. More specifically, to cope with our perceived loss, we develop one of nine basic

strategies based on the particular facet of oneness (aka the Holy Idea of the Type) to which we are most sensitive.

For example, the Type One futilely seeks to make the outer world perfect while neglecting to 'turn within' to realize the Holy Idea of Perfection that is one facet of universal truth (at least from a Unity perspective). Eventually, we forget that this strategy solidifies into an identity — namely our Enneagram type. Type, then, is not the totality of who (or as we might say in Unity *what*) we are in Truth; rather, it is simply the persona we fashioned to best survive or cope with this 'fall' in consciousness.

Unity's inclusivity and the Enneagram

Along with this metaphorical emphasis, Unity is not about escaping or avoiding our human condition via our spiritual awakening. Rather, we believe in an incarnational spirituality — one that offers us a pathway for spiritually embodied or 'soul'-centered living.

Whereas spirit can be seen as undifferentiated oneness, 'soul' can be seen as our unique expression of that oneness. As Sandra Maitri teaches, "Our type, awakened or asleep, remains the same". We don't aim to eliminate personality or otherwise discard our type structure. Rather, we transcend our personality's limitations whilst including the type within the circle of wholeness. When we live from the constructed identity that believes it is separate from God (namely our type), Unity refers to this as living from 'personality'. When we live from our spiritual center (represented by the whole Enneagram circle), Unity calls this living from our 'individuality'.

Living from personality does not make us 'bad', but it does cause us to suffer more. To the extent that we over-identify with our personalities, we suffer from the distress of our separation from the Divine. We also suffer from the type-driven quest to seek outwardly for whatever we think we need to be at peace, to feel worthy, to experience joy or satisfaction, whilst never feeling content with what we find. When we realize our mistake, rather than beat ourselves up, we can compassionately offer ourselves the deep sense of relief and rest that can come from releasing all that futile worldly seeking!

As I write in ['The Enneagram of the Soul: A 40-Day Spiritual Companion for the 9 Types'](#), many of us do not start this inner quest for wholeness until we have emotionally and often physically exhausted ourselves pursuing all other avenues — until we finally come to learn, for example, that for each of our types, no amount of: perfecting or correcting (Type One); supporting or seducing (Type Two);

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accomplishing or image-crafting (Type Three); dramatizing or fantasizing (Type Four); researching or compartmentalizing (Type Five); worrying or preparing (Type Six); ideating or pleasure-seeking (Type Seven); challenging or protecting (Type Eight); or accommodating or self-numbing (Type Nine)...

...can ever get us the experience of: divine perfection (Type One); unconditional love (Type Two); intrinsic worth (Type Three); authentic connection (Type Four); compassionate wisdom (Type Five); steadfast faith (Type Six); deep satisfaction (Type Seven); playful innocence (Type Eight); or blissful union (Type Nine).

From a Unity perspective, waking up is about living more fully — and I would add, soulfully — in this world. We can live either from the defended reactivity of our point of suffering (our personality) or from the fount of creativity that flows effortlessly from our inmost self (our soul or individuality).

This inclusivity helps the Enneagram student to get out of the mindset that personality is something negative to cast aside. Instead, it fosters more compassionate openness not only to all the common traits of our type but also the shadow aspects of our types, authentic aspects of self that our type represses or censors. Grounding in the Unity perspective of our innate goodness gives us a way of being with these difficult aspects of our wholeness and start to fully integrate the parts of our being that were previously outcast or demonized.

Understanding Unity's perspective intellectually does help, but something more is needed to awaken fully to this sense of good without an opposite. One path that Unity offers to help us to realize our divine nature is the practice of silence, which helps us to 'die' to our false, egoic identities.

The practice of dying daily ('I die daily', I Corinthians 15:31)

While the practice of silence is recommended by Unity, there are many ways to practice silence. The particu-

lar method I offer here, called Centering Prayer, comes from the contemplative Christian teachings promulgated by Contemplative Outreach.

Centering Prayer seems to be a particularly effective practice for offsetting the pull of the personality and its agenda. Centering Prayer is my primary spiritual practice, and the one I teach and recommend the most to my private clients and in my Evolving Enneagram community.

At Evolving Enneagram, we currently host five weekly Contemplative Practices & the Enneagram groups dedicated to the practice of Centering Prayer, which we engage in silence together for 20 minutes each gathering.

The intention behind this practice is not to acquire anything (not even peace or love) during our sit. Rather, it is a daily (ideally, twice daily) practice of letting go of our personality's thoughts and agendas — not to demonize them, but make them less central. Thus, this practice invites space for a consciousness bigger than our own (Divine Love) to transform us so that we become more centered in Spirit, in love, in wholeness.

Centering Prayer is a prayer of consent. In this practice, we begin by selecting a word that represents our 'sacred' word, meaning the word that symbolizes our consent to the presence and activity of spirit in our consciousness. We adopt a sitting posture that is alert but also relaxed.

As we sit in silence, whenever we find that our mind has begun to focus attention on a 'thought', we gently surrender the thought, letting it go. In this practice, 'thoughts' are broadly construed to include any focus of attention, including focusing on a feeling or bodily sensation. Whilst the recommended minimum sit time is 20 minutes, it can be helpful for those new to the silence to start with 5 or 10 minutes and work their way up to 20+ minutes. It is better to make time to sit for a few minutes than to not sit at all.

This gesture of self-emptying our thoughts is an act of faith. This is where we find that our consciousness might get rather loud, busy, or urgent in our heads, telling us to get up and

do something! Or we might focus on what's wrong, tomorrow's agenda, our inner fantasies or fears, or judgments of our own meditation. When the thought doesn't release easily, we bring in our sacred word and use it to center ourselves again. The sacred word is not to be repeated like a mantra but used only to help us to return to the silence.

Those of us versed in the Enneagram will often notice the particular mental and emotional habits of our type arise here. The point is not to follow, analyze, or otherwise give into them or our analysis of them. We practice releasing these 'thoughts' as often as we need to during our sit. Even if we seem to have a spiritual realization, during this sacred time, we are invited to release even that, and return to the silence. We release what our personality is driving us to do or focus on and trust the space of emptiness and mystery.

It is vital to note here that turning our attentions to silence does not mean the obliteration of human feelings such as anger, pride, vanity, and so forth. Somehow, by not rejecting or trying to eliminate our humanity, these aspects of our being become transmuted.

Through this practice, which personally have engaged since around 2006 and taught since 2017, I have witnessed the spontaneous opening of compassion in people — a radiance of care and sense of connection that includes but transcends personal love. As Unity co-founder Charles Fillmore once commented: "We can't get any closer to the Divine than to see through the eyes of Love".

Awakening to our gifts

What if every challenge we face in the world has, as its core, the belief we are separate — separate from the Infinite wellspring of Good, separate from our deepest selves, and separate from one another? Perhaps, rather than try merely to legislate caring for one another, we might, through this Unity approach to transformation, cultivate the blossoming of oneness in our own hearts so that we might view the world more through the eyes of this awakened heart. And, as we each

awaken to the truth of oneness, perhaps we will organically bring forth greater love and unity into the world — not because we think we ‘should’ or because some so-called ‘sacred’ text or spiritual leader or even some ‘Higher Power’ demands it, but because love and oneness are our true nature.

Indeed, in my experience, as individuals begin to wake up and live less from our personalities and more from our individuality, gifts begin to emerge that serve the whole.

Type Ones no longer see in just black and white, or right or wrong. Living for a purpose beyond themselves, as they become centered in their wholeness, Ones see more clearly not only what skillful actions they need to take but also when to rest, let go, and let be.

Type Twos overcome the pride of believing they are beyond having human needs. They are more able to spend time in solitude engaged in their own creative pursuits and become more receptive to receiving love and to accepting help. As they become centered in their wholeness, Twos come to recognize that sometimes the greatest gift they can give others is the gift of their own being and receiving.

Type Threes come to realize their inherent value — outside what they do or how they appear to others. They learn to slow down, and just ‘be’, appreciating life as a journey and not just an ever-moving goalpost. As they become centered in their wholeness, Threes become more patient and compassionate toward all, in touch with their own feelings, relational, and collaborative.

Type Fours develop a greater sense of equanimity. Less subject to the whims of their moods, they live with more self-renewing inspiration. As they become centered in their wholeness, Fours are more balanced, disciplined, and creative in ways that express not only their personal truth but also over-arching, universal truths.

Type Fives become visionaries and thought leaders. They comprehend the world not only with their heads, but also with their hearts and bodies. As they become centered in their wholeness, Fives feel an inner pros-

perity and generously share their resources — especially their own heart, presence, and vision.

Type Sixes begin to trust in an invisible yet felt ground of Being within themselves as their true, abiding source of support and inner guidance. They become more self-affirming, internally stable, and trusting of life. As they become centered in their wholeness, Sixes become beacons of courage that light a path in the dark for us all.

Type Sevens sense their unlimited place in the natural progression of life, trusting that their joy is an integral part of that unfolding. They can savor the present moment, even amid challenging feelings, without the need for diversions. As they become centered in their wholeness, Sevens assimilate experiences in greater depth, with their hearts as well as their minds, while sharing their awe, enthusiasm, and appreciation for all the wonders of life in the here and now.

Type Eights become more intimately connected to their child-like innocence and tender heart, engaging life with strength, as well as vulnerability and benevolence. As they become centered in their wholeness, Eights slow down, make more space for others to support and even to lead. No longer led by the need for “bigger” or “more,” they become more self-disciplined and self-regulating. They burn fewer bridges, achieve longer-term visions, and become more authentically powerful and heroic.

Type Nines courageously assert themselves, expressing their uniqueness, even when it might result in discomfort or disharmony. They engage proactively with life, prioritizing their personal goals and dreams and braving the spotlight when needed to express their truth. As they become centered in their wholeness, Nines become a powerful force of nature and bring their gift of seeing and of embracing *all* perspectives, including their own.

These are, again, just examples of the fruits of the spirit I have been blessed to witness in those I spiritually companion. Perhaps, however, it is just the beginning of what poet William Blake meant when he referred to

“bearing the beams of Love” in our world.

Love as the beginning and the end

“Love, in Divine Mind, is the idea of universal unity. In expression, it is the power that joins and binds together the universe and everything in it. Love is a harmonizing and constructive power. When it is made active in consciousness, it conserves . . . reconstructs, rebuilds and restores us and our world” — Unity co-founder Charles Fillmore, Keep a True Lent

“Love so that you may actually be what you innately are” — Unity Minister Rev. Eric Butterworth

Unity’s emphasis on metaphor and inclusivity, and one of its core practices of ‘dying daily’ through silence, can help the Enneagram student not to get too taken over by the influence of the part of us that wants to take a map like the Enneagram and use it as a way to further reject or fix ourselves and others. We see the universality of our shared suffering (albeit expressed in nine fundamentally different ways), which naturally brings more compassion and heart to the journey.

A Unity perspective also keeps us grounded in love. Love is not sentiment to us; it is ultimate reality. And when we awaken to this reality within ourselves, love becomes a center of being from which we live and move and have our existence in this world.

Love is certainly the end or outcome I seek in my life. But the spiritual paradox I’ve found is that we must begin with it from within our consciousness, to end with it in our lives and in our world.

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