

Living Appreciatively

At the very first meeting of this group that Deb started, she asked if I would do something on story. I decided to do something from my work with Stories inside Words. I told of the project that I am working on to gather stories from peacemakers and the opening set of stories from three ambassadors who told stories inspired by words to the preamble to the Charter of the UN. We played a bit with how words become more alive when stories are told that came from their inspiration. Then I asked the group to tell stories inspired by either the word enquiry or appreciation.

As I listened to the stories, I wondered where this one was going. Could people be so used to the words appreciative inquiry that they would not be able to find something new in themselves? Would all of their stories be of how they used AI? Would the words remain the same to me even after hearing all the stories? I just didn't know what would happen.

Every other time I have used the exercise, the participants are excited about the words. They are usually words from mission statements or vision statements. I usually begin with asking them to tell stories inspired by words from mission statements of famous corporations like Niki or Mary Kay or Lego. They have fun with the words, and they see the words come alive in new ways. So, by the time they began to tell stories from their own mission statement, they were having fun, and they were practiced in finding the stories. But we didn't have time to do this extra step. I had to rely on my belief that stories inside words would enliven in any event.

I began to listen to the stories about appreciation or enquiry. They stories were mixed together. As they told their stories, I began to jot down points in their stories. One by one, the stories began to reveal things about the speakers. Perhaps the story was about a family member. Perhaps the story was about something earlier in their career. Just as we find in AI work, the response to questions or the telling of the story 'of the time when' are revealing about a lot of things. But was there some kernel of something new here? I recognized my own dreariness with the words appreciative inquiry. I had been using that phrase for almost 10 years. I had written about them. I had worked through them. I had taught about them. Would there be something new for me?

I didn't see it at first. Perhaps because time was running out (I did this in an amazingly short period of time.) and so my thinking cap never got put on right and no new thoughts were coming to me. But the group was happier and happier about what they were seeing in the stories. They certainly got the point. They could see that stories enlivened words. But what about me?

The next day, I began to write up the notes from the session. I typed each phrase, word, and note that I had made. Then as I got toward the end of the list, I

felt that tingle of excitement start deep inside. Yes, there was something new there. Word after word just kept adding to the excitement that was growing in me. And suddenly, there it was. The stories about appreciation were about compassion – all of them. The stories about enquiry were about the interaction between two people who were engaged with each other in some form of conversation. That was it – compassionate engagement.

Compassionate engagement. I had it. This was new to me. Suddenly, AI became something entirely revitalized. We engage compassionately with others in compassionate engagement. I have never felt the same about AI since then.

Now, the new words allowed me to broaden my view of, my use of this philosophy. I could design retreats, surveys, or interview protocols; conduct conversations, briefings, or discussions; teach, coach, or advise with my full attention on the others in the room (engagement) and with good intentions toward the other (a compassionate heart).

These two new words were now fresh and alive to me. They were also became measures of my intended actions and actual actions. Easy and simple. Be there for the other person with a desire to be helpful and affirming.

I recently conducted some interviews for a book I am writing. The interviews were about how the persons perceived me. Here are some of the statements I recorded:

You always bring a strong desire to understand fully, to assure that the framework is clear, yet you give comfort to others while you do it.

You don't let others step on you, but you always 'make the water flow.' (Israeli phrase meaning that I don't disrupt the flow of thinking – people remain open.)

You are a very friendly bridge between worlds. When you come to me with an idea it is not transactional, rather it is generative. Something gets born and goes out to the world.

Compassionate engagement has become my guide post.

Think of a time when you were able to change how you felt about another person – a change that meant moving from a judgmental stance to one of acceptance. Another way to say it is that you went from tolerance to acceptance.

What kind of language expresses appreciation?

M. Blair, © January 2008