how seeing the world through the lens of personality changes everything

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The BuzzFeed-style quiz is taking over the internet, serving up answers to questions no one is asking. What *Star Wars* character are you? What restaurant trend describes your personality? Which Hogwarts house suits you best? What city should you actually live in? Which Ryan Gosling character is your soul mate? What’s your superpower? Your work style?

These addictive quizzes make it easy to put ourselves in (very weird) boxes. And if my Facebook feed is any indication, people can’t resist taking these quizzes and sharing their results—no matter how inane the topic or how small the insight offered. Underpinning these quizzes is the core assumption that we won’t have the same answers. We are all different—in matters both serious and silly—and discovering those differences is strangely enjoyable. Cynics argue that we’re drawn to these simple check-the-box quizzes because we’re ill-equipped to deal with the complexity of real life, but I believe this trend points to something more substantial.
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We’re not just looking for a way to kill five minutes online. Our methods may be questionable, but our motives are pure: we truly want to know more about ourselves and the people we interact with every day. We suspect our lives would be better if we actually understood ourselves and the people we love. We want to know why we do what we do, think what we think, act how we act—and why they do too.

But what we’re finding is this: actually knowing ourselves isn’t as easy as taking a few check-the-box quizzes on the internet. We’re surprised to discover that it’s difficult to perceive ourselves for who we really are. That information would be infinitely more useful, but it’s also harder to come by. Since we don’t know where to start to find the good stuff—the genuinely helpful information about ourselves and the people we love—we settle for discovering which defunct ’90s soda we are or which Jane Austen leading man we’re meant to marry. But if we instead knew the right questions to ask ourselves—the ones that would give us true insight into our inner selves—and approached those questions with the same playful spirit (and perhaps just a smidge more seriousness and self-reflection), we could emerge with life-changing information. We could learn to read people better—ourselves and others.

What Makes You You

This struggle to define ourselves isn’t some narcissistic fad driven by social media. Our collective fascination with understanding ourselves—and, specifically, understanding our personalities—goes back much further than that, to way before the days of the internet. We’ve known for a long time that we don’t begin our lives as identical blank slates. For thousands of years, writers,
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philosophers, and even biblical heroes have teased out the differences in human nature. We can find personality references in the writings of Socrates and Shakespeare, as well as in the writings of the desert fathers and America’s founding fathers. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them” (1 Corinthians 12:4), I imagine he was speaking not only of spiritual gifts but also of personality traits. (Paul himself was certainly known for his fiery personality and was under no illusions few were quite like him.)

When we talk about someone’s personality, we’re referring to those characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that make that person unique. We’re all inclined to think, feel, and act in particular ways. Our personalities capture what we’re likely to find relaxing or exciting or pleasurable or tough. This core set of qualities is a huge part of what makes you you.

Current research indicates that personality traits are hard-wired; they’re largely hereditary and remain relatively constant throughout our lives.¹ If we’re outgoing or reserved, energetic or subdued, we deserve neither credit nor blame for those traits. We just came that way, out of the box, and we can’t trade ourselves in for a different model.

While personality is a key part of who you are, it’s just one of many things that make you you. Many important traits don’t fall under the personality umbrella. Kindness, generosity, honesty, patience—these are all examples of character traits that interact with but are distinct from personality. It’s easy to conflate character with personality; it’s a common mistake. We’ve all met someone charming but dastardly, if not in the neighborhood then in a favorite novel.
And we all act “out of character” sometimes. Our behaviors fluctuate with our moods and our circumstances. People behave differently when they can see themselves in a mirror, for instance. But our behavior fluctuates in predictable ways. Everyone does certain things at certain times (such as wanting to be alone), but some people want to be alone a heck of a lot more than others.

Compared to our personality traits, character traits are more malleable. Our personalities can only be managed (or tamed, some might say). Our characters can be shaped, although this isn’t easy and happens slowly, with effort. Much of what we call character arises out of our core beliefs, and it’s surprisingly difficult to change our beliefs.

In addition to our character traits, we all have unique skills, abilities, and passions. We have personal experiences, histories, and hang-ups that shape us. These also interact with our personalities, and the way they impact us may even depend on our personalities, but they are not the same thing as our personalities.

We are complex and fascinating beings. These various aspects of ourselves—our personalities, our characters, our skills, the essence that truly makes us who we are—combine in an infinite variety of ways to make each of us who we are.

Like Holding a Good Map

Changing our core personality traits is difficult, if not impossible. To a large extent, personality is something we must learn to live with—whether that means accepting our own personalities or that of a spouse, parent, child, boss, friend, or neighbor. A big part of learning about personality is learning to make peace with who we are. But if we use personality insights well, we wouldn’t dream of stopping there.
The more I’ve learned about personality, the more I’ve discovered how powerful this knowledge can be. The various personality frameworks presented in this book are incredible tools for understanding why we do the things we do, why some things come easy while others are difficult, why particular things about our dearest friends drive us crazy, or why we absolutely cannot stand to watch network news or listen to rap music or make small talk without sounding like a blub-bering idiot. And personality insights allow us to understand why other people do the things they do, even when (especially when) their thoughts, feelings, and actions in a given situation are profoundly different from our own.

Prior to us understanding more about personality, their behavior may have baffled us. We can’t fathom why a loved one hides when the doorbell rings or a coworker must understand the origin of every single Hamilton lyric or a friend genuinely enjoys chatting with the customer service representative on the other end of the phone line. They’re not crazy; they’re just not us. They are hardwired differently than we are, and personality insights explain why and how.

I’ve come to think understanding personality is like holding a good map. That map can’t take you anywhere. It doesn’t change your location; you’re still right where you were before. But the map’s purpose isn’t to move you; it’s to show you the lay of the land. It’s the tool that makes it possible for you to get where you want to go.

Practical and Actionable

In recent years, I’ve learned to accept and adapt my behavior for my personality type—and for the types of those around me—in
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ways that never would have occurred to me ten, or even two, years ago. I’ve leaned heavily on personality insights to help me

• structure my days in a way that helps me not only survive but also thrive;
• recognize when I’m feeling out of sorts and how to best deal with those feelings;
• not lose my cool (or my mojo) over the marathon week of family Christmas gatherings;
• understand why action movies and horror novels are too much for me;
• realize I wasn’t necessarily a terrible Christian, just an introverted Christian in an extroverted church;
• plan my day so I don’t hit a wall at 4:00 p.m. every afternoon; and
• identify what my dream job might look like and stay away from jobs that would be soul-sucking for me.

Additionally, I’ve gained meaningful insights into other people from studying personality. These takeaways have changed the way I interact with them and have helped me figure out

• why some of my girlfriends prefer margarita night for ten, while others prefer coffee for two or three;
• how to stop the terrible conflict cycle my husband and I were locked in;
• how not to lose my mind (well, most days) during the pre-dinner hour at my house with my loud and crazy family of six;
• how to choose the right church for my family; and
• how to tell the difference between when my kid is being quirky and when I have a real problem that needs outside help.

These are just a few of the concrete, practical changes I’ve made in my life thanks to understanding the personality frameworks I highlight in this book. This knowledge didn’t require a great deal of study or a huge time investment. To understand the frameworks and what they told me about my personality, as well as the personalities of the people I interact with every day, I needed to ask the right questions of myself and pay attention to some specific moments in life.

The Insight that Changes Everything

Have you ever seen the movie The Sixth Sense? Okay, I’ve actually seen only a few clips, not the whole movie, because I’m a highly sensitive person (HSP) and M. Night Shyamalan freaks me out. (We’ll talk about HSPs in chapter 3.) But the movie has so permeated popular culture that even people who haven’t seen it know about the twist ending.

This supernatural thriller is about the relationship between a little boy named Cole Sear (played by Haley Joel Osment) and Dr. Malcolm Crowe (played by Bruce Willis), the psychiatrist enlisted to help him. Cole has a secret ability to communicate with dead people. As Dr. Crowe teaches Cole to release the ghosts that scare him by offering them help, he learns that maybe he wasn’t summoned to help Cole. Perhaps it’s the other way around.

In a surprise ending, we discover that Crowe has been dead from the beginning. It explains why his wife won’t talk to him, why she doesn’t even acknowledge his existence. For two hours,
viewers are led to believe that she is ignoring him because their marriage is awful, but it turns out she can’t even see him. With the big reveal, our minds reel as we mentally flip back through the movie to incorporate this key piece of information into our understanding, which casts the film’s events in a whole new light. Once we know Crowe is dead, the narrative shifts and everything makes perfect sense. We think, *Oh, of course*, even though while we were watching the movie the first time, we never perceived anything was amiss.

Try this for a more relatable example. Have you ever had a really bad day? A day when nothing seemed to be going your way and you were tired and moody and agitated and nobody liked you and you didn’t like them either and you couldn’t put your finger on what was going so terribly wrong? Then you ate a sandwich (or, better yet, took a nap) and felt like a brand-new person, and you realized that nothing was horribly amiss, you were just hangry. Or maybe slangry. (You can figure out what *that* means, right?)

That little insight completely reframed the way you felt about the previous few hours.

If you’re a parent, you’re acquainted with the phenomenon when your two-year-old is having a really terrible afternoon and won’t eat their snack and won’t keep their clothes on and won’t say anything but no and screams for no reason and you fear that you’re a terrible parent who has ruined *everything*, until your child finally wears themselves out and collapses on the sofa, snoring, three hours before bedtime, and you realize, *My child isn’t possessed; they were just exhausted.*

Personality insights can be like this. One key piece of information shifts our whole paradigm—and the world suddenly makes a lot more sense.
The frameworks in this book can highlight what upsets you (and why) and what makes you hum. They can help you understand what’s causing friction in your relationships, and what to do about it. They can open your eyes to what’s really going on in situations that currently make you batty.

Unfortunately, finding this information about our own personalities isn’t a straightforward process. It’s not exactly complicated; it’s just that it’s difficult to look directly at our own natures. That’s why I rely on the tool of personality frameworks. These frameworks give us the eyes we need to see ourselves in a new way.

Seeing the World through Someone Else’s Eyes

I’m a big reader. In fact, I have a blog called Modern Mrs. Darcy (modernmrsdarcy.com), where I share what I’m reading, recommend books to others, or—my favorite—connect what I read in a book to the real, off-the-page life I’m living.

I read a wide variety of books, across many genres, but what I really love is to crack open a good novel and step into another world for three hundred pages. When I read a great story, I get to experience the world through someone else’s eyes for a little while. I’ll never be a boy wizard, but J. K. Rowling helps me imagine what it might be like to be a kid Shouldering a fearsome responsibility (while wielding my wand and chugging butter beer). I live in the twenty-first century, but Jane Austen helps me feel the pleasures and perils of life in the English countryside two hundred years ago. I had a wonderful childhood, and my parents are still alive and well, living just a few miles down the road, but L. M. Montgomery invites me to experience the sting of being told I’m unwanted, the loneliness of having no one to love or care for me.
I love the personality frameworks in this book because they let me do the same thing.

We all live in the first person. I experience the world through my eyes; we all do. But each of these personality frameworks, when used thoughtfully, gives me eyes to see the world from someone else’s point of view for a little while. It’s a simple way to try out a new perspective, a different worldview. And once we’ve caught a glimpse of the world through someone else’s eyes, we won’t soon forget that point of view. It changes us, and it changes the way we read others.

About This Book

I’ve shared some of my personality-related stories on my blog over the years, and as I’ve interacted with readers, I’ve gotten to hear just how helpful learning about personality has been for many of them. But a big obstacle for many people who would like to learn more about these frameworks is the sheer amount of information out there. It’s overwhelming. People don’t know where to begin or which framework will help them most or where to find the best resources or why to even bother.

My goal in this book is threefold. In these pages, I hope to

1. provide an overview of the frameworks that have been the most helpful to me;
2. make this important information a lot more accessible and a lot less intimidating; and
3. highlight the kind of valuable insights that come from understanding personality.
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Keep in mind that I’m not a scholar. I’m a fellow traveler, someone who has benefited from the same information and has learned to pay attention to the right moments, ask the right questions of myself, and tweak accordingly. I’ll hold your hand and show you how I’ve been able to put what I’ve learned to use in my own life in an effort to inspire and guide you to do the same.

You don’t have to read this book straight through from front to back. In fact, I’d suggest you don’t. After reading about my aha! moment in chapter 1, feel free to jump to the framework that interests you most. I haven’t shared every existing personality framework in this book but instead have chosen the ones that have helped me most. Now, you get to choose the ones that look helpful to you. Read a few chapters, take an assessment or two, talk it all over with a friend, and come back to the book when you’re ready. Some frameworks are easier to grasp than others. Some make intuitive sense after your first read, while others may require a reread for them to really sink in. (I’m looking at you, chapter 7.) This book will wait for you.

You don’t have to be an expert about personality to enjoy the benefits of this book, but you do need to cultivate an expertise about yourself. I promise, it’s nobler than it sounds. I’ll be right here, asking the questions right along with you.
I’ve been fascinated with personality since one memorable family dinner when I was in my late tweens or early teens. My mom mentioned her church group would be reading a new book together. I’d never heard of the book and didn’t know much about the subject matter, but what my mom said intrigued me.

She explained that the author had taken an old idea and updated it for the twentieth century. Ancient Greek and Roman physicians and philosophers had sorted people into four categories based on their “humors,” believing each individual’s unique combination of these elements determined their personality. For the modernized version, the four categories of people are the popular sanguine, powerful choleric, perfect melancholy,
and peaceful phlegmatic. These categories aren’t good or bad. There is no “right” answer, only the possibility to accurately see yourself as you truly are. The promise is that when you understand yourself better—your strengths and weaknesses, emotional needs, and driving motivations—it is much easier to understand others as well, especially when they aren’t like you.

I begged my mom to share her copy of the book and spent hours and hours poring over it, trying to spot myself and my loved ones in its pages. I was hooked.¹

I became obsessed with the idea that by discovering who I was at my core—what made me tick, who God made me to be—I could gain insight into important questions, such as What should I study? Who should I marry? What do I want to be when I grow up? How am I going to remember to buy milk at the grocery store?

I surmised that finding the right answers to these questions—the profound and the prosaic—would change my life.

But they didn’t—or not for a long time, at least. That’s because even though I was fascinated by personality typing and started learning more about it, I was doing it all wrong. When it came to connecting what I was learning to my real life, I was failing. Totally.

Wait a minute, you say. I thought that with personality there are no wrong answers?

Well, yes and no.

Objectively speaking, when it comes to your personality type—at least according to the frameworks in this book—there are no wrong answers. No personality type is better or worse than any other. Some people are better suited than others to be engineers or teachers or executives, while others are naturally more compassionate or more analytical. It takes all kinds to make a world.²

But there is a wrong way to approach personality, and I had inadvertently found it.
An Inadvertent but Common Error

When I initially tried to figure out my personality, the crucial first step in understanding myself and others, I didn’t begin at the beginning. I didn’t ask myself what I was really like. Instead, I asked myself what I wished I were like.

It was an inadvertent error, and so insidious I didn’t even realize I was doing it. (And I wasn’t alone. When it comes to personality frameworks, this happens all the time.) But my understandable mistake still ruined my chances of gaining any useful self-knowledge from the experience.

To illustrate, let me tell you how much I hate parking garages. It relates, I promise.

When it comes to operating a large motor vehicle—and by large, I mean “bigger than a bicycle”—my spatial abilities are, er, not great. This isn’t a big deal (my driving record is beautiful, honestly), unless I’m parking. Parking is hard. I can manage just fine in a suburban parking lot or my own driveway (don’t laugh). But put me in a parking garage, and I start shaking.

I don’t know about the parking garages in your town, but in the garage I regularly have the displeasure of parking in, it’s important that I pull my car all the way in to the parking space or my Honda’s back end (did you notice how I avoided saying “minivan”?) will block the driving lane. In theory, this is no big deal. But in practice, this means cringing with every fiber of my being as I ease the front end of my vehicle closer and closer to an immovable concrete wall—inch by uncomfortable inch—dreading the repugnant metal-on-concrete scraping noise (and costly-to-repair damage) that will result if I misjudge the distance.

When I first started parking in this awful garage, I would pull my car in just as close as I could bear. Then I’d kill the
engine, hop out, check out my parking job, and discover I was still a full two feet from the barricade. I wish I were kidding.

My early experience with personality frameworks was a lot like parking in that garage.

I remember in college when I first really dove into the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)®. The system identifies and describes sixteen distinct personalities, which we’ll learn more about in chapter 6, but for now, suffice it to say, it’s important to accurately identify your type. I spent hours poring over the various profiles and found the information simultaneously fascinating and frustrating.

When I first took the assessment, my result was clear: INTJ. For those of you to whom this sounds like total alphabet soup, allow me to explain. The INTJ is known as the architect, the mastermind, the scientist. This result was no surprise, given my history and upbringing; many INTJs are little bookworms as kids. They’re smart and creative and highly analytical. They prefer to work alone or, at the very most, in small groups. These types are hardworking and determined; they think critically and clearly; they tend to be perfectionists. They grow up to become software and mechanical engineers, project managers, marketing analysts, and attorneys.

I knew the INTJ type, all right. I come from a long line of attorneys and judges and knew the type and their skills very well, even if I hadn’t known to put the alphabet soup label on it. Those skills were valued in my household growing up. Perhaps that’s why it was so easy for me to see myself as an INTJ. And because I knew the type so well, I didn’t realize a critical flaw in my thinking. I didn’t see the INTJ type as one way to be; I thought it was the way to be. So I wasn’t surprised when my personality test confirmed that I was a
rationalist type who could grow up to become a terrific attorney one day.

In my assumptions, I completely misunderstood myself, yet I had no clue I had done this. Instead, I continued merrily on my way, convinced I was a strategic thinker and analytical planner and occasionally wondering why this “insight” didn’t seem to help me much in my day-to-day life. I thought my parking job was just fine.

I was wrong. I was still three feet from the barrier, and my back end was blocking the lane.

I spent hours studying the various MBTI profiles, again fascinated and frustrated. And again, I had new information but no insight.

I wasn’t looking for knowledge for knowledge’s sake. I wanted practical information I could put into action. I wanted to cash in on the promise of the first personality book that hooked me: that I could understand others better by first understanding myself better. Unfortunately, the information wasn’t helpful to me because, while I was gaining an understanding of personality typing systems in general, I still didn’t understand what I was really like. I didn’t have a correct understanding of my own personality.

Thales of Miletus, one of the sages of ancient Greece, put it plainly: “The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself.” Without realizing it, I had bumped straight into a key problem the Greeks identified more than two thousand years ago: knowing yourself may sound easy, but it’s surprisingly complicated. I was just a kid; I had no deep-seated, long-established wisdom. I had a lot to learn about myself, and I was just getting started.

Looking back, I wonder, How could I have gotten myself so wrong? How could I have misunderstood myself so thoroughly?
Perhaps, because I was young, I didn’t have the life experience I needed to see a person clearly, even if that person was me. However, I place the bulk of the blame on my own blindness, caused by plain old wishful thinking.

**Denial Is a Powerful Force**

I have an obstetrician friend who has delivered thousands of babies, including a surprisingly high number from women who didn’t know they were pregnant. Having carried four babies to term, this blows my mind. I’d expect one such delivery over the course of a career, *maybe*. But my doctor friend has seen dozens—and he’s still young. When he first told me this, I thought he was making it up just to get a laugh, but he was being truthful. When I asked how this could possibly happen over and over again, he explained that, in all seriousness, denial is a powerful force. Or as Christopher Alexander said, “We are not always comfortable with the true self that lies deep within us.”

Whether my own mistake—of seeing only what I wanted to see—was born of ignorance or deep-rooted discomfort, I know this much: when it comes to understanding yourself and others, wishful thinking will get you nowhere. If personality information is going to help you, you’re going to have to get comfortable with the true self that lies deep within you.

All the personality tests in the world won’t mean anything to you if you’re not honest with yourself about your own personality and the personalities of those around you. Aspirational answers won’t do you any good; only true ones will. And so, the first step is to take an unflinching look at who you truly are. What are you *really* like?
The Beginning of Understanding

Fast-forward a few years to the winter following my June wedding. My husband, Will, and I had just had another painful fight. It was awful, but not in the way you’d imagine. We hadn’t fought about anything earth-shaking. Our conflicts were excruciating because we lacked the skills we needed to work through routine marital disagreements.

It doesn’t matter how often couples fight. However, how they fight is critical. Married people need to learn how to disagree, figure things out, and move on. Will and I were married, but we hadn’t figured out how to do those things yet. That first winter we were still terrible at conflict. When we disagreed, he became cold and distant. I was extraordinarily sensitive to his change of mood, and I’d get upset, which baffled him. Then I’d become angry because he didn’t understand why I was upset. Secretly (or maybe not so secretly), I thought I was being reasonable and Will was doing it wrong. I blamed him for shutting down whenever we disagreed, and I told him so. Often.

Back to the fight. I don’t remember what it was about—how to fold the laundry, where to store the Tupperware, what we should do on Saturday morning—whatever it was, it was mind-numbingly mundane. But we disagreed, as people do. Then I told Will what I thought, and he acted aloof, then I got upset, and then he was baffled—which made me furious!

Instead of talking circles around our stupid issue again, I did the only thing that seemed to help—I went for a run in the freezing cold to cool off. Then I came home, took a shower, put on my pajamas, and plopped on the couch with a library book. Coincidentally, I was reading David Keirsey’s Please Understand Me II, which I now jokingly call the MBTI Bible.
The previous year Will and I had gone through our church’s required premarital counseling program. We drove across town on a Saturday afternoon to meet the couple we’d been randomly paired with. They were kind, if a bit eccentric. I can still remember our surprise when we pulled into their driveway and saw three hundred pairs of teddy bear eyes staring at us from their home’s bay window.

We drank lukewarm tea and made awkward chitchat at their kitchen table under the watchful eyes of the teddy bears, which lined not just the bay window but every room of the home. After the introductions were over, they presented us each with a personality assessment and a number 2 pencil. Our future discussions would be based on our results.

We spent the next half hour bubbling in answers to a few hundred questions about how we handle conflict, what we dream of, how often we seek out new experiences, and if we tend to be agreeable. A month later, we returned to the land of the teddy bears to find out how we did.

According to our results, we were more or less compatible, more alike than different. “There’s one thing we noticed,” our hosts said. “Your tests indicate that you might have problems with conflict. But don’t worry too much. All couples do.”

I found the whole experience frustrating. What kind of conflict—and why? What would we do about it when it happened? I felt as though I’d spent too much time bubbling in answers to get a result that felt like the kind of “wisdom” I could find in a fortune cookie.

I was dissatisfied because, again, I was so close to discovering some genuinely useful information. Could Will and I truly use some good info about our strengths and weaknesses, sticking points, and blind spots? You betcha. We didn’t get it there, but
when we left that day, I felt as though it was possible to find that kind of information somewhere.

Like the book nerd I was, I took myself to my friendly local library and started looking for books about personality types. (This was in the days of dial-up internet, so I consulted my local library, not Google. A good thing, I think.) I came home that night with a long reading list.

Because of the typical pre-wedding craziness, I didn’t start reading those books until after the wedding. Trust me on this: spending the first winter of your married life reading books about personality isn’t a terrible way to begin.

Most of what I read went straight over my head, but I was learning. I wasn’t yet able to see myself clearly in any of the profiles. I still felt clueless about my inner workings, my strengths and weaknesses. But I was at least acutely sensitive to the fact that everyone innately has strengths and weaknesses and that all people are different—very different—and that isn’t a bad thing.

I couldn’t type myself, but I was beginning to suspect I’d been all wrong about the INTJ diagnosis. I was studying up, trying to find myself (for real this time) in the type descriptions.

So I sat at home on my couch, in my comfy pajamas, with a copy of Please Understand Me II from the library and a hot cup of tea. I flipped it open and started reading.

It Changes Nothing; It Changes Everything

That night I opened my book to a new chapter in Please Understand Me II, where I’d left off the night before. That chapter was all about temperament and romantic relationships, including the strengths and weaknesses for different pairings in married life. When I came to the part where David Keirsey explains how
the Rational (NT) types function in married life, and especially what a pairing between the Rational and the Idealist (NF) looks like, my jaw fell open. *That was us.* He was describing Will (clearly an NT) and me (who must be an NF) so accurately it was spooky. It was as though I was reading the history of my courtship and early marriage, right there on the page. (Don’t worry about the alphabet soup. We’ll get there.)

Here’s what I learned that night. First, because of Keirsey’s dead-on description of the way an Idealist tends to handle conflict unhealthily, I was absolutely sure I’d been typing myself incorrectly. (This would be the first of many times I would discover that the easiest way to type yourself is to pay attention to how you’re likely to screw up.) For the first time, I could see clearly that my behavior matched the NF type. The description was so uncannily accurate in regard to my behavior that I knew *instantly* I’d been typing myself incorrectly for years. It was suddenly clear where I’d gone wrong: I hadn’t been seeing myself as I actually was but as I wanted to be. No wonder those personality rubrics hadn’t helped me.

Contrary to my belief, Will, who I could now clearly peg as an NT, wasn’t terrible at conflict. In fact, his approach to marital disagreements was textbook for his MBTI type. And my behavior was textbook for mine. We were experiencing what Keirsey called “an endless problem” in relationships between our types (which, except for this sticking point, Keirsey declares are extremely well-suited for marriage). My type is naturally emotionally expressive; Will’s type is naturally resistant to emotional displays. When we disagreed, I would tell Will how I felt, and he would remain calm, seemingly cold. I thought that meant he didn’t understand me, or care, and I’d get upset. He didn’t understand why I was upset, because he definitely
My Aha! Moment

understood—and felt my disappointment deeply. Then I’d get angry that he seemed not to understand.

That night I finally understood that Will wasn’t being cold or trying to exasperate me. He just wasn’t me, and I’d been expecting him to act like me.

I cannot tell you how freeing this insight was. Let’s just say the clouds parted and I’m pretty sure the angels sang. We were still the people we’d been the day before, a couple who still didn’t know how to fight. But that discovery dialed our conflicts down from epic to ordinary. Our disagreements weren’t alarming; they were normal. Expected, even. My epiphany didn’t change anything except our perspective—not that day, at least—but it changed the way I moved forward.

For the first time, I began to see the dynamics at play when Will and I disagreed in a new light. It was my first big aha! moment about personality, the first time I felt the power of having accurate information about my personality (and, in this case, my husband’s personality) and applying it to my life. Once I understood what was actually going on, and why, I could begin to do something about it.

Maybe when I first started exploring personality—and couldn’t get mine right—I’d made an honest mistake. Maybe I simply wasn’t comfortable with the true self that lay deep within me. But I suspect the problem was simply this: knowing yourself is hard. It’s difficult to clearly see yourself for who you really are. The process requires that you ask a difficult question of yourself and face the answer with as much honesty and grace as you can muster, because sometimes “What am I really like?” is a scary question.

Asking yourself this question and facing the answer is intense, but it’s also possible—and absolutely worth it.
Probing your own personality isn’t an easy process, not even in the best scenario. But I’m keenly aware of how my frustrating experience could have been *so much easier* if I’d known—even a little bit—what I was doing. Looking back, I wish someone had pointed me in the right direction. I wish I’d had someone looking over my shoulder, encouraging me when I headed in the right direction, and gently calling me back when I wandered off track. I needed someone to ask me the right questions at the right moments and to point out the key things I should have been paying attention to. I’m a big reader, so I wouldn’t have minded if this guidance had existed in the pages of a good book. I can’t go back and smooth my own road, but maybe my experience can make yours a little less bumpy. Stay with me, as that’s what I hope to do in the chapters ahead.