

Appreciative Inquiry: Designing Epiphanies

(PDF attached if preferred. Free PDF Adobe Reader available at <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>)

A human being is a part of a whole, called by us 'universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. ~ Albert Einstein

Dear Friends and Colleagues ~

First, we want to remind you of our second Appreciative Inquiry Foundations Class scheduled for May 8 – 12, 2006 in Charleston, WV. It's an opportunity to join a learning community of like-minded individuals to experience first hand the energy and wisdom of Appreciative Inquiry – and discover how it can work for you. For details and registration, please visit www.characterethics.com/foundationsclass/. It's coming up fast so don't delay your decision to join us.

Secondly, Einstein asserts in the quote above that we must free ourselves from delusion, widen our circle of compassion, expand our vision of the universe, and move to a new level of consciousness. Hm ...can we “*design* epiphanies”?

Optical Delusions vs. Mind's Eye

Pierre Pradervand in his book, The Gentle Art of Blessing, explores getting to new consciousness with an example from a book on the scientific method by Martin and Inge Goldstein. They wrote about people who were born blind from cataracts but thanks to medical advances, become capable of seeing. It was discovered that the people needed extensive training to actually see because:

their *brains* had not been trained in the rules of seeing . . . It is apparent that seeing—the sense we think of most directly putting us in touch with facts—is learned rather than automatic. We see with our minds, not with our eyes...(163).

For our purposes here, what “rules” or ways of seeing anew can we develop and learn that enable us to make positive change and create a more compassionate world?

Ships in the Bay

By using the following story we're risking the ire of anthropologists (forgive us) who consider the following legend highly unlikely and ethnocentric. We see what they mean AND we share it here because, while it may not be factually accurate, like so many stories it contains a valuable truth and gives us a great metaphoric question.

In 1520, when Ferdinand Magellan arrived at the Terra del Fuego, what surprised him and his crew was that the Del Fuego Indians, who lived around the bay, had not spotted the boats entering the bay. He realized that nothing in their past cultural experience had prepared them for the idea of vessels that (to them)

resembled huge floating houses. They were used to tiny canoes, not ships. Canoes represented THE reality, and completely sealed their imagination, hence their vision (Pradervand, 162)

The Del Fuego Indians were being held captive by their experience. Even though a completely new way of moving around on the ocean was right in front of them, they couldn't "see" it. It was an optical "delusion" of sorts. This legend leads us to ask: what "ships in the bay" are we not seeing? What new innovative ways of organizing are right in front of us and yet we don't "see" them?

A Peak Experience in Timekeeping / A Peek into the Future

In 1967, Swiss watchmakers produced the first wristwatch quartz movement after years of research. However, they decided that quartz would fade away as a fad and so they focused their attention on improving mechanical timekeeping. The Japanese saw something else and within a few short years they captured the lions share of the watch market putting some Swiss companies out of business.

So what did the Swiss miss? They had created an innovation that would change the watch-making industry for ever but their way of looking at the world prevented them from seeing it. They simply wanted to fix the problems with the mechanical watch. They wanted to make what they already "knew" as the correct way of keeping time better. They were a prisoner of their universe.

Increasing the Likelihood of Seeing Things Anew

One way to see the world anew, the "ships in the bay," is to reverse what you are looking at. As Albert Szent-Gyorgyi has said, "Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen, and thinking what nobody has thought."

By looking at peak moments in the life of an organization, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) helps us look at what we have been looking at and think things we never thought before. In Gestalt terms it is a Figure/Ground Reversal that creates "a delightful 'surprise' in the viewer's eye." We are bringing what Jane Dutton from the University of Michigan has called the "submerged good" to the foreground. When making change we are always using our best guess about what might be better and by examining those moments when we are at our best we can start making change on firmer ground. We gain confidence by starting with what we know works and moving into the unknown. AI arouses a human system to value and use its assets, strengths, capacities and skills to the fullest.

Designing Epiphanies

When you hear West Virginia or Appalachia, what is the first image that leaps into your mind? Trish often hears imprisoning stereotypes expressed by people both within and without the state who are a captive of their universe. What are people missing when all they see are the stereotypes of West Virginians? The emphasis on developing the natural capital (coal, timber, gas) has submerged the other capitals (natural, human, cultural, social, political, financial, and built).

The inquiry question we could put forth is, “If you moved away from WV, what would you miss the most?” or “When you have out of state friends or relatives visit you, what do you take them to see?” or “What do you most wish the people outside of WV could see or know about it?”

Asking these kinds of questions serves to deconstruct the walls of our individual universe. They help us look at what we have been looking at and think new things. They help us see the “ships in the bay.”

We invite you to look back over the entire time you have been with your organization and pick a peak moment; a moment when you felt alive, energized and connected to others in the organization. What do you appreciate about it? What do you see that you have never seen before?

Enjoy! And let us hear from you. ~ 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!