

Appreciating Mindfully

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In the previous blog entry, I pondered how Appreciative Inquiry (AI), as a philosophy, transcends the duality of “positive” and “negative”. On a slightly different note; however, I have been thinking how one might stay true to the principles of AI when the “going gets tough”.

Say, for example, one experiences a number of challenges in one’s life. For argument’s sake, say a loved one dies, a relationship ends, one is in an accident, one is physically hurt, one’s computer crashes days before a deadline is due, one’s apartment floods, etc. Say all of these things happen pretty much at the same time (as it did for me). Can one stay honest AND inquire appreciatively into the situation? Is AI simply a nice perspective for sunshine days or is it a real life philosophy applicable in any given situation?

My experience has taught me that AI is a powerful way to bring me into the present moment. In a way, it is a practice in mindfulness. The temptation to be lured in to the “same ol’, same ol’” story about the past, may seem overwhelming at times. We may acknowledge that the story itself serves a purpose and then gently allow it the space to be, or go – but it need no longer be given centre stage and held up as the one and only truth to be told. There is a fine, yet fundamental, discerning distinction between identifying with a construct or story as Truth, versus seeing it as a truth among many. The first implies becoming the story; the latter involves witnessing the story as a construction of the storyteller. There is no denial of the story. But there is also no need to keep telling it and revolve the rest of one’s life around it.

AI capitalises on the creative power of memories (present thoughts about the past), and anticipation (present thoughts about the future). It is designed to bring these creative forces into awareness in the present moment, and to do so in a fresh, uncontrived, “beginner’s mind” kind of way. Rather than the same old, taken-for-granted stories we routinely tell ourselves – much of the time out of our awareness as a script that runs in the background of our consciousness – it asks questions that allow us truly to become present to ourselves in an honest and surprising way.

Why do I say honest? Sometimes we fear that because we no longer perpetuate the old, thin, problem-saturated story we usually identify with, we are somehow in denial. But are the stories we tell ourselves repeatedly about who we are, who others are and what the world is, really true? And furthermore, does it have to be a truth-denial, identify-repress dichotomy? Can we be awake to something – stand in the pure flame of awareness – and do so with a light touch? Can we wholeheartedly accept something and at the same time choose not to strengthen and perpetuate it? Can we remind ourselves to become open, curious and pay attention to more than what we routinely would have? Can we inquire directly into what gives Life, even when we sometimes feel like being alive itself is a challenge?

In a paradoxical way, I think we can. There is a beautiful quote by an old late acquaintance of mine, philosopher and poet John O’Donohue, who said: “In our longing, lies our belonging”. In a nutshell, I think this is the power of an Appreciative Inquiry. It brings me in touch with my

heart's longing. It allows me to make new and significant intra-psychic and interpersonal connections that free up energy to make deliberate choices about belonging.

And sometimes the longing is simply to be kind to oneself for a while; to take time to being human and to heal a broken heart. Am I happy that a beloved died unexpectedly amidst a variety of other unfortunate events? No. Do I accept the reality of each one of these circumstances? Yes. Do I find a moment of aliveness – Life – in each instance? Absolutely. With AI, I have reflected on what has been the best moments of each relationship and experience, and why. I am learning what those instances reveal to me about who I am and what I value, and what my aspirations are as I continue. I allow myself to feel the tenderness of grief, and at the same time feel poignantly connected to Life, allowing its inherent compassion and wisdom to reveal itself to me – in me – more and more.

To me, AI is not about either-or, should-shouldn'ts, positives or negatives. It encourages an honest, present moment inquiry into what matters most and provides direction on where to go from here. I have experienced it to be an ennobling perspective and practice in mindfulness – in almost any given situation.

A few appreciative questions I have been asking myself after my aunt's passing:

Thinking back on my relationship with Iris, what are my 3 clearest happy memories of us together? What happened? What did she communicate to me through her words, behaviour and / or attitude, that she felt, believed and valued about herself, life and me? What did she see in me that I did not acknowledge or know about myself yet? What do these moments say about what she valued and believed possible? What is the greatest gift she gave me in terms of an alternative perspective on life and womanhood?

What are the one or two key phrases she shared with me that will continue to be a life teaching for me?

What image or symbol connects me most powerfully with the memory of her?

What wish do I have for how I live my life and / or think about myself in the future, that will honour her legacy?

About the Author:

Ezelle Theunissen practices as a coach and appreciative inquiry trainer & consultant to create "generative & learning" organizational cultures that wish to thrive in a rapidly changing environment. She specialises in organizational and community transformation and the design of innovative programmes that integrate learning and coaching at individual and team level. She especially enjoys participating in environments that are innovation-focused and possibility-oriented.

Ezelle has gained considerable experience working in diverse environments – from rural, small town and peri-urban communities to big brand corporate industries. She feels equally inspired collaborating with private, non-government and / or public sectors and thrives in environments rich in diversity. She is equally fluent in English & Afrikaans and especially enjoys working with other English-second-language speakers throughout the world.

Ezelle's coaching practice focuses on coaching leaders and managers at the cutting edge of their fields. Her areas of expertise include entrepreneurship and business development, managing change, learning and development, and increasing effectiveness and quality of experience in the workplace. She thrives in settings lead by avant-garde visionaries who pioneer new enterprises and programs in fast-paced and growing environments.

To learn more about Ezelle Theunissen, visit:

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