

Appreciative Inquiry: Thriving and Creating Better Worlds
(A pdf file is attached if you have trouble with the format.)

Organizations are centers of human relatedness, first and foremost, and relationships thrive where there is an appreciative eye—when people see the best in one another, when they can share their dreams and ultimate concerns in affirming ways, when they are connected in full voice to create not just new worlds but better worlds. ~David Cooperrider

Dear Friends and Colleagues ~

First, in the interest of “creating better worlds,” we want to make sure you know about the upcoming Appreciative Inquiry Foundations Class that Chet and I will be co-teaching. It’s an opportunity to join a community of like-minded individuals to experience first hand the energy and wisdom of Appreciative Inquiry – and discover how it can work for you.

The class will be held September 20 – 23, 2005, in a gem of a city, Charleston, WV. Visit <http://www.characterethics.com/learningopportunities/> for details and registration. It’s coming up fast so please don’t delay your decision to join us.

Secondly, it’s a good time in our on-going exploration of Appreciative Inquiry to consider how we can get to the sort of thriving that Cooperrider suggests in his statement above. We will compare a deficit-based approach to problem-solving and a strength-based approach by way of two true stories adapted from Locating the Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry by Charles Elliott (published in 1999 by The International Institute for Sustainable Development).

Our first story is about Rosemary and her son, Joel...

Rosemary Wilson is a successful New York publisher with custody of her 11-year-old son, Joel. Despite Rosemary's determination to provide him with every material and emotional advantage, Joel is clearly having a hard time growing up as a lone child of a single parent. He has become truant at school and is combative at home.

The situation is now so serious that Rosemary decides to tackle it systematically. She tells Joe’s nanny to keep a list of Joel's misdemeanors and to make sure to ask his teacher each day how he has behaved when she picks him up from school.

"He has to learn," says Rosemary, "I will go through the list with him every evening--quietly, methodically, thoroughly, explaining why what he has done is wrong or unacceptable. We will soon see a big improvement. He's a bright enough youngster; he just needs to have things pointed out to him in a consistent way. Once he sees that we are on to him, he'll change...."

And the result? Joel's behavior has gotten no better; in some important respects, it has become worse since this list-and-tell regime was begun.

Meanwhile, our second story unfolds two thousand miles to the South West . . .

The Lakota people in New Mexico also have a delinquent youngster. He has been seen damaging people's cars and trucks in the car lot outside a store. When challenged, he has been rude and dismissive of the authority of the elders.

The whole clan is called together one evening and forms a large circle. The young man's father walks with him into the middle of the circle and then joins the other adults on the perimeter. The father begins to speak first.

"You were our first born, our most precious one. Your mother and I rejoiced the first time we felt you kick in her stomach. We ran from house to house, telling all these people that you were alive and well and strong. And so you were. You were born crying with a shout so loud they heard it three hundred yards away above the radio. How proud we were! How happy! You have always made us happy. Your first steps--oh, how you fell over into a puddle. The look on your face! How we laughed..."

On and on, the father recounts, sharing the happiest memories of his son's life. No word of criticism is uttered. The father's task is to remind the young man of all that he means to the family, the clan, the people; of all the joy and happiness he has brought; of the delight his wider family have in him.

When he is finished, it is the uncle's turn. He is followed by the two grandfathers. It will be long past midnight before they have finished. After the men, the women speak followed by the clan chief. He summarizes all that has been said. He speaks slowly, with long pauses, as though searching for the deepest ways of saying what has to be said.

His theme, from which he never deviates, is the same: the pride and pleasure this young man has brought to all the Lakota people; the living, the departed and those not yet born. Like all the earlier speakers, he never mentions the vandalism and the malicious damage, the shame, the anger, the futility, the mindlessness. All that is left unsaid, unhinted. The sole refrain is that this young man is a beautiful gift to the whole people, one of inexpressible value.

When the old man has finished speaking, he makes a small sign. The ring of people stands still, almost at attention, looking ahead of them at the young man in the centre of the circle. Then they melt wordlessly into the night.

The question we would like you to consider is . . .

Which youngster has the better chance of transformational change: the one whose faults are catalogued and reviewed each day? Or the one who has been ritually assured of his place in the hearts of all his people?

This contrast is what the appreciative approach is all about.

And for those among us who would like to know how Lakota boy turned out . . .

We don't know. Sorry. However, this is one of the important lessons about organizational change. There is nothing that is currently known that will guarantee a positive outcome. If there was we would be machines and the job of the change agent would be to find the "right" switch to flip so everything would be ok.

Charles Elliot poses a wonderful question after his retelling of these stories: "Which boy do you think has a better chance of transformational change?" It's a real question. Elliott has his own view point but there is no assurance that AI will make everything OK.

Of course the question you might be having right now is, "Why even do AI if there is no assurance of a positive outcome?" There is no assurance of a positive outcome with any kind of organizational intervention and experience and research indicate that using AI will more often lead to positive outcomes. We need to remain humble and acknowledge that in the greater scheme of things we know very little about how to make transformational change and what we see in AI is very promising and powerful.

For a recent evaluation of AI, you can access “Appreciative Inquiry: What We Know, What We Need To Know” by organizational specialists, Therese F. Yaeger and Peter F. Sorensen at http://www.odnetwork.org/publications/seasonings/2005-vol1-no2/article_yaeger_sorensen.html .

A complete listing of our mailings may be found at <http://www.characterethics.com/appreciativeinquirylearningspace/> .

Enjoy! Let us continue to hear from you and don't forget about the AI Foundations Class.

~ Trish, Chet, and Skip

If at any time you wish to be removed from this “learning space”, please hit reply and say, "Please remove" in the body of the email. Thanks!