Conversation with Charles T. Tart, Part I

By Andrea Isaaacs and Jack Labanauskas

Enneagram Monthly: You have a very high reputation in the field of parapsychology. Is this because your background and main contributions have been in that area?

Charles T. Tart: No, not really. A lot of people think that, because I'm one of the better known parapsychologists in the world and I have had a fairly active research career in that field. But that's only part of my activity. When I characterize myself anymore, I say that I'm primarily a transpersonal psychologist. I'm interested in questions like "What's the real spiritual nature of human beings, as opposed to erroneous beliefs about it?" "How do you develop it?" "What are its consequences?" and so forth. Within that broad, overarching field of transpersonal psychology, which is still a new and a very open field, I have a specialty within it of parapsychology, I have another specialty within transpersonal psychology of altered states of consciousness, another specialty of mindfulness training, and things like that. But transpersonal psychology really best describes my interests.

EM: How would you define "transpersonal psychology?"

CTT: I'm a psychologist by training, of course. My specialty in my graduate education almost 40 years ago was a new area called "personality," picked partly because it was a brand-new, not yet too tightly defined, program at the University of North Carolina, so I could look at what I wanted. Transpersonal psychology was developed roughly in the last 25 or 30 years. It came out of the two major forces in psychology and the reaction to them. The two major forces, I'm sure you've all heard this, were behaviorism and the psychoanalytic, psychopathological approach. The first seeing people as empty organisms and automatically throwing away all the best stuff in human life, and the psycho-analytic-psychiatric approach seeing pathology as the model for everything.

Humanistic psychology arose as a reaction to leaving out the good side of human nature. Abe Maslow was the primary person in founding that. I was in the humanistic psychology camp at the beginning, but humanistic psychology never really questioned the dominant materialistic paradigm of that time.

EM: When did humanistic psychology begin?

CTT: It started about 30 or 35 years ago. Let's see. I came out to California in 1963 and humanistic psychology was just getting started around then. Maslow's book, The Psychology of Being, would be the thing that would mark the formal beginning of it.

Continued on page 18

CONTENTS

Conversation with Charles T. Tart, Part I
Andrea Isaaacs and Jack Labanauskas Page 1

Discovering the Enneagram
Eddie Fitzgerald, SDB Page 1
Gratitude for the Enneagram
Mona Coates, Ph.D. Page 22

From the Editors Page 2
Letters to the Editors Page 3
Humanistic psychology stayed within the dominant materialistic scientific paradigm of our times—you know, everything is matter, so if you had an experience of mystical union with the cosmos, feeling intimately related to all life, something like that, we would certainly honor that because it was a noble feeling, but within the humanistic approach at that time, nobody took it too seriously as saying something about reality. We were nothing but our brains, so obviously that was some sort of malfunctioning of the brain, even though it may have been meaningful and existential.

EM: And then transpersonal psychology developed

They had this brilliant idea that scientific method, as a way of refining knowledge, had worked real well in physical areas like chemistry; can we apply scientific method to spirituality..."}

We’ve got to take them seriously. That looking seriously has been the main characterization of my work ever since.

My 1975 book, *Transpersonal Psychologies*, actually helped to launch the field, though don’t credit me with coinining the term “transpersonal psychology.” I didn’t—Maslow did that.

A side note—for the book I put together, *Transpersonal Psychologies*, I had gotten people from seven or eight major spiritual traditions to write about their systems as a psychology rather than as a religion. So Robert Ornstein wrote about Sufism as a psychology, Haridas Chaudhuri wrote about Yoga as a psychology, and so forth. The book was originally called *Spiritual Psychologies*, but just before it went into print, I got a call from my publisher, who was a little panicked. He had great news, one of the major psychology book clubs wanted to adopt it as their monthly selection when it was published—but psychologists could not deal with the word “spiritual!” They just went red in the face, so the publisher asked if we could change the title. The word, “transpersonal,” meaning “beyond the personal self” was so new at that time that I figured psychologists wouldn’t have any knee-jerk reactions to it! So that’s how we changed the title to *Transpersonal Psychologies*. The politics of life!

I think a lot of psychologists would at least not get apoplectic at the word “spiritual” nowadays. They could handle that a little better

EM: Was there an event or experience that happened to you personally that sent you in that direction?

CTT: My whole life, of course! I would like to be able to have a good story with a dramatic event occurring during my childhood where God appeared and said “Young man, you will be a transpersonal psychologist!” but it wasn’t anything that focused. It was something actually more common to most people. I was raised as a Lutheran, and as a kid I was quite devout and I believed it all. As I got into my teenage years, and started thinking

You can’t just make up a bunch of questions that you think ought to discriminate different types on the Enneagram and give them to people and score them and think you’ve got a valid way of typing. for myself, and also being educated in science, I began to see that a lot of the religion stuff I had just automatically believed didn’t make sense.

This is something that happens to zillions of people, and there are several common reaction patterns. One, people become religiously devout and try to pretend that scientific findings about the world aren’t there. Another group does religion on Saturdays or Sundays and ignores religion all the rest of the week. Others just reject all spiritualities, all religions, saying, “Right, science has shown it’s all nonsense.”

I was lucky to have been able to avoid these extremes. I came across the writings of the early
people in parapsychology (psychical research, as it was called earlier), and realized that back before the turn of the century, a lot of intelligent men and women were going through the same conflict: here was science, seeming to disprove religion, and people were saying "Throw it all out!" But, some reasoned, "It's going through the same conflict: was science, seeming brilliant idea that scientific people in thousands of years, is it all nonsense?" They had this conflict as a teenager which really started me on my career.

I found that about half the people I knew well, I could type with some degree of confidence. There was another half of them that I could never fit into the Enneagram.

one thing or another, but it was that lucky resolution of that conflict as a teenager which really started me on my career. Now I've reached a point where I'm quite proud to say I'm a real, hard-assed rigorous scientist, and I'm a spiritual seeker, and I don't think those two have to be in understanding, it either. So when they make these parallels, physicists who read it probably think, "Oh God, laymen, this is nonsense, they don't understand what they're talking about," and then reject the connection that people are trying to make to spirituality. So when I try to draw connections or bridges, I try to draw on really solid science, not talk about something like quantum physics—which I don't really understand or use—even in metaphorical ways, which would create unnecessary hostility.

Applying this back to the Enneagram and merging into psychology, skipping the necessity for spirituality for a moment, every "research" project on the Enneagram that's done to low standards in a sloppy way hurts the process of acceptance. If you're going to see how useful this is as a valid personality typology or how useful is it in therapeutic ways, professionals have long ago developed high quality ways of doing this, and that's now what's expected if you want to introduce something into the scientific and psychological mainstream. When it's done in a low quality way, it just sets up reactions which, if anything, dilute the good quality evidence, making it harder for the Enneagram to gain some acceptance.

EM: That's understandable.

CTT: I would like to see acceptance. I haven't followed Enneagram developments closely in the last few years, but I know that when I was heavily involved in it, there were a lot of things that could have been done with the application of basic psychological and scientific methods. For example, when I was first introduced to the Enneagram in Claudio Naranjo's group back in the early '70s, it was clear to me that it was one thing to have an expert on the Enneagram figure out somebody's type—that was nice, but in a sense, that was a labor intensive process and it depended on how good that one person doing the typing was. What we really needed was a high quality psychological test that could type people very accurately.

I had enough education in how to go about creating psychological tests to know it's not easy. For instance, there are a lot of poor quality psychological tests out there from the early days of psychology that have what's technically called "face validity." On the face of it, on the surface, they look like they ought to measure the thing they propose to measure. So a test of neuroticism would ask the question, "Are you neurotic?" And if someone said "Yes," then the conclusion was they were neurotic. But if "No," they're not neurotic. On the face of it, you'd think it would work that way. But we know that's often not the way things actually work. You can't just make up a bunch of questions that you think ought to discriminate different types on the Enneagram and give them to people and score them and think you've got a valid way of typing.

EM: Have you ever worked on creating a good test?

CTT: I actually began a little work on coming up with a test for Enneagram types at the time, using a model that had been developed for one of the most popular psychological tests around, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). The MMPI developers created what you might call an empirical test. They already had large populations of different types—schizophrenics, manic-depressives, paranoids, hysterics, what have you, in various mental hospitals, mainly...
Ever since Descartes posed his dualistic philosophy which separated the material world from the spiritual, science has been at odds with the church. At times, science has been on the defensive, such as when Galileo was forced to recant his heretical ideas on the motions of the planets, and often it’s been the assailant, such as when Copernicus’s view of the solar system shattered the geocentric vision of the universe. This conflict, which lingers even in 20th-century Western science, has degenerated into scientism, a dogmatic resolution to divorce mainstream science from all things spiritual.

There are a few brave scientists, however, who are willing to suffer the slings and arrows of scientism in an effort to explain the unexplainable. Among this group are the parapsychologists, a cadre of explorers who have chosen to penetrate the mystery of psi phenomena such as clairvoyance, psychokinesis, and precognition. While their hope is to prove the existence of such phenomena and explain the mechanisms behind them, the scorn of mainstream science has forced parapsychologists into a self-imposed silence on the subject, broken only by reports of stringent methodologies and statistical results. The parapsychologists’ thoughts and feelings on the implications of their work have remained sequestered—until now. Charles Tart presents the inside story from the leading figures in the field of parapsychology in Body Mind Spirit: Exploring the Parapsychology of Spirituality.

The book opens with Dr. Tart’s address to the 1993 Second World Parliament of Religions, where he sketches the history of conflict between scientism and religion, and outlines the evidence for the reality of a spiritual world and spiritual life. Noted figures such as William Roll, Rhea White, Michael Grosso, and Karlis Osis give their views on the battle between scientism and religion, their reasons for attempting to explore the spiritual realm with scientific tools, their thoughts on the future of parapsychology (as well as other fields of scientific study), and the potential effects that a merger between science and spirituality would have on the rest of us.

As important as any lab report to readers seeking an understanding of parapsychology, and of equal impact to the spiritually minded who have had little contact with the scientific exploration of psi phenomena, Body Mind Spirit offers a tantalizing glimpse of what could be possible if the conflict between scientism and religion is resolved and a cooperative exploration of the spiritual world begins.
in Minnesota. And they said, "Let's forget for a minute what we think various questions mean. Let's just give these people lots and lots of questions, true/false questions, and find out empirically what discriminates by counting which questions are answered true more often than these people in a labor-intensive individual way. It worked, whether it made sense or not.

They developed a test with great empirical validity. That is, they already had experts who had diagnosed these people in a very intensive way. All the psychiatrists and psychologists who had worked hard on the process of classifying these people in labor-intensive individual interviews developed a paper and pencil test that got very good at separating these people in this purely empirical way. It worked, whether it made sense or not.

**EM: What happened to your Enneagram test?**

**CTT: I developed something like the MMPI by collecting several hundred questions from people who were in Claudio's group with me and who were fairly familiar with the Enneagram types. I wouldn't have called us "experts," but we had been doing a lot of work on ourselves with this material at that time. I basically gave the people in Claudio's group with me and who were fairly familiar with this material at that time. I basically gave the

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do, you've got something that helps distinguish between manics and schizophrenics.

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There's a nice parallel to the Enneagram here, too. As I was thinking about what we might talk about when you called up, I thought in a way I ought to say that the Enneagram isn't real.

**EM: Is not real?**

**CTT: Is not real. It's a theory. It's a theory that says the nature of the human mind is such that there are nine major types that it naturally falls into in terms of dynamic realities within an individual, habits and defense mechanisms and so forth. That's a nice theory. But then when you have a particular person in front of you, that particular person is a single, living reality, and they may or may not fit into that particular typology. For instance, when I was working closely with the Enneagram, I found that about half the people I knew well, I could type with some degree of confidence. There was another half of them that I could never fit into the Enneagram. But that was all right. I didn't have to do that in order to relate to people. Those for whom the typology was helpful, great. For those for whom it's not helpful, you don't ignore their reality just because they don't fit into a particular typology. You do what you can within the reality of what they are.

To come back to the point I was making, the Enneagram is a theoretical structure. I don't know if in reality the human mind is constructed as such that it only falls into nine basic types. Maybe there's an infinite number of types. I kind of hope not, because that makes life too complicated! I mean, I'm intellectually lazy. I don't want to have to take every single reality just as it is in the "here and now" every moment-by-moment and never have past experience as a guide to anything! I'm happy that past experience will sometimes let me classify somebody or something and have some idea of how to deal with it. Of course, getting attached to this kind of theoretical reductionism is a major block to enlightenment too!

Then for a number of years, I worked within that theory/system, seeing myself as a Seven. It sensitized me, for instance, to certain habits and mannerisms of mine which I might not have picked up very readily otherwise, and they fit. I also eventually began to see how in certain ways I didn't quite fit that pattern, and if I tried to make myself fit into that pattern, I would be distorting reality, I would be getting out of touch, which certainly was not the right thing to do. I also saw this happening in the SAT group I was in. Some people were learning a great deal about themselves because of the Enneagram, and we were certainly learning something about each other, but at times there was a tendency to start stereotyping other people: "Oh, you're a Five, so of course you won't do so-and-so, or something like that." At times that was amusing, but at times you could also see that it was getting in the way of reality.

One of the things I learned from Claudio was a saying he attributed to the Sarmuni Brotherhood. I have no idea whether this Brotherhood is mythical or real, but I really resonate with the saying. "There is no God but reality; to seek Him elsewhere is the action of the Fall." That's "Fall" in the Christian sense of the Fall from Grace. This has always made marvelous sense to me. No matter how noble you think your motivations are, if you distort your perception of reality to make it fit with your noble idea, you're getting out of touch and falling into Samsara as the Buddhists would say, or into Maya as the Hindus would say. The more you get out of touch with reality, the more stupid things you're going to do, you won't know what's going on, you'll create karma, as it were, that will get you into trouble. So, insofar as the Enneagram guides you to see things in yourself and make sense of things in yourself that you hadn't seen before, so long as it inspires you to try to develop certain skills that are lacking for your type and you find are lacking for you and you need to develop—that's great!
test to Claudio to work with, and it sort of disappeared somewhere into the mists of time. I think parts of it may have made it into some other people’s attempts at tests, but it was never really done the way it needed to be done. And I got off into other things, so it never really went anywhere as far as I know.

EM: Do you still have it?

CTT: I don’t have the slightest idea! It might be in a 20 or 30 year old box somewhere, but I don’t know where it would be.

EM: I don’t think Claudio ever came up with a test, though he did combine the DSM categories with Enneagram types; that could have been from a seed that you planted.

CTT: Perhaps, although Claudio was so creative he didn’t need any seeds from me! Although I think that was largely what you might say is theoretical work. You know one typology well, you know the other typology well, and it makes sense that there are certain connections. That’s a great start. But I’m in this very hard scientific tradition in a sense that says theories are nice, but it’s facts that matter. Show me some tests that prove that there is a correlation between, say, DSM types and Enneagram types. Not theoretically but because you’ve got people who are these types and they actually work out that way.

I’m very empirically-oriented that way. I want to know what works, what’s practical, what shows up in the data. This is an important thing to me. When I say I’m proud to be a scientist, I’m a scientist in a very rigorous tradition that says science is primarily about the facts, what you can actually observe out in reality. The theories are secondary. These wonderful explanations are nice, but if the explanations don’t keep fitting the facts, out go the explanations! I really keep coming back to facts that way. A lot of scientists forget that, they get enamored of various theories.

So when people work with the Enneagram, if it fits them well, that can be very useful work. I certainly saw that with people, and it was certainly true for myself. Other people didn’t seem to fit a type very well, and if they tried to force themselves into a type, I think they could do themselves an injustice and not deal with the reality of what went on with them.

EM: It seems, though, that if you do consistent work on yourself, even if you have mistyped yourself, you may learn important things about yourself, and as you go on to type yourself differently, you may have something else to learn.

CTT: Yes, and that’s important. Let me just go back to my personal involvement to flesh this particular idea out. Before I was introduced to the Enneagram in Claudio’s group, I had been doing some Gurdjieff Work. I’d been doing other kinds of psychological growth work for quite a few years, and I was really the kind of person who was interested in trying to understand myself. Partly for practical reasons—I had done a lot of stupid things and I wanted to understand how not to do them—partly just out of curiosity.

I was very interested in understanding my own mind, and I had, as it were, made thousands of observations about myself over the years, some of them fairly deep observations in a Gurdjieffian sense. And I met somebody one day who had been in Claudio’s first Seekers After Truth (SAT) Group, which had just been going for a month or two. He began telling me about the Enneagram types, and when he came to my type, which was a Seven, a whole slew of observations I had made about myself over the years suddenly fell into place. I had a short-cut conceptual system that made sense out of a lot of stuff hadn’t been too connected before. That was one of the reasons that I decided, whatever this guy is teaching, I have to get involved with it and find out more about that.

The Enneagram can be helpful, for instance, in developing compassion for yourself, because when you see that you were forced into some fixation by childhood events...

But I think there comes a certain point where you have to be really careful that you haven’t turned the Enneagram into just another blind belief system, where you’re just imposing a strait-jacket onto yourself rather than continuing to grow.

EM: It reminds me of the Buddhist saying that “If you knew the consequence of sin, you couldn’t bring yourself to commit one!”

CTT: I learned in the context of being very involved in self-observation and psychological growth work, and that made a lot of sense that way. I’ve always worried about how it would work with people who weren’t really involved in observing themselves, or hadn’t figured out reasonably objective ways to observe themselves. Then it could be taken on as just another belief system, and people could be forced into a belief system which might or not fit but certainly didn’t take them any closer to reality. To make a big jump: from all the stuff I’ve investigated, transpersonal psychology, personal and spiritual growth, for me the keynote of it has been being able to live more in the here and now. To be able to be more perceptive about what is actually happening outside, about the actual dynamics going on inside, instead of being lost in ideas, defenses and fantasies. Not that this is a universal growth path for everybody, but it →
has worked well for me and works for some.

**EM:** Right—you have to be willing to look at yourself. I once heard someone say "Why would I want to learn about this? I might find out something about myself that I don't like!"

**CTT:** This goes back to the fact that I'm proud to be a scientist, too. In its best sense, science is a very noble quest. Because science says, "We want to know the truth about reality, regardless of what we'd like to believe about it," and we admit that we're starting from a place of great ignorance. So you have to practice absolute, ruthless honesty to be a good scientist, and look at things to see where the facts fall in spite of what you want to believe, in spite of your theories and explanations and all that. In this sense, this aspect of spiritual growth, of trying to honestly see what's going on, to see it more clearly, and to always put your beliefs and preferences and avoidances secondary to that, and to keep coming back to reality—that fits right into being a scientist.

As I reflect on what I just said, it sounds a little on the cold side, and it is slightly cold. So I would add that this seeking of truth has to be developed with balancing compassion also. That's not as easy to describe in a straight-forward manner, but it is an important part of real growth. Compassion for yourself as well as compassion for other people. The Enneagram can be helpful, for instance, in developing compassion for yourself, because when you see that you were forced into some fixation by childhood events and it's become a pattern that has defined you, yes, in one sense it is your responsibility, but in another sense you're stuck and it's not completely your fault. When you realize that, you can ease up on yourself a little bit and be a little bit more compassionate towards yourself, and that's a step towards learning compassion, towards others as well as yourself.

**EM:** Going back to when you joined the SAT group with Claudio—was it that conversation you had with the other Seven that motivated your interest, or were you already studying the Enneagram?

**CTT:** Oh, quite a time to be at Esalen and quite a time to be in California! I'll tell you a funny little story. I've always been interested in unusual things like the Enneagram and spiritual stuff. Back in graduate school, my advisors worried about me, you know, I was an impressionable young man already interested in "weird" stuff. I had arranged to have a post-doctoral training fellowship with Gardner Murphy at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka. My advisors were horrified! Although Gardner Murphy was respectable in some ways (he's served as a president of the American Psychological Association, for example), he had actually written a book called *Asian Psychologies* back in the '60s. He thought we could learn something from people in Asia! My advisors couldn't let me be exposed to a wild man like that! They got me another post-doctoral fellowship and sent me to California at the peak of the psychedelic revolution instead! Fortunately, saving me from all those weird influences in Kansas!

**EM:** Out of the frying pan and into the fire!

**CTT:** Exactly!

**EM:** You were talking about valid testing as a way for mainstream psychology to accept the Enneagram. Any other suggestions in terms of using scientific methods with the Enneagram, besides testing?

**CTT:** Yes, as you mentioned earlier, I think a lot of people who teach and use the Enneagram don't have a psychological background to begin with. That makes it hard to get psychologists to pay attention. For better or worse, every idea should be judged on its inherent merits and not in terms of who were the people who came up with it. But in the real human world, people are prejudiced. They listen to people from their own group. I remember when I got my Ph.D., I thought all of a sudden, all of my wild opinions had suddenly become authoritative considerations from a doctoral! Oh my goodness, what snobbery, what magic!

**EM:** Scary!

**CTT:** Yes, scary also, because I know how little I knew.

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**Enneagram Jewelry**

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**February, 1999**

**Enneagram Monthly**

**Page 21**
I was one of the people who had been involved with Esalen Institute and other California growth movements, and had kept track of what was going on in [Arica] Chile when Claudio, John Lilly and those folks were there, and I'd hear the reports that came back. I knew that Claudio had come back to Berkeley and was starting something which I wanted to find out more about, and then running into this guy who was a student of his really whetted my interest. He had only been going for a month or so, and so my wife Judy and I both got involved very heavily right after that. That was about 1971 when we got involved with Claudio, and stayed heavily involved until about 1974 when the first SAT group petered out.

EM: Did it do something to your opinion of doctors you had previously respected?

CTT: Yes, I suddenly discovered they were like me and didn’t know that much after all! The point about the Enneagram for people who don’t have a psychological background, especially doing test building and the like, or doing psychotherapy evaluation and research, is that there is a well-developed art of such things at this point, it doesn’t have to be done starting from scratch. People who don’t know that stuff would be well-advised to try to find a sympathetic psychologist who has those skills to work with so it can be done the right way. So a lot of work doesn’t go into researching something and then somebody who knows how to do these things says, “Oh, but you left out this obvious step, your research is worth-