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Appreciative Inquiry and Public Dialogue: An Approach to Community Change

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Abstract

This paper will demonstrate the contribution of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to whole system change in the public and non-profit sectors through elucidation of the theory, method, and examples of the successful application of this approach. Developed in the mid 1980s by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University, AI begins with the discovery of the highest achievements, core values, and aspirations embedded in all human systems. It is a methodology that begins a dialogue between individuals, expands to groups and builds to embrace and declare community wide intentions and actions. The theory of social constructionism informs this work asserting that individuals in relationship with one another can and will co-create an effective future when a positive inquiry into the heart and soul of a system, its greatest accomplishments and deepest values, generates new meaning and inspires new possibilities. Deceptively simple, the system is based on a reversal of the expectations, practices, and limitations found in traditional problem solving methodologies and thus represents a significant shift in attitude and language.

Sustainable community development and change demand the vigorous participation of multiple and diverse stakeholders. Robust public dialogue that can move people beyond the constraints of their own certainties is key to helping community groups define and achieve their preferred future. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a philosophy and large group methodology that has proven effective in creating an environment where public dialogue can flourish.

If recent politics have taught us anything, it is that we can readily be trapped in a discourse of polarization. This is true not only in the national conversation about a presidential election, but all too often in the conversation that is carried on when people come together to respond to concerns in communities or organizations. There may be competing interests, multiple voices clamoring to be heard, power differentials real and perceived, and factions convinced they hold a monopoly on

the truth. Too many voices have routinely been excluded from participation in the very decisions that may affect them, or they may be too uncertain to enter the conversation. If we are to unleash the capacity of communities to create their desired future, we need to invite vibrant discourse among multiple stakeholders, while supporting and enhancing the network of relationships strengthening the fabric of the community and its ability to get things done.

Developed in the late 1980s by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University, AI has been used with a broad range of public, private, and non-profit organizations around the world and with groups of all sizes, from small work teams to multi-national corporations. This paper emphasizes the contribution AI makes to whole systems change through elucidation of the theory, method, and selected case studies. These cases will demonstrate how the rich, appreciative dialogue generated in the AI process brings about transformative and sustainable change.

Some theoretical underpinnings of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is a post-modern approach to organizational and community change, representing a radical departure from classic organization development interventions. Traditional modes of inquiry into organizational life emerged from a paradigm in which sources of knowledge are derived from logical reasoning and empirical, verifiable experience. This inquiry seeks to determine cause and effect leading to knowledge having predictive value for organizational effectiveness. It relies on an action-research model that focuses on problem solving through a progression of steps: identifying problems or deficiencies in the system; analyzing the causes; proposing solutions; and developing an action plan to ''treat'' the problems (French and Bell, 1984). This ''medical model'' of diagnosis and cure treats the organization as sick, deficient or metaphorically as ''a problem to be solved.'' Looking at human systems through this lens can be limiting, at best, and potentially demoralizing and exacerbating of the very problems to be ''solved''. It can easily create a culture of blame, tearing at the fabric of the community. People are apt to become defensive in an effort to avoid blame, with the likely result of distancing themselves from one another and eroding trust. Further, a defensive posture acts as a brake on the learning and thinking that can move the system forward (Barrett, 1995).

Traditional problem solving has served us well in many ways, particularly in advancing our knowledge in the physical sciences and in technology. However, it has not always proven adequate for addressing human systems issues and if it is our only approach, we are shutting off a whole other method of inquiry. Action research that has become synonymous with focusing on what is wrong ''has largely failed as an instrument for advancing social knowledge of consequence. . . . Advances in generative theory will come about for action-research when the discipline decides to expand its universe of exploration, seeks to

discover new questions, and rekindles a fresh perception of the extra ordinary in everyday organizational life'' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

AI offers a way to expand that universe. It is an inquiry-based model uniting theory and practice. Rooted in social constructionist thinking, it challenges the long held view that knowledge accrues from objective and unbiased observations of a stable, enduring external world (Gergen, 2000). Rather, it asserts that the locus of knowledge is in our relationships and that we construct our reality through our conversations and social interactions. Knowledge is an artifact of the culture, myths, traditions, values, and language of the people in systems. Thus there are multiple ways of knowing, multiple realities, and no one way has primacy over another. It emphasizes the importance of the stories, metaphors, meanings, and theories expressed in the language used in the collaborative process of constructing reality. Social constructionist thinking shifts the focus of action research. Giving expression to the multiple voices and multiple perspectives in the community can generate data that is practical, applicable, and replete with new and provocative possibilities as the system attempts to understand itself and its positive potential in a particular time and context. It views the world as ''an unfolding drama of human interaction whose potential seems limited or enhanced primarily by our symbolic capacities for constructing meaningful agreements that allow for the committed enactment of collective life'' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

The premise that we can come together to influence how the drama unfolds leads us to the five principles of AI:

The constructionist principle. Human knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven. The way we know has a direct effect on what we do.

The principle of simultaneity. Inquiry is intervention. Change begins with the first questions we ask and the questions we ask determine what we find. Stories elicited by our questions become the scaffolding for conceiving and constructing the future. The emphasis in AI rightfully belongs on inquiry and the questions we craft have profound implications for changes in social practice. AI questions do not seek ''right'' answers, but rather they generate conversations that seek out the ''essential goodness'' of the system as a platform for creating an even ''better'' system.

The poetic principle. This principle shifts the metaphor of organization as machine to that of organization as text. Like a poem, the Bible, or a Shakespearean play, any human system is subject to endless interpretation. The story is constantly being rewritten through our shared interpretations. We can look into the system with any lens we choose. We can look for what is going wrong or what is going right and the greater gains are made when the means and ends of inquiry are aligned. Therefore, if we seek to increase employee retention, e.g., it makes sense to inquire into why people stay in our organization rather than focus on employee turnover.

The positive principle. Language matters. The many applications of AI in diverse settings demonstrate that the more positive the inquiry the more it

endures. When we inquire into those times when we are at our best, most successful, or most energized, people are drawn together. The positive data that emerges from such inquiry inspires people to form networks of collaboration to build on their strengths and reach for their dreams.

The anticipatory principle. Our greatest resource for generating constructive organizational change is our collective imagination and discourse about the future. An anticipatory view of organizational life posits that the image of the future is a guiding force in organizational life. Considerable research from such diverse areas of study as medicine, sports psychology, education, and sociology support the relationship between positive imagery and positive action (Cooperrider, 2000).

An overview of the AI methodology

While AI is more a philosophy than a methodology, the theory and principles described above inform the design of organization and community change efforts. There is no formula for ''doing'' AI; each application is designed to address the specific requirements of the client system. That being said, there is a model that serves as a guide for designing an AI process to elicit the system's most positive image for a better future and the will to move toward its realization.

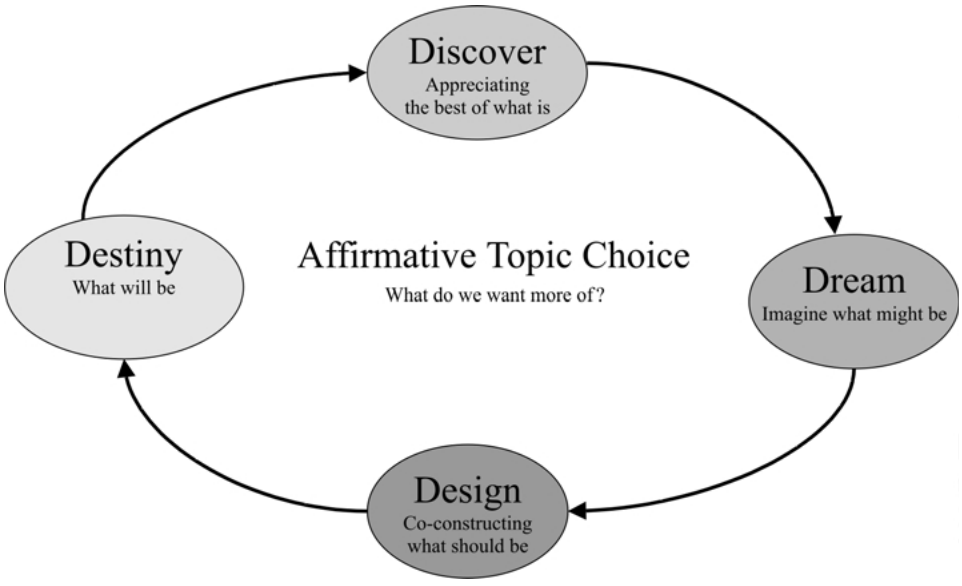

Figure 1. Appreciative frequency 4-D cycle.

The AI 4-D cycle

Typically, the process works its way through the four phases of Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. It is a recursive process with opportunities to reengage the 4-D cycle within each phase. The first task of an AI process is to define the field of inquiry. This is typically the work of the project team or steering committee working with the consultant. An introductory experience with the 4-D process not only introduces the group to the theory and practice of AI, it serves as the vehicle for surfacing the topics of interest and concern. Thus, it has the salutary benefit of creating an appreciative environment within which to design the protocol for the Discovery phase of the 4-D cycle.

Discovery. The task in this phase is to inquire into and discover the positive capacity of the organization or community through carefully crafted appreciative questions. AI is a narrative model and a relational model, so the questions are designed to engage participants in the telling of stories to one another about what gives energy and vitality to the system. It is an inquiry into and an appreciation of the ''best of what is''. In pairs, people interview one another as they seek to explore their strengths, assets, peak experiences, and successes and to understand the unique conditions that made their moments of excellence possible. The underlying question behind an AI protocol is, ''What's going right and how do we get more of it?'' It represents an intentional choice not to analyze deficits but rather to isolate and learn from even the smallest victories. In contrast to methods which search for the root causes of problems, it is a method that searches for the root causes of success. The point of the appreciative protocol is not to dismiss problems but to offer a broader lens through which people can cast an appreciative eye on their system. The interviews themselves forge new and strengthened connections and begin to locate the sources of energy for change (Elliott, 2000).

Dream. As people share their stories and engage in a dialogue about their meaning, themes and patterns emerge that inspire hope and possibility. From the most compelling images embedded in the stories, they begin to address the underlying questions of the dreaming phase: ''What is the world calling us to become?'' and ''What might we become if our exceptional moments were the norm?'' It is a time to imagine an ideal future; a time for passionate thinking. What distinguishes this phase from other visioning processes is that the dream is drawn from the stories of the positive past and the richness of the dialogue. Because it is a dream that is grounded in people's real experiences it is more believable and more achievable. It is the beginning of transforming the current story into a new narrative of hope and possibility.

Design. If the dream represents a shared ideal, the highest aspirations for the future, then it follows that there will be changes in the way people are currently doing things. The task of this phase is to create design principles that will inform the system's structures and policies that can move them toward the realization of their dream. They are principles that are known as provocative propositions—

statements that stretch the system from where it is to where it wants to be. It is a time for sustained dialogue so that people arrive at a level of depth, commitment and trust as they design together principles that they are prepared to live by. Because the provocative propositions are rooted in the dream and the discovery of best past experience, they inspire confidence to reach beyond one's grasp. These propositions become filters by which to measure any of the structural or procedural changes that are made. People ask, ''If we make this change will it move us in the direction of the ideal?''

Destiny. Guided by these design principles, the system moves to fulfill its destiny. This phase was formerly called ''Delivery'' and the emphasis was on action planning, implementation, and sustainability. Delivery, however, does not capture the momentum that is often generated by this process. As people move through discovery, dream, and design, they begin to read the organization or community in a new way—a way that invites possibility, forges new networks of relationships, and ultimately effects the direction and meaning of one's actions. Therefore, this phase goes beyond traditional action planning and becomes a time for unleashing the creative energy of the system to undertake individual and collective action.

As it is a recursive process, people within the system continue to value their successes, inquire into what is working well, and continue to seek ways to get more of it.

Applications

In this section we will present several case examples that illustrate the application of the AI process in diverse settings. We begin with a case that represents the first time AI was used as a whole systems change effort in a university.

Whole systems change in a Midwestern university

The Vice-President of Administration and Finance of a Midwestern university approached David Cooperrider about initiating a change effort that would address organizational effectiveness within the division, would provide a vehicle to build on the strengths of each department to set new goals, and would develop their strategic planning capacity. This was to be the beginning of a multi-stage process that would introduce AI to people of all levels and all parts of the University.

The first stage involved three three-day sessions with the more than 400 members of the Finance and Administration Division. AI was introduced as a process that represents a new way of thinking about human organization and change—a way of bringing people together in conversation to know and appreciate those forces that give energy and vitality to their organization and that suggest possibilities for the future. They began the inquiry in face-to-face

conversations with a partner. They were asked to reflect on their whole span of employment at the university, and to tell a story about a peak experience, a time when they felt most energized, alive and valued. They were invited to tell what they valued about themselves, their work, the university, and to think about the way they wanted their university to be.

Sharing stories of their successes, articulating their values, and appreciating together their many positive experiences enriched their dreams of the future and of how their department might become even better. They were energized and excited about a future that they were being asked to shape. For many, it was a first experience of giving voice to their hopes and visions. They felt listened to by senior management as they outlined their plans for staff training and development and better communication between departments.

Their experience of the process and their introduction to the theory behind it went beyond the work they were doing together. They were moved by the stories they heard of how AI had been used successfully with other organizations and began to see it as a philosophy that can also be applied to their everyday lives and in their personal relationships.

AI became the methodology for annual strategic planning in the entire Finance and Administration Division. Working with the consultant, some departments developed an AI protocol and conducted interviews with their external stakeholders. The data they collected from these interviews built on the work they had already done internally and informed their planning process. The work they had done in the initial workshops accelerated the strategic planning process. There was a strong sense of ownership of the goals and objectives that emerged and members worked painstakingly to design and develop specific and achievable action steps that were incorporated into one and five-year plans for each department. One department was able to institutionalize 17 of their objectives within one year. They were particularly proud that they were able to implement a four-day workweek in their department. Another department was able to review all their policy manuals in one year, making revisions that included an appreciative approach to their work and introduced appreciative leadership concepts.

AI moved deeper into the system with a two and half day summit attended by 140 faculty, staff, administrators, and students from across campus who were brought together to take part in the university's strategic planning for the future. The theme was, ''Discovering the Power of Partnership: Building a University-Wide Community to Advance to the Next Tier of Nationally Recognized Excellence.'' They moved through the 4-D process, telling stories of personal highlights of their university experience. They developed personal, global, and university timelines of successes and achievements for each decade from the 1950s to the present. They engaged in a dialogue about the meaning of the stories told and the interrelationship of the three timelines. Once again, this positive history served as a platform for envisioning the future.

The Dreaming phase was creative and exuberant as they envisioned their university in 2010:

- In ten years, we will be the nation's top university in research funding, use of technology, and all-around academic quality.
- Intellectual and social walls between departments and schools, between faculty, staff, and students, will no longer exist.
- Our university will be known nationally and internationally.

As the dialogue continued over the $2\frac{1}{2}$ days, in mixed groups and stakeholder groups, participants prioritized five areas to address that could move the university toward the realization of their vision: technological development; increased diversity; greater involvement with the community; achieving national and international recognition; and staff development.

Participants in the summit were overwhelmingly positive about their experience and were hopeful that the ideas generated would bear fruit. As one faculty member noted, ''I was seeing leadership and insight from places I wouldn't have expected.... If people here are empowered, great things are going to happen.'' And great things are happening. Action planning for each of these areas was begun at the summit and the work and the conversation continues. The Human Resources Department designed leadership and supervisory training for supervisors and managers based on AI principles. Communication and partnering between departments has significantly improved and new recognition and reward systems are in place which highlight individual's strengths. There are many stories of greater energy and passion for the work that people are doing. This multi-staged process has not only created organization-wide change, but has been effective in bringing about change on a personal level as well.

Creating a coalition for affordable housing and community development

Bringing together a group of over 80 people with many different perspectives and competing interests to plan the future of housing, community and neighborhood development for their city raises some important questions for the sponsor of the event and the consultant. Is it possible for people who do not ordinarily plan together and who have a history of not seeing eye-to-eye on needs and priorities to collaborate purposefully and effectively? Are the power brokers who traditionally dominate the planning and policy-making process willing to broaden the base of power to include ordinary citizens? Yes.

The City of Dubuque was about to put together a five-year Consolidated Plan for Housing, Community and Economic Development that would involve the expenditure of $20 million dollars. While affordable housing was a major concern, there was not a strong constituency that had the political clout to make its voice heard among other competing interests. The hope for the Housing Action

Conference was to build such a constituency while recognizing that housing, particularly affordable housing, was a part of complex social and economic factors affecting the future direction of their city. If the city were to grow in a direction that met the needs of *all* its citizens, the key stakeholders would have to come together to make it happen. The results of the proposed conference would inform the Comprehensive Plan and the disbursement of funds.

In anticipation of the Conference, more than 300 people were involved in individual interviews or in stakeholder focus groups. Their stories of the city at its best and their dreams for the future were disseminated prior to the Conference, paving the way for creating a new narrative for the City and eliciting the collective will to move forward.

The challenge to the planning committee was to determine which voices needed to be at the table and to make a compelling case for their presence. The challenge to the consultants[1] was to design and facilitate a process that assured that all voices were heard and people participated as equals in creating a shared and powerful image for the future. Further, it had to be a process that would enhance the collaborative capacity of the participants if they were to sustain the hard work ahead for the realization of that future. Though the planning committee fretted about whether people would make a commitment to come and whether it would be the ''right'' people, by the time of the event, the Housing Action Conference was the place to be. Eighty-two people, representing landlords, tenants, community activists, elected officials, service providers and other stakeholders met together in an intense and invigorating event.

Storytelling set the tone at the start of the Conference. Readers were positioned at microphones around the room reciting stories from the interviews that had been collected. They also read excerpts from a variety of works that focused on the idea of home and housing. The power of storytelling brought a hush to the room as people seemed to be reflecting on their reason for participating and the centrality of ''home'' in all of our lives.

The work of the Conference began with appreciative interviews into topics that looked to the best of the past and anticipated the desired future. There were people in the room who were very familiar with planning processes and some for whom this was a new and intimidating experience. Therefore, one important part of the Discovery phase was to elicit stories, in paired interviews, of an exceptional experience in collaborating with others. They shared stories at their tables, selected stories to share with the whole gathering, making it apparent to all that the capacity for collaboration was very present in this group along with a determination to be open to new ideas that took them beyond the ideas they each brought into the room. The learning from these stories became the platform for co-constructing the ''high road'' that they would travel throughout the Conference and beyond.

It is certainly not unusual to establish norms for working together as a group. However, the AI discovery process—face-to-face interviews which elicit stories of what the system wants more of, sharing those stories and drawing

meaning from them—fosters a way of being in relation to one another that has depth and creates an immediate and sustainable bond. We begin to create the world we want by telling stories about how it is when it is at its best. In this way the values, emotions, and meaning that people discern from the stories can become accessible and embraced. So when we want more collaboration across boundaries, stories of successful collaborations are likely to get us there.

In one group, a participant who had recently immigrated to this country related that collaboration was not part of his culture. ''If people don't agree or don't like one another, they part company,'' he said. It was a significant moment for the group members as they grappled to understand such a difference. Was it a language problem? Did he just not ''get it''? To share this cultural difference and have this circle of new acquaintances struggle with it was in itself a story of collaboration. Suddenly, the word ''inclusive'' was not just some abstract nicety, but a concept that, at times, would require building relationships across significant cultural divides.

Stories have heft and staying power. We remember stories far better than details. They carry the metaphors and images that help us make sense of the world in new ways. In their telling, the assumptions on which they are based are held up to the light and become open to question.

> The reception and passing on of story changes both the stories themselves and those who tell and listen to them. Change occurs because the story event activates the imagination.... Meanings that were previously closed are now reopened and reassessed. By such ''re-visioning'' of past history, new possible outcomes in the future can now be imagined. New futures are the stuff of hope, and hope is what can transform the present (Bradt, 1997).

As practitioners of the AI process we are repeatedly struck by the positive energy that soars in the room as people share their stories of high point experiences in their lives. People are often amazed at the impact of their own stories as well as being deeply moved by hearing stories about the exceptional moments in other's lives. We sense that people come to a new appreciation of their own and each other's essential goodness and competence. Recent research sheds some light on what it is we are seeing. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt who has studied the moral emotions writes of the emotional experience related to awe that he refers to as ''elevation'':

> Elevation appears to be caused by seeing manifestations of humanity's higher or better nature; ... it causes a desire to become a better person oneself; and it seems to open one's heart not only to the person who triggered the feeling, but to other people as well ... elevation makes people open up and seek contact ... (it) seems to create a more generalized desire to become a better

> person oneself ... It opens people up to new possibilities for action and thought.... (Haidt, in press).

In the Discovery phase of the Conference process, people did open up, new relationships were formed, and new possibilities emerged. This was evident in the high energy and collaborative spirit throughout the Conference. Working with stories highlighting the best of the past and their dreams for the future, people worked in mixed groups, in stakeholder groups, and in plenary to envision the city they wanted for themselves. They grappled with issues of downtown development, mixed neighborhoods, affordable quality housing, workforce recruitment and retention and more. They crafted possibility statements for the future and developed steps they were ready to take together to achieve their goals.

By the end of the Conference seven action planning groups had formed and each group was asked to present a report to the group in a creative way that would get people's attention and generate excitement in the larger community. Perhaps the most poignant presentation was from a group concerned with retaining a strong workforce, including youth and immigrants. A Bosnian gentleman began this group's report in his native language. No one understood a single word he said, but his message was clear to everyone. The future of Dubuque is about *all* of us. And so the future began.

It is now almost a year later and David Harris, Director of Housing Services and the sponsor of the Housing Action Conference, reports that the momentum continues. When asked what changes he sees in the way the community is working together, he responded, ''I can give you a great example of that. HUD released new lead paint regulations that were to become effective in September. Before this we would have had another ''holy war'' in town. The landlords would have been up in arms shouting that we were trying to put them out of business. This year, we sent out a lot of communication, we met with them to explain the changes and there was a quiet and seamless transition. A new level of trust has been reached in the community.''

When asked if people are still hopeful and confident about achieving the goals they set for themselves, he offered several stories:

''The Downtown planning effort is still going strong. They have designed a process, set a timeline and a budget. They are working with the City Council, getting the necessary approvals.''

''One of the task forces was concerned about retaining youth in our City. They sponsored a Teen Dance with young people on the planning committee. Four thousand people showed up for a dance in the downtown plaza! They continue to plan events with and for youth.''

''Another task force was concerned with creating more livable neighborhoods. They decided to 'attack' some of the vacant buildings and organized a youth program. One hundred youth spent a long weekend painting and giving a face-lift to some abandoned properties. Some of the owners showed up and worked side

by side with the kids. They are planning another four-day event. People are taking ownership of their own neighborhoods.''

''The Housing Department came out of the process with much more stature. We're on a roll and it feels great.''

As the community is considering other planning events, people are asking for broader stakeholder participation. It is a phenomenon we have seen before. Once people have experienced a process that gives voice to all participants, they seek broader and broader rings of inclusion. The system seems to reach out for wholeness.

AI in developing nations

AI allows for much flexibility and adaptability making it well suited to a broad range of applications. The following story demonstrates how this process has been instrumental in transforming the way consultants are working with communities in developing countries.

This AI process enabled villagers to reclaim their sense of competency and renew their sense of agency in their own community in a way that well-intentioned traditional development efforts may well have diminished.

This is a story from the village Phakhel in Nepal as told by Tricia Lustig, a consultant with the LASA Development Group in the United Kingdom. She has spent much time in Phakhel and is well known in the village. Tricia had a dream that there would be some way to help the people to help themselves, one that would not require a great deal of outside assistance. She writes, ''I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I knew I would! I first voiced this dream in the summer of 1998 and in November of that year met Mac Odell, a consultant who had adapted AI for work with villagers. She felt this was exactly what was needed in Phakhel and invited some of her Nepali colleagues to work with her. They invited people in the community to come to a meeting and talk together about how they might help their village, and people came. They knew Tricia, were curious about what they could learn from one another and were also curious about what it is that Tricia actually does.

They followed an abbreviated version of the 4-D model and adapted it to a community in which most of the people are illiterate. Tricia and her colleagues separated the men, women, and children into different work groups and brought them together to share information.

The villagers were invited to tell a story about something that had gone well in the village, something they had done together. They were asked to create a document of their ''successes'' by drawing their story using pictures and symbols on flip chart paper. Extra time was needed to encourage the women to pick up a pen, something that was very unfamiliar to them.

One man got up to say, ''This really brings it home to me. We've been bloody lazy! For the past 40 years we have been holding our hands out for aid from the

government or INGOs (International Non-Government Organizations) and what do we get? We fight, we can't agree on anything and we don't feel good about ourselves. Forty years ago, we did a lot together because there was no one else to help us and you know what? We were proud of what we did! We were proud of our village. Are any of you proud now? No? Well, lets do this together and be proud again!''

In the Dreaming phase, participants were asked, ''What kind of village would you like for your children and grandchildren?'' People shared their dreams and each group was asked to draw a picture of their shared vision for the future of their village.

The Design phase was more difficult. Tricia believes that people who have not learned to read have difficulty with the concept of planning and this had to be taught. The consultants worked with them, helping them determine the steps needed to achieve their dream, consider what had to be done first and what had to follow, reflect on what the challenges might be, and determine how they might organize themselves.

Delivery emerged from Design spontaneously. When participants reported on their design, they stood up and declared who committed to do what.

As is their tradition, 3-Ds are added to their model: Do; Debrief; and Dance. They ask the group, ''What can we *do* right now?'' Tricia writes, ''This is important and comes from Mac Odell. If we all do something together in the next 5 or 10 minutes, it gives a good feeling and people see how much can be achieved in a short time if everyone helps.'' In this first AI session, the group decided to clean the local schoolyard, which was full of trash. They quickly cleaned it up and burned the rubbish. The school children pledged to keep the schoolyard clean and according to Tricia, it remains clean today, two years later.

They conclude the process with a *debrief* of the session and when finished, they *dance* and sing to celebrate their accomplishment.

In this village, women had to walk up to one hour to get their water. Pipelines and taps for each group of houses were their first priority. The men agreed to build a secondary school, providing all the materials and labor. By their second meeting, pipes and taps had actually been installed in many of the housing groups because PLAN International, an INGO, had come in and done it for them. However, those whose living situations were more complex were not included in PLAN's work. The women contributed all the money they had raised to help those who had been left out. Within five months everyone had water!

Since they had accomplished their first goal, they decided to work with the men on the secondary school project. The men had been involved in raising money for the registration fee for a new school but had been unable to agree on a site; in fact, a disagreement about where the school should be located had gone on for years. At this meeting, the women decided that they would set up a committee to decide where the school should be located. When one of the participants, Jamuna Thing, stood up to say that she would take charge of this, the men cheered and clapped wildly. The women were leading the way.

In that meeting, 10,000 rupees was pledged (an amount that represents the average yearly income for a family of six). This work was begun two years ago. When Tricia visited the village in May, 2000 they had raised 34,000 rupees and had sunk the foundations for the school. When she returned in November, they were continuing to build on the foundation. They have received a grant from PLAN International for 2.2 million rupees to build a school with 14 classrooms. The villagers have now raised an additional 162,000 rupees themselves. They have paid the registration fee and the rest of this money is earmarked to pay teachers' salaries. Tricia is back in the village about three times a year. She and her colleagues, Lal Lama and Harka Lal Gurung, continue to help with the process as needed. A strong community organization is in place, led by three villagers, and as Tricia writes, ''they seem to move from strength to strength''.

In closing, we present an extraordinary application of AI. It is a bold effort to begin a global conversation among people of all faiths to support interfaith social justice work around the world.

United religions initiative and the unique contribution of appreciative inquiry

In 1993, the Right Reverend William Swing, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of San Francisco, was asked by the United Nations to organize an interfaith worship service at Grace Cathedral as part of the 50th anniversary celebration of the signing of the UN Charter. In thinking about this request, he conceived the idea of building a parallel institution to the United Nations that would bring together leaders of diverse faith traditions from all over the world to promote enduring interfaith cooperation. He first saw it as an assembly of religious leaders, like the UN, who could work together to end religiously motivated violence, and create cultures of peace, justice, and healing for the earth. It was to be a daunting task but an important one. The 1996 Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential listed over 15,000 global problems and noted that over half of the armed conflicts in world in 1993 were between groups from different religions.

In an effort to make his vision a reality, Swing traveled around the world in 1996 talking to religious leaders, scholars, and interfaith groups. While he found support from many people, including Mother Theresa and the Dalai Lama, he also found opposition, skepticism, and cynicism.

With help from others, Bishop Swing began to conceive of a new way of bringing people together. The United Religions Initiative (URI) is not about a merger of faiths or a new religion; rather, it represents an agreement among individuals of all faiths to build relationships. Toward that end, David Cooperrider has worked with URI, introducing AI principles and the 4-D process to create dialogic structures that have enabled difficult conversations to metamorphose into deep friendships.

The first gathering was built around forging relationships that inspire conversation. At Cooperrider's suggestion, the group was not limited to

religious leaders. Interfaith leaders, corporate and NGO executives, scholars in religious and organizational studies, people who were knowledgeable about philanthropy and communication were included to collectively represent the diverse stakeholders who could begin to build this initiative. Carefully crafted appreciative questions brought people together across the boundaries of differing belief systems and traditions. They told stories to one another of times when they had been involved in work that was of great significance and meaning to them and sought the learnings in those stories that could inform the work ahead. They were asked what they valued about themselves and about their religion or faith community that could be a resource to this new venture; what were the special gifts in their beliefs and practices that could contribute to cooperating with others to build a URI. While recognizing the many world problems and conflicts, they looked for the most promising, positive trends and patterns in their communities or around the world that suggested a counterbalancing story—a story of hope and promise for the creation of a URI.

The questions were designed to discover the best in each other and the resources they brought to the task. It was an opportunity to challenge assumptions they may have had about their differences and to open pathways for new learning about what might be possible in their collaboration.

Dialogue about their discoveries was followed by an opportunity to dream, to create an image of how a truly effective URI might contribute to a better world. They imagined the steps necessary to craft a charter that would create such an organization.

Their collective vision of the future was of living in a world of mutual respect, of serving the needy, and being caretakers of the earth and all its inhabitants; a world where religion leads to dialogue and not to hatred and violence; one in which there would be a celebration of all diversity, and cooperative action for global good. A vision such as this would have profound implications for the design of their new organization.

Participants at this first conference committed to hold gatherings all over the world, inviting many voices to further shape the vision of a URI and inspire the writing of a charter. Local gatherings, regional summits and a yearly global summit have moved the process forward.

As more and more people became involved throughout the world, the shape the URI was to take began to form. It would not be a replica of the United Nations. Rather, it would be a very organic grass roots organization held together by its clarity of purpose and principles. Interfaith groups would come together as ''circles of cooperation'' working in their own way in alignment with URI principles toward the overarching goal of ending religious violence and creating cultures of peace and justice.

The work on writing the charter that began in 1996 culminated in June, 2000 when more than 300 participants from six continents, representing many religions and spiritual traditions met in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for a charter signing

ceremony. Pittsburgh, a city with more bridges than any other U.S. city, provided an apt metaphor for the bridge-building that is at the heart of the URI mission.

Since its inception the URI has spawned many dynamic ventures, creating new possibilities for cooperative interfaith action. As the year 2000 dawned, a URI peace-building effort known as ''The 72 Hours Project'' brought gatherings of millions of people throughout the world community in a spirit of hope and peace for the new millennium. From December 31, 1999 to January 2, 2000 more than 400 communities in 60 countries representing faith traditions from Anglicans to Zoroastrians participated in prayer vigils, peace marches, and other interfaith activities. URI has created a video series, ''Improbable Pairs''. In one episode, an Israeli father and a Palestinian uncle speak movingly about the terrible losses of their kin in past conflicts and of their hopes and shared efforts for peace. The pain that could have kept them apart and bitter has, instead, brought them together in friendship to work for a more peaceful world.

Appreciative Inquiry has framed the dialogues in many of the offshoots of URI. For example, the Dalai Lama believed that, ''If the leadership of the world's religions could simply get to know one another . . . the world could be a different, a better place,'' and has convened meetings of the Inter-religious Forum for Friendship Among Religious Leaders. Because of the aspirations to create a forum where leaders can get to know one another in mutually respectful ways and reflect on hard issues without binding any institution to another, AI seemed appropriate to guide the conversation. Through the sharing of stories, ''the sharing of things precious,'' and the search for understanding life purpose and best qualities, there emerged the surprise of friendship, of genuine affection, of relatedness.[2]

Following the 1996 URI summit, several interfaith groups sponsored an opportunity for youth to hold their own gatherings. The youth recognized that AI ''mirrored our natural way of talking to each other, getting to the heart of what matters to us, who we are, what we want to see happen,'' commented Jennifer Peace, a doctoral student at the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, who attended the summit. She noted that AI was a particularly effective method for minority youth who sometimes had been silenced, to be treated as equal participants in a democratic gathering. It creates an environment that can help nurture a new generation of compassionate global leaders by giving them profound experiences of intercultural encounter, interfaith reflection and social action. Through using AI, the young people felt authorized to act without asking permission. They have initiated several projects such as establishing an interfaith house where young leaders will live in community, adding the element of interfaith reflection as they work on selected projects with Habitat for Humanity, and the creation of a book of sacred stories. As the Rev. Paul Chaffee stated, ''Appreciative Inquiry is uniquely suited for building a multi-cultural, multi-faith community . . . (It) focuses on what works . . . Exchanging what is best about ourselves turns out to generate trust . . .'' (Chaffee, 1997). The URI continues to work in a way that has helped create trust as well as mutual

respect in an arena where both have been noticeably absent through much of history.

Conclusions

We often speak of the desirability of reaching consensus in our public dialogue but perhaps this is too limited a goal. Consensus can ''calm down'' rather than ''fire up'' the aspirations of a community. Appreciative Inquiry creates a dialogic environment that excites the imagination. The robust dialogue of many voices is a welcome disturbance that can move our thinking to that borderland of stability-instability, order-chaos where our greatest creativity resides. The appreciative conversations that take place one to one, in small groups, and in ever larger circles, serve to build trust and strengthen relationships allowing for the disruption of old patterns of thinking. This opens a pathway for new insights, new hope, and therefore new possibilities. We are better able to reach for these new possibilities when we are mindful of the successes we have had and of the strengths in our system. The best of our past gives us new confidence permitting us to be bold in our aspirations. We believe that the cases described here illustrate that an appreciative approach to our most important concerns sets the stage for co-creating a new plane of understanding, a more interesting place, where individual passion and collective commitment, fueled by a bold and expanded image of what is possible, join forces in pursuit of the ideal.

Notes

1. The consultants for this project were the lead author, Muriel Finegold and EnCompass, a Maryland consulting firm.
2. Excerpt from an email from David Cooperrider.

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