

Thinking about the Gurdjieffian Enneagram Phenomenologically: The Case of a Phenomenology of Relationship

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Abstract

Partly because it offers guidance for successfully completing any intentional activity or effort, the enneagram is a central symbol in the Gurdjieff Work. Gurdjieff went so far as to claim that all Work principles are present and discoverable through enneagram study. In this article, I overview its symbolic, psychological, and practical value, and discuss its potential insights for exploring phenomena phenomenologically. Drawing on narrative evidence from African-British novelist Doris Lessing's 1984 *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, I illustrate how the enneagram helps to explicate a phenomenology of relationship. I highlight the personal use of the symbol by developing an enneagram of the process of writing this article.

Keywords: J.G. Bennett, *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, enneagram, esoteric symbols, the Fourth Way, G.I. Gurdjieff, Doris Lessing, P.D. Ouspensky, systematics, the Work

Introduction

We can picture the three main parts of the enneagram ... If the outer circle represents our diary, then the inner sequence represents our notebooks, and the triangle, our creed. If the outer circle represents our daily lives, then the inner sequence is that of our Sadhana, or spiritual practice, and the triangle of our faith. If the outer circle is a sequence of time, then the inner periodic figure is synchronicity, and the triangle is timelessness.

Even simply to know that there can be different orders of life within the same life can mean a great deal.

—Anthony Blake¹

Illustrated in Figure 1, the enneagram is an esoteric symbol first brought to prominence in the West via the 1949 publication of *In Search of the Miraculous* by P.D. Ouspensky, one of G.I. Gurdjieff's foremost proponents.² According to Ouspensky, Gurdjieff first presented the enneagram to his Moscow and St. Petersburg groups in 1916 and "returned to the enneagram many times and in various connections."³ Gurdjieff associate J.G. Bennett claimed that Gurdjieff attributed the

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¹ A. G. E. Blake, *The Intelligent Enneagram* (Boston: Shambala, 1996), pp. 323-24.

² P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* (London: Harcourt, 1949), pp. 285-95.

³ Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 293.

symbol to a school of Sufism in Central Asia.⁴ Bennett explained that the enneagram gives “full weight to the reality of unreality and show[s] the way beyond it.”⁵ Gurdjieff student and biographer James Moore spoke of the enneagram’s “integrity and essential dignity” and described it as “one of those rare symbols which encapsulate and transmit a new idea of awakening power.”⁶ Gurdjieff associate Maurice Nicoll reported that, for Gurdjieff, the enneagram “formulated the whole of [his] teaching and that the more a man could read its meanings the more deeply he understood the [Gurdjieff] Work.”⁷ In studying Figure 1, one notes the enneagram’s three essential parts: a circle; an inscribed triangle; and a set of six inscribed, interconnected lines, a figure sometimes called a *hexade*.⁸ The circle’s circumference is marked by nine points located at the triangle’s three points

⁴ J. G. Bennett, *The Dramatic Universe: Man and His Nature*, vol. 3 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1966), p. 64; J.G. Bennett, *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 294; G.I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1963), p. 87-90.

⁵ J. G. Bennett, *Enneagram Studies* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1983), p. 16.

⁶ James Moore, ‘The Enneagram: A Developmental Study’, *Religion Today*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1988), p. 3, p. 5.

⁷ Maurice Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky*, vol. 2 (London: Stuart & Watkins, 1952), p. 379. The literature on a Gurdjieffian understanding of the enneagram is considerable and varied. Useful introductions are: Bennett, *Dramatic Universe*, pp. 63-72, pp. 108-114; Bennett, *Enneagram Studies*; Bennett, *Gurdjieff: Making a New World*, pp. 293-97; A. G. E. Blake, *The Intelligent Enneagram*; Carole M. Cusack, ‘The Enneagram: G.I. Gurdjieff’s Esoteric Symbol’, *Aries*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2020), pp. 31-54; Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries*, vol. 2, pp. 379-438; Ouspensky, *In Search*, pp. 285-95, pp. 376-78. Other literature on the enneagram includes: Gerald De Symons Beckwith, *Ouspensky’s Fourth Way* (Oxford, UK: Starnine Media & Publishing, 2015); Nathan Bernier, *The Enneagram: Symbol of All and Everything* (Brasilia, Brazil: Gilgamesh Publishing, 2003); Tinky Brass, *Enneagram* (Oxford, UK: Kharkadeh Books, 2018); Richard J. Defouw, *The Enneagram in the Writings of Gurdjieff* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Press, 2011); Irv Givot, *Enneagram of Healing: Exploring a Process* (Mercer Island, Washington: Atom Press, 2012); Irv Givot, *Seven Aspects of Self-Observation* (Aurora, Oregon: Two Rivers Press, 1998); Clarence E. King, ‘The Manufacturing Process’, *Systematics*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1963), pp. 111-26; Moore, ‘The Enneagram’, *Religion Today*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1988), pp. 1-5; Johanna J. M. Petsche, ‘The Sacred Dance of the Enneagram: The History and Meanings behind G.I. Gurdjieff’s Enneagram Movements’, *Fieldwork in Religion*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2016), pp. 53-75; Ken Pledge, ‘The Concrete Significance of Number in Experience: Its Relevance to Systematics and the Enneagram Cosmology’ (Bridgewater, New Jersey: Unis Institute, 1993); Ken Pledge, ‘Structured Process in Scientific Experiment’, *Systematics*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1966), pp. 304-333; Mohammad H. Tamdgid, *Gurdjieff and Hypnosis: A Hermeneutic Study* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 36-51; Lee van Laer, *The Universal Enneagram* (New York: CreateSpace, 2017); James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1980), pp. 505-19; Sophia Wellbeloved, *Gurdjieff: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2003); Christian Wertenbaker, *The Enneagram of G.I. Gurdjieff: Mathematics, Metaphysics, Music, and Meaning* (New Paltz, New York: Codhill Press, 2017); Christian Wertenbaker, *Man in the Cosmos: G.I. Gurdjieff and Modern Science* (New Paltz, New York: Codhill Press, 2012), pp. 23-41; On Sufism and the enneagram, see Laleh Bakhtiar, *Rumi’s Original Sufi Enneagram* (Chicago: Institute of Traditional Psychology, 2013); Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sufi Enneagram* (Chicago: Institute of Traditional Psychology, 2018); Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, ‘The Enneagram’s Science of the Soul’, *Spirituality Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2024), pp. 2-21. Bakhtiar (*Sufi Enneagram*, p. 118) explained that “Sufism is technically one of the origins of the Enneagram. It developed out of many traditions, but it was the Sufis, I believe, who perfected it, and this is what Gurdjieff learned when he went to Central Asia.” I don’t discuss the enneagram of nine personality types in this article because it has minimal ties to the Gurdjieff tradition; for commentary on the personality enneagram, see Cusack, ‘The Enneagram’, pp. 43-51; Moore, ‘The Enneagram’; Sotillos, ‘The Enneagram’s Science’.

⁸ Bernier, *The Enneagram*, p. 150. In his discussion of systematics, Bennett identified the six-line figure as one expression of his six-term system, the *hexad*. He described this figure as “the hexad as progressive cyclicity” and suggested that it “enables us to express the two-fold character of creation and counter-creation and also the notion that the entire process moves on towards a goal. In this way, we combine cyclicity and progress and thereby remove a cause of dispute between those whose convictions are founded on a sense of the endless return, and those who believe in limitless progress,” see Bennett, *Dramatic Universe*, vol. 3, p. 48.

and the hexade's six. These nine points are numbered from 0/9 to 8 running clockwise. The triangle's top point represents both beginning and end; it is therefore designated as both 0 and 9 (starting and finishing points).

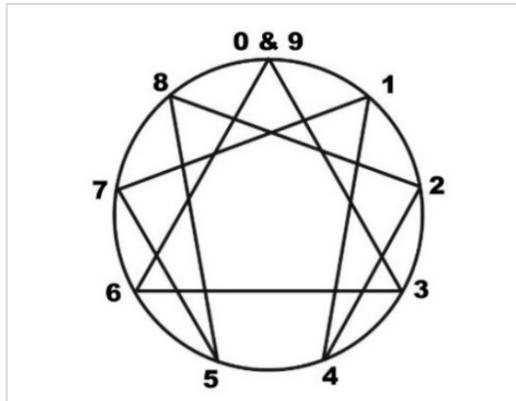


Figure 1. The Gurdjieffian enneagram.

As illustrated in Figure 2, this top point plus the hexade's six points can be associated with the seven unique notes of the major diatonic musical scale—do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-si—completed via the second, higher do marked as point 9. Associated with the major scale's two half tones between mi-fa and si-do, the points 3 and 6 are marked as “shocks,” relating to Gurdjieff's Law of Seven (or Law of the Octave), which claims that any intentional process goes off track unless appropriate adjustments happen at specified moments indicated by points 3 and 6.⁹ One of the enneagram's greatest values is helping to know when a particular process or effort might encounter deflection and to introduce appropriate actions to make sure the process continues toward the result for which one aims.

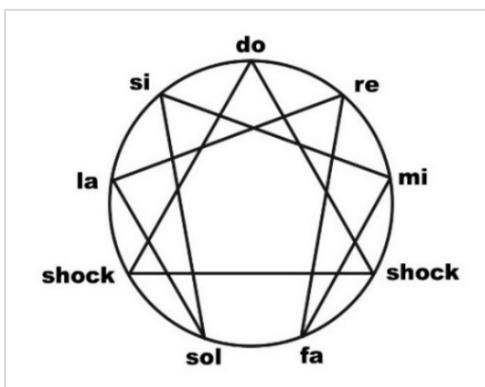


Figure 2. The major diatonic scale placed on the enneagram.

⁹ One notes that the enneagram marks the second shock at point 6, whereas the shock in the major scale is between si and do—i.e., points 8 and 9. This discrepancy has often been mentioned in the enneagram literature; for example, Ouspensky (*In Search*, p. 291) highlighted the disjunction directly: “The apparent placing of the interval in *its wrong place* itself shows to those who are able to read the symbol what kind of ‘shock’ is required for the passage of si to do.” Various understandings of this seeming discrepancy have been offered. See, for example, Defouw, *The Enneagram*, ch. 5; Wertenbaker, *The Enneagram*, ch. 8.

In looking at the enneagram's symbolic aspects, one notes that the circle represents wholeness, the triangle relates to three-ness, and the hexade relates to seven-ness in that dividing 1 (wholeness) by 7 (the octave's seven unique notes) results in the repeating decimal .142857...—the sequence of the hexade's six points as they intersect the circle (1-4-2-8-5-7). In turn, 2/7 equals .285714..., 3/7 equals .428571..., 4/7 equals .571428, and so forth until we reach 7/7, which, via the continuing addition seven times of .142857..., equals .99999..., which equals one. Turning to the three points of the triangle, we find that dividing 1 by 3 yields the repeating decimal .33333..., and dividing 2 by 3 yields .66666.... Adding .33333... together three times equals .99999... equals 3/3 or one.¹⁰ In the literature on the enneagram, these calculations are used to illustrate how the three and seven relationship is integrated in the enneagram via the 3-6-9 points of the triangle and the 1-4-2-8-5-7 points of the hexade.¹¹ As Bennett explained, “six of [the enneagram's] lines are derived from one divided by seven and the others [comprising the triangle] from one divided by three.”¹²

Meanings offered by the enneagram

One important question relates to the practical, psychological, and spiritual value of the enneagram. What exactly can it be used for and what insights does it offer? Most broadly, the enneagram provides a generalized picture of any organized process or project and how that process or project might successfully be accomplished. As Bennett wrote, the enneagram represents “every process that maintains itself by self-renewal” and “enables our thought processes to shape

¹⁰ It has been pointed out that the enneagram's unusual relationship between 3 and 7 is only possible in a base-ten system. Pledge, in “Concrete Significance of Number,” explained that “to symbolize laws of both seven and three, the decimal system is required” (p. 6); also see Wertenbaker, *The Enneagram*, pp. 6-11. In *Gurdjieff: Making a New World*, Bennett pointed out that the special relation between 3 and 7 generated in a base-ten system suggests that the enneagram was only fully developed “after the mathematicians of Central Asia had founded the modern theory of numbers by giving zero a separate symbol. Whereas the belief that the number seven is sacred probably goes back to Sumerian times, the form of the enneagram is likely to have developed in Samarkand in the fourteenth century. This would account for its absence from Indian or European literature. However, Gurdjieff asserted that it was far more ancient and attributed it to the Sarman Brotherhood. Both versions may be true” (p. 294).

¹¹ See Bennett, *Enneagram Studies*, pp. 1-5; Cusack, ‘The Enneagram,’ pp. 40-41; Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries*, vol. 2, pp. 381-82; Ouspensky, *In Search*, pp. 289-90; Wertenbaker, *The Enneagram*, pp. 6-11. There are many intriguing numerical relationships found in the enneagram. For example, note that all the numbers across from each other sum to nine (1+8, 2+7, and 3+6; see Ouspensky *In Search*, p. 287, n. 1). In addition, these numbers joined together in downward and upward directions all indicate multiplications of nine (downward 81, 72, 63, 54 and returning reversed upward 45, 36, 27, 18). The enneagram's numerical patterns are discussed in Bernier, *The Enneagram*; Pledge, ‘Concrete Significance of Number’; Wertenbaker, *The Enneagram and Man in the Cosmos*.

¹² Bennett, *Enneagram Studies* p. 3. Drawing largely on the thinking of psychotherapist Carl Jung, Marie-Louise von Franz in *Number and Time* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974) contended that “numbers appear to represent both an attribute of matter and the unconscious foundation of our mental processes. For this reason, number forms, according to Jung, the particular element that unites the realms of matter and psyche. It is ‘real’ in a double sense, as an archetypal image and as a qualitative manifestation in the realm of outer-world experience In this manner, it operates as a still largely unexplored midpoint between myth (the psychic) and reality (the physical), at the same time both quantitative and qualitative, representational *and* irrepresentational” (pp. 52-53). The interpretive significance of number is the major conceptual underpinning of Bennett's development of *systematics*; see Bennett, *Dramatic Universe*, vol. 3, ch. 37; Bennett, *Elementary Systematics* (Santa Fe, NM: Bennett Books, 1993).

themselves both according to the shape of the world and to that of our own being.”¹³ Pledge contended that the enneagram “points to a world which is already present but virtual.”¹⁴ Nicoll associated the enneagram with the Law of Shock (one description of the Law of Seven), which refers to “the idea of a shock being necessary for progressive development and continuation of a thing.”¹⁵ He explained:

In the development of a thing, whether it be the growth of a living creature, or the development of an idea, or the learning of a difficult subject, or the carrying out of some enterprise, or the transformation of one thing into another, the successive stages can be represented by the notes of an ascending octave: *Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol*, and so forth. A shock must come between the stage *Mi* and the stage *Fa* for that thing to proceed in its right order of development. Otherwise, it will deviate from its course and become something else. The stage *Fa* will not be reached.¹⁶

Because it offers guidance for successfully completing any intentional activity or effort by becoming aware of and countering the two shocks, the enneagram is a central symbol of the Gurdjieff Work. Here, I review the value of the enneagram by discussing potential insights that the symbol offers for exploring phenomena phenomenologically.¹⁷ In proceeding with this examination, I begin by considering the nine points of the circle phenomenologically and asking what each point is and what might be meant by the enneagram’s two shocks at points 3 and 6. I then discuss the dynamic of the hexade and what insights about human experience and life might be offered via its 1-4-2-8-5-7 dynamic.

Understanding human experience via the enneagram

In the early 1990s, I wrote a chapter on the “phenomenology of relationship” as portrayed in British-African writer Doris Lessing’s *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, a novel written as a diary and depicting the unlikely friendship between Jane Somers, a stylish, middle-aged fashion editor living in London; and Maudie Fowler, a proud, indigent ninety-year-old woman who eventually dies from stomach cancer.¹⁸ By *relationship*, I referred to the process whereby “two worlds are drawn

¹³ Bennett, *Enneagram Studies*, p. 3, p. 6. In the Gurdjieff tradition, the enneagram is most often associated with the food diagram and the transformation of food, air, and impressions in human beings; see Bennett, *Enneagram Studies*, pp. 47-51; Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries*, vol. 2, pp. 386-91; Ouspensky, *In Search*, pp. 376-78.

¹⁴ Ken Pledge, ‘Structured Process’, p. 332.

¹⁵ Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries*, vol. 2, p. 402.

¹⁶ Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries*, vol. 2, p. 402.

¹⁷ On phenomenology, see Linda Finlay, *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2000); David Seamon, *Phenomenological Perspectives on Place, Lifeworlds, and Lived Emplacement* (London: Routledge, 2023); Max van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice* (London: Routledge, 2024).

¹⁸ David Seamon, ‘Different Worlds Coming Together: A Phenomenology of Relationship as Portrayed in Doris Lessing’s *Diaries of Jane Somers*’, in David Seamon, ed., *Dwelling, Seeing and Designing: Toward a Phenomenological Ecology* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York), pp. 219-46; Doris Lessing, *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (New York: Vintage, 1984).

together in a lasting way”; by *world*, I meant “a person’s sphere of action, recognition, and experience, both firsthand and vicarious.”¹⁹ I suggested that relationship involves a situation where two people’s separate worlds come together “in a widening sphere of interaction, understanding, and concern. Literally, two worlds become one.”²⁰

For one real-world example of a developing relationship, I drew on Lessing’s account of Somers and Maudie’s shifting situation to identify steps in the process by which two individuals of vastly different backgrounds come to care for each other and become integral parts of each other’s lives. Though I made no mention of the enneagram in my explication, its processual structure grounded the background of my thinking as I carefully studied Lessing’s novel and located experiences and events that indicated how the two women gradually became close friends.

The developmental structure as I presented it in the original chapter is reproduced in Figure 3. Parallelling the nine points of the enneagram’s outer circle, the deepening relationship is described via seven stages and two shocks, though I changed the circle’s numbering to accommodate linear time only, thus 0 became 1 (*dissatisfaction*) followed by 2 (*asking*), 3 (*searching*), 4 (*trying to accept*), 5 (*accepting*), and so forth. Also note that, for the enneagram’s two shocks at points 3 and 6, I substituted the arrowed *encountering the other* and *sympysis*, an unusual word meaning in Greek, “the state of growing together.”²¹ I argued that, in Somers and Fowler’s deepening relationship, *sympysis* referred to “the gradual creation of a bond between the two women that eventually becomes as real as the two women themselves.”²² I argued that both *encountering the other* and *sympysis* sponsored a connection “in which what was unrelated before is now joined.”²³

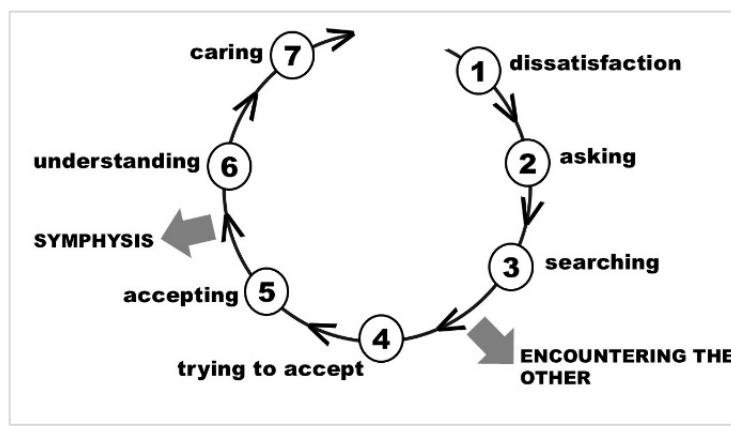


Figure 3. The Relationship cycle (redrawn from Seamon, ‘Different Worlds’, p. 220).

Figure 4 illustrates Figure 3 as it can be rephrased in enneagram form. The starting point is *dissatisfaction* (point 0 in the enneagram), triggered by Somers’ deepening awareness that her life

¹⁹ Seamon, ‘Different Worlds’, p. 219.

²⁰ Seamon, ‘Different Worlds’, p. 219.

²¹ Seamon, ‘Different Worlds’, p. 230.

²² Seamon, ‘Different Worlds’, p. 220.

²³ Seamon, ‘Different Worlds’, p. 220.

is unfulfilled, a recognition partly forged by her husband and mother's recent deaths. Until her husband's death, she pictured herself as a "nice person," but his passing makes her realize that "I know now that I did not ask myself what I was really like, but only thought about how other people judged me."²⁴ It is Somers' distress at realizing who she really is that provides the motivation for shifting her life aims and eventually draws her to helping Maudie Fowler:

If something else should turn up, something I had to cope with, like illness or death, if I had to say to myself, Now you will behave like a human being and not a little girl—then I couldn't do it. It is not a question of will, but of what you are. That is why I decided to learn something else.²⁵

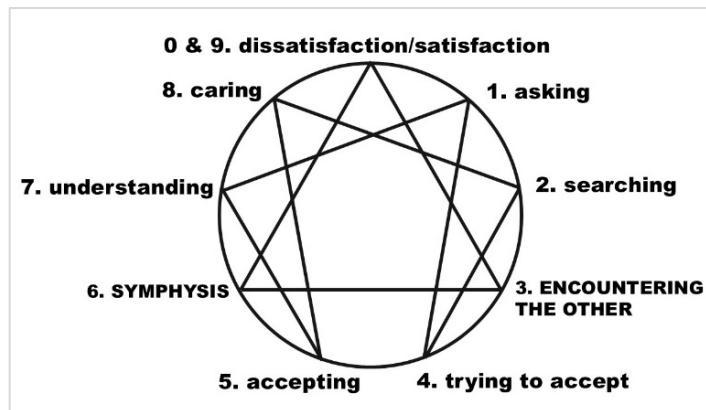


Figure 4. Enneagram of relationship.

Somers' dissatisfaction provokes stage 1 of the enneagram, *asking*, via which she ponders how she might become a better person. This stage involves assessing who one is and what one wants. Somers realizes aspects of her life she hadn't registered before—that the center of her world is her workplace and that she has no home life: "One of the things I am thinking is that if I lost my job, there wouldn't be much left of me."²⁶ In this stage of asking, Somers begins to realize that she can't really be other than who and what she is—a limited, self-absorbed person. She describes her dilemma as a question: "How did we get like this, so soft, so silly, so babyish? How?"²⁷

These sobering recognitions of stage 1 bring Somers to a next stage described in the enneagram as *searching* (2). This stage marks a shift from confusion and disappointment to active efforts toward personal change, some of which fail because they are superficial or poorly considered. Because of her failures in caring for her ill husband and mother, she decides she wants to help others. She reads a newspaper notice asking for volunteers to befriend old people, but the older woman to whom she is introduced doesn't care for Somers, who doesn't care for her. Somers

²⁴ Lessing, *Diaries*, p. 5.

²⁵ Lessing, *Diaries*, p. 11.

²⁶ Lessing, *Diaries*, p. 11.

²⁷ Lessing, *Diaries*, p. 82.

also realizes that she could help her elderly neighbor, but that potential relationship doesn't feel right either. She discovers that finding the right person is not an easy task:

Not just anyone will do in the establishment of a relationship. If it is to be genuine, the two people must fit. In time they become a part of each other, and this togetherness can arise only when *each is right for the other*. Otherwise, there is nothing but [a false] connection, and connection cannot last because the two parts cannot hold.²⁸

Stages 3-9

At this point in the relationship cycle, the right person must appear if the cycle is to continue—what is marked on the enneagram as *encountering the other* (3). Somers encounters Maudie Fowler through a moment of serendipity, meeting coincidentally in a neighborhood pharmacy as the two women stand together in line. Maudie asks Somers to get a prescription for her because Maudie cannot read the druggist's handwriting. In that moment, Somers feels a potential attachment: "I took the paper and knew I was taking much more than that."²⁹ As they leave the shop together and walk down the street, Somers intuits a sense of need: Maudie does not look at Somers, "but there was an appeal there."³⁰

Maudie invites Somers to her apartment for tea, and Somers accepts—an action that eventuates her growing fondness for the older woman and a deepening friendship. At this point, the relationship moves into a testing phase—the stages of 4 (trying to accept) and 5 (accepting). Throughout these two stages, an attraction-avoidance tension exists: For Somers, the risk of responsibility; for Maudie, the blow to her pride of needing help. These two stages intermingle and, for Somers, involve realizing the fragility of Maudie's world and accepting an obligation to help her. Out of the uncertainty that stages 4 and 5 will be successful, the women experience a progressive fondness for each other and eventually connect in trusting, heartfelt ways. Whereas at the start, their worlds were distinctly different, there is a gradual coming together via which they draw close and what was two is now one. I called this lived joining *sympysis* to emphasize that, at this stage of the relationship, there arises an entity that is as real as the two women themselves. One decisive event for cementing this unquestioned togetherness occurs several months after the women meet when Somers agrees to bathe Maudie after Maudie indirectly asks her. In touching her in this direct, intimate way, Somers accepts Maudie for who she is:

I slowly washed her top half, in plenty of soap and hot water, but the grime on her neck was thick, and to get that off would have meant rubbing at it, and it was too much. She was trembling with weakness Maudie might be only skin and bones She was chilly, she was sick, she was weak—but I could feel the vitality beating there: life. How strong is life.

²⁸ Seamon, 'Different Worlds', p. 224.

²⁹ Lessing, *Diaries*, p. 12.

³⁰ Lessing, *Diaries*, p. 13.

I had never thought that before, never felt life in that way, as I did then, washing Maudie Fowler.³¹

Somers' bathing Maudie marks a turning point in their relationship, which is now taken for granted and a reality for both lives. This situation is grounded in two final stages—what I identified as *understanding* (7) and *caring* (8). Here, Somers shifts from outside to *inside* Maudie's world. She comes to realize Maudie's world *as it is*, and to recognize Maudie's need to *be herself*, no matter how impoverished or unpleasant her life might seem to outsiders. At the same time Maudie allows Somers full admittance into her world; Somers becomes the friend for whom she had hoped.

Like *trying to accept* (4) and *accepting* (5), stages 7 and 8 are complementary. Understanding fosters deeper caring, which in turn supports deeper understanding. A significant difference is that understanding involves *awareness* whereas caring involves *commitment*. The relationship is successful because the two women commit to each other emotionally and are kin, at least figuratively. In relation to the enneagram, Somers is now at stage 9, which can be labelled *satisfaction*, at least in terms of a successful liaison with Maudie. Several years after the older woman died, Somers reflected back on their experience, explaining that "She was in need of help, I offered it, got deeper than I had meant, and had ended by being something not far off a daughter to her."³²

As illustrated in this account of Somers and Maudie's relationship, the enneagram describes a potential cycle of change and completion. In Somers' case, the feeling of shallowness that triggers her aim of becoming a better person, eventually leads, through helping Maudie, to a sense of accomplishment and personal betterment. The enneagram assumes that a successful conclusion to any effort is never guaranteed, and Lessing's account of Somers' touch-and-go traversal offers considerable insight as to how the enneagram might contribute to the phenomenological aim of understanding human experience more comprehensively.³³ I next turn to the 1-4-2-8-5-7 pattern of the enneagram's hexade and ask what the interlinkages might suggest about the relationship process.

The enneagram's hexade pattern

In my original chapter discussing Lessing's novel, I drew only on the stages of the enneagram's outer circle to consider the unfolding relationship over calendar time. I now turn to the hexade's

³¹ Lessing, *Diaries*, pp. 51-52.

³² Lessing, *Diaries*, p. 407.

³³ In the original chapter, I emphasized that the phenomenology laid out arose from only one descriptive text and was therefore tentative. I explained that the process I considered was a rendition of Somers' experience, since it is Somers' experience via her diaries that Lessing's novel mostly portrays. Considering the relationship process from Maudie Fowler's perspective would involve a different set of stages that would only begin at "encountering the other" in Somers's experience. Because the novel is written from Somers' perspective, her depiction of the relationship is portrayed thoroughly, though she attempts to understand Maudie's experience by writing a diary entry entitled "Maudie's day" (pp. 113-22). Somers writes: "I want to understand. I *do* understand a lot more about her, but is it true? I can only observe what I have experienced myself, heard her say, observed But what else is there I cannot know about?" (p. 126).

1-4-2-8-5-7 interconnections, an understanding of which is more difficult and less clear.³⁴ Wertenbaker explained that the 1-4-2-8-5-7 pattern relates to the many possibilities present in a situation of which the actual real-world process may only actualize a few.³⁵ Blake claimed that the hexade's lines "designate the way of intention" and "represent the search for meaning."³⁶ Bennett suggested that the pattern identifies how a process might be corrected and reinforced to "obtain self-renewal."³⁷ He pointed out that the hexade's sequence "determines the coherence and perfection" of the process.³⁸

Nicoll offered one of the most thorough depictions of the hexade's value by linking it with an interconnectedness of the seven temporal stages as they involve a timeless dimension beyond linear time:

Let us try to get rid of the idea of time by means of conceiving the world in higher dimensions—i.e., conceiving that time does not exist and that everything in succession in time is alive and is, so to speak, always *there*, although we seem to pass from one thing to another ... My object is to try to make you think about the enneagram and bring it to some kind of life in your mind and imagination ... We believe that the cause of a thing is anterior in time to the effect. We have no idea that the future may influence the present. ... I might even be willing to think that something I do today may affect me years hence.³⁹

In describing the hexade as an interconnected, non-linear mesh of different moments of time, Beckwith offers a description of the sequence that parallels Nicoll's:

The [hexade's] inner circulation defines the hidden, non-linear relationships and connections between different moments of time. In such an example, the inner circulation is "out of time" ... and points to the forces coexisting in both the past and the future which come together to create the present moment.⁴⁰

The hexade and Somers and Maudie's relationship

Applying the hexade to Somers and Maudie's relationship is complicated by the narrative limitations of Lessing's novel. Here, I examine some possibilities by considering the seven points chronologically as they each have connections with the 1-4-2-8-5-7 pattern. We begin with stage 0 of Somers' dissatisfaction marked by realizing her failings as a human being and feeling a vague wish to become a better person. This starting place can be described as "the inspiration of the idea

³⁴ Useful explications of the hexade pattern are Bennett, *Dramatic Universe*, vol. 3, pp. 68-72, pp.108-114; Bernier, *Enneagram*, pp. 226-37, pp. 241-48; Blake, *Intelligent Enneagram*, pp. 318-47. For a provocative example of the enneagram's interpretive value, see Blake's rendition of the "Terminator" films (pp. 178-83).

³⁵ Wertenbaker, *Man in the Cosmos*, p. 40.

³⁶ Blake, *Intelligent Enneagram*, p. 326, p. 270.

³⁷ Bennett, *Dramatic Universe*, vol. 3, p. 68.

³⁸ Bennett, *Dramatic Universe*, vol. 3, p. 71.

³⁹ Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries*, vol. 2, pp. 385-86.

⁴⁰ Beckwith, *Ouspensky's Fourth Way*, p. 269.

that will appear in stage 1 as possibility to be actualized, not yet brought into existence.”⁴¹ For Somers, this trigger arises from the external world—the deaths of her husband and mother. Importantly, it is this first shock that marks the start of all intentional processes. In Somers’ case, this first shock is the impetus for the eventual arrival of shocks 2 and 3—encounter with Maudie Fowler and the symphysis between the two women.

The dissatisfaction and shock of stage 0 activates the *asking* of stage 1, which incorporates a wide range of ideas and possibilities, “still only potential influences, but they begin in turn to activate our own potential.”⁴² These possibilities percolate inwardly and provoke in Somers an inkling that something might be shifted, even though what this might be is unclear at this point. In relation to the hexade, stage 1 is linked to points 4 and 7 (see Figure 1). In Somers’ asking (1) how change in her life might be possible, there is the resonance of understanding (7) and efforts of trying to accept (4). The 1-4 link indicates how a sincere asking draws the possibility of a real person to be helped; in turn, the 4-1 link strengthens the possibility of the asking. For the 1-7 link, the asking posits a potential understanding that, in the 7-1 link, resonates with the asking and perhaps contributes to a hopeful continuation. As Bernier suggested, this link can intimate actions “that may possibly be done in the future. It is the object already transformed, the form, acting back over the mind (7-1).”⁴³ One senses dimly an answer to the asking.

In the searching of stage 2, the answer to the asking gains clarity and one solidifies potential actions. Here, the person “makes calculations, writes things down, programs, makes phone calls, collects more information.”⁴⁴ Though often one is unaware of the process, his or her sensibility “usually travels through the hexade several times, making adjustments and reprogramming actions, always simulating the entire process.”⁴⁵ In her efforts at searching, Somers makes missteps, but her earnestness and perseverance eventually bring her to Maudie Fowler. In the hexade, Stage 2 is related to points 4 and 8. For the 2-8 link, Somers’ searching presupposes a situation for caring; the 8-2 link portends that possibility. The connection of point 4 to 2 indicates how Somers’ sincerity for finding the right person (2-4) contributes to a strength for trying to accept that person (4-2).

The appearance of Maudie Fowler at Stage 3 marks the first shock to keep the possibility of a relationship on track. Maudie serendipitously arrives in Somers’ physical world but, perhaps more so existentially, is present because of Somers’ strong wish for personal change. One is reminded of Nicoll’s comment above that “everything in succession in time is alive and is, so to speak, always *there*, although we seem to pass from one thing to another.”⁴⁶ With Maudie now in the picture, the ideas and possibilities of stages 1 and 2 shift to the actuality of stage 4, which now incorporates a real person in the real world. As Bernier explained, “The idea is now an effort [and] acquires material form and personality, occupying physical space, adjusting to structures, time,

⁴¹ Bernier, *The Enneagram*, p. 226.

⁴² Bernier, *The Enneagram*, p. 227.

⁴³ Bernier, *The Enneagram*, p. 227.

⁴⁴ Bernier, *The Enneagram*, p. 242.

⁴⁵ Bernier, *The Enneagram*, p. 242.

⁴⁶ Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries*, vol. 2, p. 386.

rhythms, and cycles.”⁴⁷ The 1-4-2 links continue in significance as the efforts of “trying to accept” (4) resonate with the original impulses of asking (1) and searching (2).

The “trying to accept” of stage 4 leads to the “accepting” of stage 5, which is said to be the enneagram’s most hazardous point, called by Gurdjieff the *harnel-aoot*, a situation where “contact with the start has been lost and contact with the end has not yet been found.”⁴⁸ As Bennett explained,

The *harnel-aoot* is a very painful experience, but it is the only condition for reaching the perfection at which the process is aiming. In climbing a mountain, one must reach the point at which there is no feeling that it is possible to reach the top and no feeling that one can return to the bottom. Once that point is passed, no matter how hard the going is, one has the confidence of getting there in the end. The end itself becomes a force that is working in us.⁴⁹

Via the hexade, stage 5 is linked with stages 7 and 8. After much effort and some setbacks, Somers has unquestionably accepted Maudie as a friend in stage 5, which provides the comprehensive understanding of who she is and what she needs in stage 7. Somers’ hope for understanding Maudie can arise through Somers’ efforts of acceptance (5-7). This acceptance also grounds the caring of stage 8 (5-8). Somers’ full entrance into her life of Maudie’s situation takes time but is eventually successful, leading to the symphysis of stage 6, whereby the two women are now together in an irreversible coupling of familiarity. Bernier emphasized that stage 6 “is the moment of commitment” and “demands that the action have involvement with the exterior.”⁵⁰ The two women have accepted each other and will remain close friends until several years hence when Maudie dies from stomach cancer. This mutual fondness provides the impetus for stages 7 and 8, both linked in the hexade with the difficult accepting stage 5 (5-7 and 5-8) and the *harnel-aoot*. The cycle ends with Somers’ greater completeness at stage 9. Significantly, Somers’ experience with Maudie deepens her concern for older Londoners, and later in Lessing’s account, Somers will assist other older women.⁵¹ One can imagine how understanding and caring for Maudie Fowler reverberates in Somers’ experience with other individuals in need (7-1 and 8-2). She has become the stronger, more able person she had hoped for at the start.

Blake pointed out how any completion of a task or effort “is a kind of closure that enables [the situation] to be something in its own right. It does not exclude the greater whole but lives within it.”⁵² So it is with Somers’ successful relationship with Maudie. It marks one fulfilling and fulfilled responsibility in Somers’ life that will perhaps continue in her efforts to assist other older

⁴⁷ Bernier, *The Enneagram*, p. 244.

⁴⁸ G.I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson: All and Everything, First Series* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), p. 754; Bennett, *Talks on Beelzebub’s Tales* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1977) p. 56.

⁴⁹ Bennett, *Talks on Beelzebub’s Tales*, p. 57.

⁵⁰ Bernier, *The Enneagram*, p. 234.

⁵¹ Lessing, *Diaries*, pp. 141-51; pp. 181-94; pp. 312-16; pp. 358-62; pp. 414-27; pp. 487-89.

⁵² Blake, *Intelligent Enneagram*, p. 234.

Londoners. As Blake explained, the enneagram “shows how *events* are produced within a given *history*.⁵³

Working with the enneagram

The enneagram offers a picture of how people might keep their lives on track. Because of the unavoidable deflections in all human experience, efforts and events often become other than what one hoped for or expected. The enneagram is a tool for understanding life processes so that potential is actualized and aims are achieved. In studying the enneagram, one valuable tack is applying its interpretation to one’s life experiences, an approach I use to end this article. Figure 5 details the enneagram that describes my writing this article. The effort began with an editor’s request (stage 0) to provide an article “relating to the Gurdjieff Work” for a special issue of this academic journal. I had written other articles for this editor, and I was enthused to be asked to write another. I felt a strong possibility that I could accomplish an article, though as I accepted the opportunity, I had no clear sense as to what the article would be about or what direction it might take.

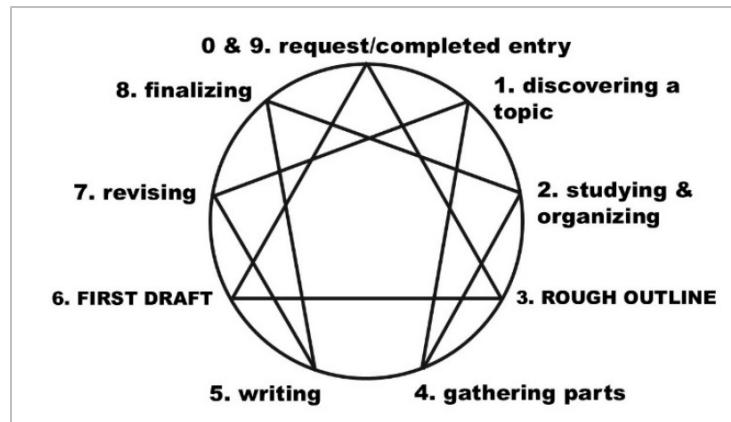


Figure 5. The enneagram of writing this article.

As marked by stage 1, the first matter was asking myself what I could write. My starting thought was probing some aspect of J.G. Bennett’s systematics, a topic I have explored in several past editing and writing efforts.⁵⁴ As a starting point, I reread Bennett’s overview of systematics in volume 3 of *The Dramatic Universe*.⁵⁵ I was struck by his explication of nine-ness, illustrated by the enneagram and Bennett’s perceptive interpretations of preparing a meal for a community and

⁵³ Blake, *Intelligent Enneagram*, p. 234.

⁵⁴ Bennett, *Elementary Systematics*; David Seamon, *Life Takes Place: Phenomenology, Lifeworlds, and Place Making* (London: Routledge, 2018); David Seamon, ‘Christopher Alexander’s Theory of Wholeness as a Tetrad of Creative Activity: The Examples of *A New Theory of Urban Design* and *The Nature of Order*’, *Urban Science*, 3, 2 (2019), pp. 1-13; David Seamon, ‘Holism and the Gurdjieff Work: Henri Bortoft’s Authentic Wholeness and J.G. Bennett’s Systematics’, *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, 14, 2 (2024), pp. 47-71.

⁵⁵ Bennett, *Dramatic Universe*, vol. 3, ch. 36.

a young woman's becoming a professional singer.⁵⁶ As I read these accounts, I felt an uncertain possibility that perhaps the enneagram could be the central focus of my article. I considered how the article might be organized, and I suddenly remembered the chapter I had written on a phenomenology of relationship in the early 1990s.⁵⁷ I was reminded that, in organizing that entry, I had refrained from mentioning my reliance on the enneagram. Why not return to that chapter, discuss the use of the enneagram directly, and give attention to some of its aspects that hadn't been explored in the original chapter?

This decision led to stage 2 of reading entries on the enneagram (see footnote 7) and pondering what the article might include. As I read the literature, I realized that my understanding of the enneagram was far from complete, particularly the structure and meaning of the 1-4-2-8-5-7 pattern. As I overviewed the wide range of ways in which I could present my discussion, I discovered interpretive differences in the enneagram literature. I had to decide what the strongest interpretations were, keeping them in mind as I envisioned my article. Eventually, in stage 3, I produced a preliminary outline, marked by four major topics: first, an enneagram overview; second, a description of relationship stages; third, a discussion of the relationship's hexade; last, a conclusion. This rough outline was the first shock in that it transformed the thinking efforts of stages 1 and 2 into a tangible potential that the following stages would hone and finalize.

In Figure 5, I call stage 4 "gathering the parts," since I had to begin shaping the rough outline of stage 3 by deciding what material should be included, in what order it should appear, and how it should be phrased. In this stage, I had to decide which enneagram interpretations I would draw on for my argument and how much weight they would be given. Ultimately, I concluded that, because of their specificity in providing real-world examples, the most relevant interpretations for the task at hand were those of Bennett, Bernier, Blake, and Nicoll.⁵⁸ In stage 5, I drew on these materials and my ideas to begin writing, a task that unfolded unpredictably in fits and starts. In authoring many articles and books, I have found that this movement from stage 4 to stage 5 is always the most difficult because one has a vague sense of what is possible but has not yet seen clearly what the possibility means in terms of an actual document. One feels discouraged and is not certain about a finished work. This is the phase of harnel-aoot, and the experience is exactly as Bennett described above: one has left safe harbor but the new destination is not yet in ready sight. There is some solace offered by the whispers of stages 7 and 8 that encourage the possibility of completion (7-5-8).

After several false starts and dead ends, the document began to take a clear shape. I began to revise, test different orderings of presentation, and replace crude first phrasings with more polished explication. At this point, the first draft of stage 6 came into place, and I was relieved that the document was now a reality that only needed the finishing touches of stages 7 and 8—revising and finalizing. At this time, I realized that the article needed some sort of first-person account, and

⁵⁶ Bennett, *Dramatic Universe*, vol. 3, pp. 69-71; pp. 108-14.

⁵⁷ Seamon, 'Different Worlds'.

⁵⁸ Bennett, *Dramatic Universe*, vol. 3, pp. 63-72, 108-114; Bernier, *Enneagram*; Blake, *Intelligent Enneagram*; Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries*, vol. 2, pp. 379-438.

I added this section on the enneagram of writing this article. The result became the “completed entry” of stage 9.⁵⁹

What can be said about the hexade of writing this article? For all the linkages, I can only speak of a kind of distant intuitive sensibility that infuses the stages and connects them with past and future efforts and possibilities. In stage 1 of discovering a topic, there was the 1-4 link that intimated ways in which the wide range of topics cast possibilities in some sort of assembled gathering, each different for each of the many topics that percolated through my thinking. This awareness has parallels in the 1-7 linkage: how different topics provide a different range of presentations, each of which would need shaping in its own unique way. Stage 2 of studying and organizing was directly related to the finalizing of stage 8 (2-8) and was integral to which parts would be gathered in stage 4 (2-4).

If the first half of the stages (0-4) indicate a conceptual and intellectual phase gradually concretized in the movement from stage 4 to stage 5, the movement from stage 5 toward 9 is a kind of consolidation whereby the finished article becomes as real as the many parts identified and arranged in stages 0-4. In this part of the hexade, the writing of stage 5 is fertilized by the possibilities of stage 6—the first draft and its revisions and finalizing. Of all the stages, the links between stage 5 and stages 7 and 8 are strongest and sturdiest in the sense that I as author have seen clearly by stage 5 what the article can be. There is the puzzlement and pleasure of transforming the unfinished early drafts into a well-arranged final document.

Conclusion: Meeting Reality

In this explication of the enneagram, I have drawn on the circle’s temporal stages and the hexade’s out-of-time connections. Also central is the triangle, the points of which indicate how three independent but mutually related qualities must be present to ensure that any intentional effort or process reaches completion. The triangle represents Gurdjieff’s Law of Three in that there are required the three impulses of *affirmation* (point 0—Jane Somers’ dissatisfaction; my acceptance to write an article), *receptivity* (point 3—Maudie Fowler; my rough outline), and *reconciliation* (point 6—Maudie and Somers’ symphysis; my first draft).⁶⁰ Bennett explained that, broadly, the first impulse relates to function; the second, to being; and the third, to will.⁶¹ Pledge suggested that the triangle designates three stages of any intentional process.⁶² Line 0-3 establishes a phase in which the process is identified, clarified, and set in motion; there is a “stage of expansion.”⁶³ Line 3-6 relates to a stage of action and interaction that propels the process’s continuation. Line 6-9

⁵⁹ In the days after completing the draft, I reread the entry several times. I noted two matters needing explication. First, I had not addressed the question of the placement on the enneagram of the second shock at point 6, for which I added footnote 9. Second, I realized I had not directly discussed the significance of the enneagram’s triangle, which I now discuss at the start of the following section, “meeting reality.” These additions indicate how stage 8 of “finalizing” may continue past the original moment of “completion.”

⁶⁰ Bennett, *Elementary Systematics*, ch. 3; Ouspensky, *In Search*, pp. 77-81.

⁶¹ Bennett, *Gurdjieff: Making a New World*, p. 295.

⁶² Pledge, ‘Structured Process’, pp. 310-11.

⁶³ Pledge, ‘Structured Process’, p. 310.

identifies the finalizing efforts that ensure the process's appropriate accomplishment. For Jane Somers, one notes the questioning that leads her to Maudie Fowler (stage 1), who offers a sphere of engagement (stage 2) that eventually leads to the women's deep friendship (stage 3). In a related interpretation, Blake pictured the enneagram's triangle in terms of a quest: line 0-3, leaving home and searching; line 3-6, the journey to new places and discoveries; line 6-9, returning home and using what one has gained for the situation at hand.⁶⁴ For Jane Somers, this quest widened her life and strengthened her sense of self. For me in writing this article, I have gained a deeper understanding of the enneagram and hope my interpretation is useful for others.

The enneagram houses a mystery expressed partly via the hexade's out-of-time meshings. Who we are, what we have been, and what we become arise from a succession of present moments, past, present, and future, all summarized by the hexade's interlinkages outside time. In calendar time, I discovered my appreciation for phenomenology as a graduate student, but that interest was somehow already connected to many different past experiences—an English teacher who loved literature, a pleasure of music, a reverence for nature, a sense that there was something "truthful" in the world. These situations underwrote a recognition that I could pledge my professional life to phenomenological research. In turn, that professional work was, is, and will be fueled by motives and accomplishments—extended study of the phenomenological literature, doing phenomenology phenomenologically, writing and editing books, promoting a phenomenology newsletter—all results that at some point were potential aims not yet accomplished yet, via the shifting, out-of-time links of the enneagram's hexade, supporting the efforts and intimating possibilities, projects, and achievements. I picture the many enneagrams symbolizing my life, smaller and larger efforts, enneagrams marking parts of larger enneagrams that all merge in the one "master" enneagram of a human life.⁶⁵

I can picture a similar interconnected set of experiences and events that precipitated my involvement with the Gurdjieff Work. From an early age, I always had the feeling that there was a "rightness" to the world, if only one was persistent in its discovery. The experience of mastering a musical instrument and discovering the integral relationship among melodies and chord progressions set my awareness toward some ineffable trust that this "rightness" might be discovered. The moment of encountering the Gurdjieff Work I still remember indelibly: looking at a copy of *In Search of the Miraculous* on a colleague's desk, opening it randomly, and reading Ouspensky's discussion of the three "foods" for human beings: air, ordinary food, and impressions.⁶⁶ I had never before encountered the idea that impressions were food, and that one serendipitous insight triggered my involvement with the Gurdjieff Work. Shortly after, there were a series of "lucky" coincidences: the discovery that there was a Work group nearby; the encounter with Work teachers Paul and Naomi Anderson; a lecture by Gurdjieffian J.G. Bennett, who was enrolling students in his International Academy for Continuous Education in Sherborne, England.⁶⁷ Bennett's motivating lecture led to my attending his ten-month introduction to Work

⁶⁴ Blake, *Intelligent Enneagram*, p. 41.

⁶⁵ Ouspensky, *In Search*, pp. 289-90; for a graphic rendition, see Wertenbaker, *The Enneagram*, p. 43.

⁶⁶ Ouspensky, *In Search*, p. 181.

⁶⁷ J.G. Bennett, *Witness*, ch. 28 (London: Turnstone Books, 1974).

principles at Sherborne. I can readily claim that this experience has been the most important event in my life and set my professional interest in phenomenology and my spiritual quest grounded in the Gurdjieff Work. As with the events that mark my professional trajectory, so it is with the events that brought me to Gurdjieff. These interconnections and unlikely coincidences mark the mystery of the hexade and illustrate the impossibility of knowing how one's life comes to be.

Pledge explained that the enneagram conveys "the latent patterning of the present moment," and Bennett wrote that the symbol depicts "the universal similitude of events."⁶⁸ He emphasized that the enneagram incorporates an inescapable spiritual dimension and points toward an integrated, multifaceted manner of understanding:

To think about [human beings] effectively, we must get beyond linear thinking in order to see the inner cohesion. The spiritual world is totally non-linear and this is why we cannot ordinarily think about it at all. We must therefore find a new way of thinking. In order to change our way of thinking, we have first of all to recognize that it is not a matter of looking along several different lines at once but recognizing that there is a structure in what we are looking at. The structure may be imperfect, but if it were not there at all, we could understand nothing.⁶⁹

For my personal involvement in the Gurdjieff Work, I appreciate the enneagram for its revelation of reality. Nicoll claimed that the Gurdjieffian tradition continuously offers "a new growth of understanding with all its inexhaustible, delicate, and new perceptions of truth"⁷⁰ I have found Nicoll's claim to be true, and I hope my rendition of the enneagram offers some indication of how it contributes to this intensifying understanding as it can unfold practically, psychologically, and spiritually.

⁶⁸ Pledge, 'Structured Process', p. 332; Bennett, *Enneagram Studies*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Bennett, *Enneagram Studies*, p. 7.

⁷⁰ Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries*, vol. 4 (London: Stuart & Watkins, 1955), p. 1302.