

THE DYNAMIC ENNEAGRAM – SIXES

By Thomas Condon

“People born to be hanged are always safe in water.” – Mark Twain’s mother

Out on the plains of Africa there are water holes where clusters of animals come to drink. There zebras gather in small herds near their worst enemies: the lions. Whenever lions are present, the zebras gravitate toward them, maintaining a safe distance but keeping the lions in view. If the lions get up and move, the zebras follow them. Lions hunt in short swift charges; if the zebras lose sight of them, the lions could sneak up and attack. So the zebras keep the danger close.

Six is the most explicitly fearful style in the Enneagram. Sixes are especially aware of life’s dangers and wary of hazards that may lurk beneath everyday appearances. To varying degrees they keep danger close to them in order to stay safe. Some of this danger may be real but most of it is imagined.

There are two types of Sixes: phobic and counterphobic. Their reactions to being fearful are so different that they can appear to have separate personality styles. When phobic Sixes sense danger, they lay low. They may act cautious, compliant or ambivalent in order to avoid potential attack. When counterphobic Sixes sense danger, they often deliberately provoke it by acting outspoken and aggressive – wanting to handle trouble before it handles them. Phobic Sixes can be charming, modest and meek while counterphobics can seem tough, challenging and punchy. A nervous phobic Six I know has a bumper sticker on her car that says, “Disappear Fear.” A counterphobic Six’s bumper sticker reads, “Fear is Never Boring.”

Healthy phobic Sixes are steady, loyal and idealistic. They are usually committed to a tradition, group or cause but in a voluntary, dedicated way. To that end, they are dependable, hard working and unusually professional. They keep their promises, are faithful in marriage and make honorable, protective friends.

Healthy phobic Sixes are gracious and diplomatic. They put people at ease and are often well-liked for their discretion and manners. They can be very funny and have vivid imaginations. Healthy phobic Sixes handle power with integrity and are fair-minded leaders partly because they sympathize with underdogs. They’re not

pushovers and will take unpopular stands when necessary. Generally, though, they work toward solutions that benefit all parties and allow everyone to win.

When phobic Sixes are less healthy, caught in what I'll be calling a trance, they can become blind conformists even as they avoid personal responsibility. They subtly shift their power onto outside authorities and begin to romanticize those who seem surer of themselves. The Six may strike an unconscious bargain with a hero, a bargain that says, "I'll do what you want me to do if you'll protect me from danger." The Six then hides under an imaginary umbrella, pledging fealty to this outside force, growing addicted to the security that this arrangement seems to offer. The Six's positive capacity for loyalty is double-edged – when less healthy, Sixes can be loyal to the wrong people or simply codependent.

When they give away their power, phobic Sixes start to worry and feel helpless. To compensate, they become cautious and wary, trying to anticipate the motives of others. They may also try to check their own aggressive or powerful impulses, so that they don't deviate from the submissive role they have agreed to play. They could have trouble finishing what they start, worrying about who will criticize the finished product. They may seem friendly, but can be passive-aggressive or give off contradictory messages as their resentment breaks through.

Entranced phobic Sixes can be skeptical, tense and indecisive, hesitantly stutter-stepping their way through life. "He self-flagellates," explains the friend of a Six. "He has tremendous energy, but he doesn't like uncertainty. So he's like a bouncing ball, up and down – he gives himself a lot of angst."

When deeply unhealthy, phobic Sixes become addled with fear and openly dependent upon others. They might surrender their life to work, becoming an abject slave to a job or a boss. They could act like weak, powerless losers and yet demand coddling from friends, tyrannizing others with their helplessness, placing strict, narrow limits on what they will risk or try. Deeply entranced phobic Sixes avoid all risks, terrorize themselves and may persecute others who deviate from norms. They can also be chronically cowardly, litigious, petty, intolerant and dogmatic.

There's an old story about three pilots watching a plane taking off during a hurricane. The first pilot says, "There goes a brave man." The second says, "There goes a fool." The third pilot says, "What's the difference?"

Healthy counterphobic Sixes are often courageous, willing to take a tiger by the tail and yank. They can be physically brave, highly skilled and have a real passion for living. If they participate in a tradition, it is usually in the role of constructive gadfly, serving the tradition by stirring it up. They consider themselves team players who offer useful alternatives, using the old as a springboard to the new. To this end, they may be energetic, honest, assertive and have many good ideas.

If a healthy counterphobic Six is not serving a tradition, he or she is often creative and original. Their ability to look past appearances and to question assumptions leads them deeper into a unique point of view. They can be attracted to art as a way to express themselves and resolve their general sense of alienation.

Less healthy counterphobic Sixes often have an edgy, restless quality. Some channel their energies into physical activity; they could enjoy sports and tend to be more openly competitive than phobic Sixes. Some counterphobics hide their insecurities with cool or tough masks. They may seek physical challenges to expel their fears by facing danger.

Entranced counterphobic Sixes are afraid of being afraid and to beat their fears they take preemptive action. Because they act impulsively they are prone to making bad decisions. When unhealthy, their preoccupation with taking risks can devolve into a recklessness that verges on self-destruction. A counterphobic Six with vertigo defined it as “the fear that you’re going to somehow uncontrollably hurl yourself off a precipice.” Another Six tells how he used to pump gasoline into his motorcycle with a lighted cigarette in his mouth. A counterphobic journalist says: “Every time I get a new assignment I’m convinced that this is the one I’m gonna blow. But pulling out of what feels like a nosedive is really exhilarating.” Another Six, a stage actor, describes going on stage as “parachuting behind enemy lines. My job is to get out as quickly as I can.” Another counterphobic Six enjoyed fly fishing – for piranhas.

Back on the plains of Africa, one zebra has begun acting strangely. While the others remain in their intermediate zone, not too far away from the lions but not too close, this zebra can’t stand living with the constant, potential threat that the lions pose. To the horror of the other zebras, it raises itself up and charges the lions. Counterphobic Sixes are often defiant or rebellious towards authority and can habitually challenge imbalances of power, feeling that the world is unfairly biased against them. Some have a ranting quality, especially when they talk about gov-

ernments and power structures. Many counterphobics are wryly funny and good at satire. When insecure, however, their humor can sting and bite.

Zoo workers say that zebras are far more dangerous than most people realize. Like horses they frighten easily but they are also ill-tempered. When zebras bite they hang on, sometimes until their victims die. Deeply entranced counterphobic Sixes can be aggressive, unstable and senselessly contentious. They may be fruitlessly hyperactive, as well as accusative and vengeful. Some counterphobics are provocative and obnoxious; they prize their hatreds and can be belligerent or even persecutory; adopting a dangerous, vigilante-like mentality. Deeply unhealthy counterphobics generally behave much worse than the authorities they accuse of abusing power.

Fear and Doubt

Sixes are part of the emotional trio who oppose themselves, project their power onto others and have trouble taking action. In the trance of their style, Sixes project their core capabilities – their fundamental ability to live independent lives and assert their own point of view. Unlike Fives who fear being socially entrapped, Sixes believe that more general forces oppose them. These can be authorities, institutions, the church, the government, bosses, spouses – whoever is the Six's particular bogeyman. One Six joked, "My mother is Puerto Rican and my father is black. We lived in a large Jewish tenement in an Italian neighborhood. Whenever I left the house, the kids would point at me and say: 'Get him! He's all of them!'"

Some Sixes existentialize their fears in that they see the universe as a bleak, spectral void capable of random, unpredictable hostility. "Fate" is a frightening, impersonal force that can snuff out the Six in an eyeblink or rain down misfortune upon them.

Entranced Sixes can complicate daily life, ambivalate about decisions and baffle others with their apparent helplessness. While this behavior can seem pointlessly self-defeating, Sixes believe they live in a universe that is out to defeat them anyway. By defeating themselves first, Sixes at least control the time and place of their defeat and perversely take a kind of default power. The good thing about being self-defeating is that part of you always wins.

One Six grew up next door to a dog kennel that raised Doberman Pinschers and remembered being frightened daily by the neighbor dogs. Each morning he would walk out his front door to go to school, carrying his lunch pail, open-hearted to the world. Suddenly the dogs would begin barking violently, terrifying the boy. This went on for some time until one day something different happened: the young Six began hearing the dogs barking in his mind before he left the house. This scared him but also helped him feel prepared and in control, eliminating the element of surprise when he walked out the door.

As adults, Sixes can habitually scare themselves in the same way that they were once scared by others. Although an adult Six might believe that the outside world is poised to attack him, Sixes are actually self-attacking. They either scare themselves with invented fears, recruit others to scare them or unconsciously engineer events so that they confirm the Six's negative expectations. In other words, they set themselves up.

A friend of humorist Robert Benchley's once said of a mutual acquaintance: "There's no doubt about it, Robert, he's your worst enemy." "Not while *I'm* alive!" Benchley shot back. To an unhealthy Six, the way to be your own best friend is to be your own worst enemy.

A man is chased over a cliff by tigers. As he falls, he grabs on to a vine while the tigers crowd above him snarling and swatting. As he clutches the vine more tightly, the roots start coming out of the side of the cliff. He looks below and sees fog.

Desperate the man looks heavenward and yells, "Can anyone up there help me?"

A deep booming voice replies, "Do you have faith?" The vine comes a little farther out of the side of the cliff, and he looks back up and yells, "Yeah, sure! I have faith."

"Then let go of the vine!" comes the booming reply.

The man pauses to think this over. Meanwhile the vine comes further out of the cliff while the tigers are still snarling above him, the fog billowing below him. Finally he looks up again and yells, "Can anybody *else* up there help me?"

Sixes control through doubting, what NLP calls *finding counter examples*. A Six's central defensive habit is to question reality in order to discover its hidden

potential dangers, to find strength and safety in negative anticipation. Meanwhile they distrust their own instincts and the evidence of their senses. “It’s like I can’t count to one without a second thought,” one Six joked. Another said that her childhood nickname was “Yabut” because of the way she would react to any assertion with the words “Yeah, but...”

Let’s say a Six is driving one night down a dark highway. Suddenly a car pulls out in front of her. She swerves, successfully avoiding a collision, and continues driving.

Prior to the emergency the Six was feeling calm, confident and secure. The way she reacted reflected her mood; when the car surprised her, she responded reflexively and effectively, without a second thought.

A minute after the near miss the Six has a delayed reaction. She suddenly starts thinking about what happened: “That was a nasty surprise! The next time I might not be so lucky. I’ll bet he was a drunk. Didn’t I read somewhere that this is the most dangerous road in the region? It’s full of drunk drivers because there are bars around here. Haven’t planes crashed on this highway?”

The scared Six driver is now second-guessing herself, imagining future emergencies and rehearsing how she will handle each one. As she does so she makes herself anxious, fills her mind with vivid images and pays less attention to the task of driving. The irony is that she is trying to feel as calm, confident and secure as she was before she scared herself.

If you cut out a cardboard silhouette of a hawk and sweep it over a pen filled with baby chickens, the chicks will scatter in terror. Sixes defend against their shadows with the defense mechanism of *projection* – disowning their own feelings or unwanted qualities and seeing them in the environment or in other people, something like the pot calling the kettle black. Unlike Fives who give others the power to overwhelm or emotionally invade them, Sixes project their fundamental power to pursue their own destiny, make independent decisions and take overt responsibility for their thoughts, feelings and actions. Instead, they give this power to outside forces and then unconsciously hope to be rescued or protected in return.

Six is a very romantic personality style but the subject of its romance is power, in both its positive and negative aspects. Just as Fours can dress up a beloved person in their emotional imagination and feelings, Sixes romanticize powerful peo-

ple, institutions or entities, imbuing them with a significance they don't necessarily have. Sixes can either deify these forces or demonize them but, in either case, the Six is seeing his own power in the other and then unconsciously living in tension to it. A Six who is angry might only be conscious of how angry others seem. A married Six who is attracted to someone other than her spouse might begin to suspect her husband of having an affair. A Six who wants to make art but lacks the courage could idolize artists.

One Six told this story about projection: "I'd had a difficult frustrating day and was in a bad mood. So I went to the gym and began lifting weights to work off my anger. After a while, I noticed a heavily muscled young man who was looking in my direction with narrowed eyes. I looked away and went on lifting weights. A little while later I noticed the same thing. The kid was still staring my way with narrowed eyes.

"I resisted the impulse to glare back at him. But I started thinking about how much I resented these kinds of testosterone-based challenges. I remembered having that much to prove when I was young. It reminded me of wolves urinating in snow marking out their territory. How glad I was that I wasn't young anymore! I continued grumbling to myself like this and went on with my exercising.

"Later, on my way to get a drink of water, I came face to face with my nemesis. Despite my feelings, I decided to be friendly and said "Hi." The young man smiled pleasantly, narrowed his eyes and replied "Hi, how are you?" I suddenly realized that he had bad eyesight. He'd been squinting because he wasn't wearing his glasses. I'd painted my bad mood on his face."

In the novel *The World According to Garp*, the main character buys a house after he watches a light plane crash into it. His rationale? The odds of another plane ever crashing into the house are astronomically slim. Sixes who project their power onto existential forces can be superstitious or believe unduly in "fate." They could watch the world for external signs that tell them what they should do or perhaps refuse to make decisions without consulting their astrologer. A Six who has a daily breakfast of cereal with sliced banana says, "I always cut the banana into seven slices. And I count them and recount them to make sure there's seven. Because my life has gone well with seven slices, and I don't want to tempt fate by having six or eight."

Positive and Negative Hallucination

The writer William Burroughs once said, “A paranoid is someone who knows a *little* about what’s going on.” Most entranced Sixes aren’t truly paranoid but rather suspicious, approaching life and new situations with a generalized attitude of bad faith. They look for what can go wrong, expect the worst and attribute their own negative qualities to others. But the inner strategy common to both paranoia and suspicion is based on what hypnotherapists call *positive hallucination* – seeing things that aren’t there – and taking a minor menace and magnifying it into an outright danger. “People think that I’m a hypochondriac,” one Six explains, “but I’m not. I’m an alarmist. I never imagine I have an ailment when I don’t have one. On the other hand, if I’ve got a hangnail, I think it’s a brain tumor. I always cut to the worst possible conclusion.”

In the Six trance, “what if?” is always a more compelling question than “what is?” A Six’s positively hallucinated fears are based on possibility which, by definition, can’t be disproved. This makes a Six’s fearful conjectures difficult to refute and explains why it is generally pointless to try to talk an entranced Six out of his or her fears.

Positive hallucination and projection are also at play when Sixes give their friends or intimates the “third degree.” Say, for instance, you are married to a Six who senses that you are angry. Maybe you are unconsciously angry but out of touch with your feelings. If you are a Nine, for example, you might be suppressing your anger to avoid being disagreeable and creating conflict.

But your Six spouse senses your latent anger and begins to probe. “Are you sure there’s nothing wrong? You seem upset. There must be something bothering you. What about what I did the other day, are you angry about that?” If the Six is counterphobic he or she might aggressively try to provoke you.

When you finally express the anger that you didn’t know you had, the Six might seem happy or relieved and perhaps say something like, “Oh, *that’s* all it is; I can deal with that. I can see why you would be angry, that makes sense.” It’s a relief to the Six, because he or she was hallucinating something far worse.

A further variation on this pattern comes when a Six successfully irritates a truly un-angry friend or spouse, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a man says of his Six wife: “Sometimes she goes to great trouble to get me angry. Then she

acts like what I say in anger is my true opinion of her. Actually it's only my true opinion of her when I'm really angry. But somehow she seems pleased."

Ski instructors say that novice skiers see downhill mountain slopes as steeper than they really are, as if magnified by their inexperience. When Sixes see scary images of negative possibilities they not only magnify those images but also see them as close, bright, vivid and in motion.

The most important quality of a Six's internal imagery is size. In English we say we "look up to someone" or put someone we admire "on a pedestal", phrases that imply size as well as height – the admired person is both larger and taller than the speaker. Entranced Sixes often see others, especially authority figures, as larger and taller than themselves, roughly the same height difference as between a child and a parent. This is a contributing element to the Six feeling not only small and helpless, but dependent and young.

While Sixes positively hallucinate danger, they negatively hallucinate good feelings, including times when they are confident, capable and successful. A Six comedian says, "When I'm onstage, if the whole room is laughing and there's one person just staring at me, I'm gonna go home thinking, 'How come he didn't laugh?'" In baseball this is called having "rabbit ears." If 50,000 fans cheer a player and one person boos, the player only hears the boo. Another Six adds, "I have a reputation with my friends as being this eternal pessimist, a groaner, a doom predictor. And I probably am, to be fair about it. I just tend to concentrate on the doughnut hole instead of the doughnut. Because I think if I do that it will help me plug it."

I once watched a Six and a Seven talking. The Six was complaining that everything in his life was difficult while the Seven kept cheerfully reframing the Six's complaints. The Six looked uncomfortable with each positive suggestion from the Seven. He would pause for a moment and then say "yes but" and come up with a renewed argument about why his life was so bad. The Seven, in turn, kept finding positive counter-examples while the Six found negative ones.

Growing desperate, the Six grabbed a magazine that lay on a nearby table. On the magazine's cover was a two-paneled photograph advertising the magazine's feature article. "Look," the Six said to the Seven, "this is how you see things, and this is how I see things." The left panel of the photograph showed a beautiful

young woman sunbathing on a tropical beach. The right panel featured a close up picture of a skin lesion. The magazine's feature article was about skin cancer.

Other Sensory Distinctions

Entranced Sixes often talk to themselves and show themselves bright, vivid, frightening images, then talk to themselves some more and then get anxious feelings which are usually experienced in the Six's upper chest or the midline of their torso. Occasionally a Six will report experiencing anxiety in the belly but this is less usual. Sensations in the belly – the area of the body often associated with will and power – are more typically cut off and the area may be experienced as numb or tense. “It's like I'm wearing a belt of steel,” one Six said, echoing many others.

Some scared Sixes have slightly widened eyes, which give them the shocked, I've-seen-a-ghost look that people have after bad plastic surgery. “My husband always tells me, ‘put your eyes back in your head,’” one Six reports, “because I tend to get bug-eyed when I get scared. And then I think, ‘Oh God, now everyone knows I'm scared.’ Then my eyes bug out more.”

A percentage of Sixes are prone to panic attacks and the description of the symptoms can match elements of a Six's general experience: dizziness, heart palpitations, a churning stomach, choking sensations, weak knees and chest pains. A self-panicking Six is essentially caught in a continuous “fight or flight response” and their bodies adapt to their emotional habit with chronic tension, which then becomes their kinesthetic baseline, what somatic therapists call “body armor.”

Panic is, of course, a Six's believed-in form of control even though the Six feels and acts helpless. If unhealthy Sixes start to relax, they may also start to feel vulnerable or uncertain and suddenly begin inventing fresh fears. After making themselves anxious again their tension returns, but they may also feel back in control.

Some phobic Sixes fear their own sexuality. The energy present in sex is reminiscent of the instinctual animal power that some Sixes try to avoid feeling. A rush of sexual energy could feel to a Six like a power surge flowing through an electrical cord not made for it. And like a surge protector, the Six defensively shuts the feeling down.

Some very counterphobic Sixes are people of action who climb mountains, race automobiles and trek across deserts. Typically, they are aware of their physical body feelings but have little or no idea that they are emotionally afraid. The fact that they are driven by fear can be surprising to them.

By middle age, counterphobic Sixes can have ailments due to youthful risk-taking or possibly a series of colorful stories about past accidents. While not necessarily socially extraverted, some counterphobics are physically extraverted in that they find their center through motion.

A few Sixes are absolutely phobic or counterphobic, but most exist along a continuum where they are more one than the other. An extreme phobic Six would be considered clinically paranoid while an equally unhealthy counterphobic Six could be a raging anti-authoritarian. An indecisive phobic Six could be occasionally aggressive but return to his cautious, phobic mode when the episode has passed.

Sooner or later most phobic Sixes develop some counterphobic strategies. The sheer difficulty of living daily with chronic fear gradually spurs them to find a more active form of coping, especially if the Six has an inkling that he or she is producing the fear. This doesn't mean that counterphobic is better than phobic – both are rooted in a habit of fearing that is itself distorted. All Sixes have an inner defense of doubting, of disbelieving reality and their own instincts. When healthy, the two types of Sixes tend to grow towards each other, with phobics becoming more courageous and counterphobics more accepting of their fears.

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