Video Transcript Living on the Appreciative Edge – Destiny (Frank Barrett)
AI World Conference in Florida, featuring Frank Barrett

What does a system look like when Appreciative Inquiry is part of its daily fabric? How do we get beyond a notion of change as a one-time intervention and see it instead as an ongoing process?

On this DVD, Frank Barrett helps us see Destiny as ongoing organizational improvisation. In traditional models of organizations, leaders plan, implement, and evaluate strategic change. Appreciative Inquiry proposes a different model--one in which organizations practice continual discovery, dream of possible alternative actions, redesign approaches on the spot and create innovative products.

Jane Magruder Watkins introduces Frank, citing the U.S. Navy video of an AI Summit that was co-facilitated by Frank. She also praises Frank's "incredible writing" on AI.

Frank recalls the first international conference in Baltimore, in 1999, where AIC was founded by 22 AI Practitioners. Then, through music and metaphor, and with equal parts of humor and wisdom, Frank explores jazz improvisation as an example of an appreciative system devoted to innovation.

He notices that Destiny is the only one of the 4-Ds (which, by the way, took AI Practitioners 10 years to come up with) that it is not both a verb and a noun: Discover and Discovery; Dream; and Design. He says Destiny, as a noun, is sort of "stuck." Yet, Destiny is ongoing Discovery, Dream, and Design, simultaneously. AI is ongoing learning and discovery.

He proposes that:

    Deficit discourse is related to command and control

    Appreciative discourse is related to self-organizing systems

    Wholeness, having the whole system in the room, helps people get that organizations are human constructions and, as such, can be constructed in many different ways

    When people observe Mother Teresa doing good works, their own emotion is elevated (just the observation of it), what jazz musicians call the "groove"

    Image leads to action leads to engagement

    We need to Design for sustainability

He also proposes that AI is at its best when it is tied to strategic issues. He thinks we need to move from strategic planning to strategic relating. He talks about the old-paradigm D-A-D model of strategic planning: Decide, Advocate, and Defend, in which learning goes down. This happens in command-and-control organizations, where the goal is to eliminate surprise. Then he asks the question: can surprise and discovery become invigorating, rather than noxious? The answer is yes: jazz bands do it all the time.

Frank reminds us that the word "proviso" is Latin for "plan." Improvisation, then, the life-giving force for jazz musicians, is acting without a plan. He shares a true story about a group of professional explorers who are hiking in the Alps when a snowstorm comes up. They get lost, but fortunately one of the explorers has a map that they use to get safely down the mountain. However, when they get down, they discover that the map is a "map of the Andes." So the question posed by the story is, why does a map of the Andes work when the explorers are in the Alps? As Frank reminds us, the map certainly doesn't predict the future, i.e., it certainly isn't "a strategic plan." Frank proposes that the map turns the explorers into learners--it gives them an excuse to process real-time information simultaneously with real-time action. Like jazz musicians, they improvise, work without a score, work with a "map of the Andes." They learn by doing. Frank thinks our best organizational learning happens when we are working with maps of the Andes.

Destiny = Living on the Appreciative Edge

Inquiry = Quest for affirmative competence; notice and confirm on an ongoing basis

Improvisation & Destiny - Keeping curiosity alive

All living systems already exhibit spontaneity, the capacity to respond in unique ways, to experiment, to be inventive. Spontaneity and improvisation depend upon appreciative ways of knowing. When human systems are improvising, they are living at the appreciative edge. Innovation, experimentation, and improvisation are, at core, acts of affirmation.

Improvisation (like jazz bands): Living on the Appreciative Edge

    Self-organizing system
    Dynamic tension between chaos and order (Dee Hock's chaord)
    Strategy and implementation are simultaneous
    Devoted to continual re-inquiry
    Openness to novelty
    Continual quest to discover the best alternatives
    Small, positive actions have large consequences
    Agile and adaptable organization

Who Can Improvise?

Language as prototype

Frank tells a (funny) story of parents supporting children who are learning to talk, a fully appreciative system. He also reminds us of the importance of comparison and says we need to choose our comparisons intentionally and wisely.

Regarding improvisation, Frank invites us to: "Think of a time when you found yourself in a radically unfamiliar situation and had to take action that led to a successful outcome. This is probably a situation for which you were unprepared, when you were faced with some unforeseen obstacle or unexpected surprise. It may well have been an incident that momentarily made you feel joyful, exhilarated; perhaps incompetent, nervous, or even frightened. Nevertheless you responded, took action, and something good came of it."

Jazz players, he says, do this all the time! The question they ask themselves is, was I terrified enough?

On Learning, "Intelligence," Creativity, and Identity:

> John Dewey's definition of learning the capacity to imagine new possibilities, the capacity to generate novel responses to familiar stimuli

> Discovering who we are by discovering how we behave in unfamiliar situations
> Learn by comparison

On Guiding Principles of Improvisation and Creativity:

> Art of unlearning habits

> Appreciative mindset: say " yes" to the mess'

> Minimal consensus and minimal structures that show maximum autonomy: the value of impersonal trust

> Embrace errors as a source of learning and discovery

> Provocative competence: incremental disruptions

> Alternating between soloing and supporting

> Striking a groove: dynamic synchronization and flow

Regarding Principle 6, Frank finds it interesting that we have no theories of follower-ship. Jazz provides one: "comping" or supporting. Making the solo happen. Surrender your ego to the idea; idea is king.

Frank then unpacks each principle:

1. Master the art of "Unlearning"

> Create opportunities to surprise yourself

> Develop routines and abandon them

> Be suspicious of patterns (or habits)

> "If it sounds clean and slick, I've been doing it too long," says Miles Davis

> Throw yourself into the terror

He tells a story about saxophonist Sonny Rollins, considered by jazz artists to be the greatest improviser of all time. Sometimes "he stinks." He quotes saxophonist Steve Lacy: "I'm attracted to improvisation because of something I value. That is a freshness, a certain quality, which can only be obtained by improvisation, something you cannot possibly get from writing. It is something to do with the "edge." Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap. And when you go there you have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means but it is a leap into the unknown."

2. Appreciative Mindset and Engagement: Saying "Yes" to the Mess

Whatever has happened or is happening has positive potential for innovation

Attend closely to what is happening and jump in

Every act, every utterance, has affirmative potential

There is hope in every motif and cue, that any material can be embellished in a positive direction

Frank says, "Jazz is a great model for hope." The crucial moment is saying yes to the mess, that no matter what "junk" is put in front of us, we can make "sense" of it. Jazz players are constantly saying yes, try this, yes, try this, yes, try this, improvising in every moment. He then demonstrates improvisation by taking four notes given to him by members of the audience, sitting down at the piano, and creating a nice piece of jazz. The idea is, Appreciative Mindset: Amplify Positive Deviance: we have the materials right here and right now.

3. Guided Autonomy: Minimal Structure and Maximal Freedom

Assume when people disagree that they're both right

Dissent and debate are tolerated and encouraged

It's not about reaching consensus; it's about just enough agreement. When people develop Provocative Propositions, they each will see them differently, but there will be some overlap, some ability to coordinate the actions. You're not going for "clarity."

Jazz players, he says, don't necessarily like each other. They're going to Minimal Consensus and Maximal Autonomy.

Limited structures and tacit rules that coordinate action through time

Impersonal, minimal constraints that invite embellishment and transformation

These rules themselves can become the targets of transformation (even while they provide orientation)

Impersonal trust

4. Embrace Errors as a Source of Learning and Discovery

Risky, explorative actions are expected to produce the unexpected, including errors

Errors are incorporated as part of the ongoing action

Potential to be integrated into new pattern of activity

Repeat it, amplify it, develop it further (treat it as just another piece of "junk" to be played with)

In organizations, we train errors out. He tells the story of a hospital emergency room where people could talk openly about their errors; the number of errors went down.

Errors as Source of Learning

"When we have a failure, we try to replicate it. We repeat it to learn from it. We take this error and we what new information it can generate. It helps us see in new ways." Safety manager at Boeing

"If you're not making a mistake, it's a mistake." Miles Davis

Mindset of Wisdom

Dangers of excessive caution and excessive confidence

People who experiment, expect to fail and learn from failures

Wisdom = Acting with knowledge while simultaneously doubting what one knows

5. Provocative Competence

Explore and monitor the perimeter of comfort and the edge of the unknown

Create incremental disruptions that dislodge habit and demand openness to what unfolds
Nurture affirmative images of what's possible

Create situations that demand action: possibility is not an option

Open and support alternative pathways

Frank says the job of the leader is to provoke competence (but not all the time…). He shares a story about Miles Davis who provoked competence by forbidding his band members to practice.

Provocative Competence: "Tweaking" Cultural Inertia

Frank tells three short stories to demonstrate this principle:

British Air - top managers were taken off site; someone put airline seats in their motel rooms, beds were removed. They came up with all kinds of good ideas about improving the airline seats. (No one asked for a consensus decision to do that!)

Navy rescue drill - When at sea, sailors do what's called an "Oscar drill", a dummy is thrown overboard and the crew needs to rescue the dummy by turning the ship in a figure 8. The commanding officer decided that the crew was getting complacent, so he said, "Hey, guys, don't blow this one," and he jumped overboard.

6. Alternating Between Soloing and Comping

Taking turns: make the other happen
"Comping" = Accompanying

Providing a "holding environment" that supports the unfolding of others' ideas and actions

Give one another room to experiment, to develop themes

Attentive listening enables exceptional performance

7. Striking a Groove: Dynamic Synchronization

Appreciative attunement to others

Continual attempts to shape one's creations to what one has heard and is hearing

Negotiating a shared sense of the beat

Expressions of connection and ecstasy: sailing, gliding, grooving

Expressions of receptivity, openness, fluid connection

Renewed sense of hope

Frank reminds AI practitioners that every human system already is an appreciative system, or it couldn't live as a system. There are places in every human system that are already spontaneously acting and reacting, and inventing as they go (i.e., improvising). Spontaneity, innovation and improvisation require an appreciative way of knowing (self-organizing, not command and control). Every human system already is doing that or else, in some way, it will be in entropy or die, become a statue and freeze. Our task then, as AI Facilitators, is not to bring appreciation into the system but to help people notice where appreciation already exists, and amplify it. That's Destiny!

Frank Barrett, Ph.D., is associate professor in the Graduate School of Business and Public Policy at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, where he is director of the Center for Positive Change. He is also a faculty member in the School of Human and Organizational Development at the Fielding Graduate Institute. Frank has written and lectured widely on social constructionism, Appreciative Inquiry, organizational change, jazz improvisation, and organizational learning. He is coeditor of Appreciative Inquiry and Organizational Transformation (Greenwood Books, 2001).