



The Power of Language

By Jane Magruder Watkins

When Dawn asked me to write a short piece for the Taos Newsletter I began to reread some of the pieces previously written by my colleagues on the Taos Board. As usual, I always learn something from the wonderful and wise people who belong to that group and this time was no exception. I found a piece that Harlene Anderson wrote that included a quote from Heidegger who, as Harlene noted, called our attention to the connection between language and change. In Heidegger's words: "Changes in the world necessitate changes in language, and changes in language affect what we are able to grasp about the world [and how we grasp it] By searching for new ways to speak about new situations and experiences, language develops."

I found myself once again totally intrigued with the power of language; the meanings we make from the dialogues we have; and, more profoundly, the power of the choices we make about how we interpret, react to, or change, in the (not so) simple process of exchanging words with each other. As I look back on my own life, I realize that not only do I speak of things that did not exist in the late 1930's when I came into this world (computers, rockets into space, diseases that had no name or did not exist), but also, I have an emerging (and uneasy) understanding of the power of language to shape our world in the future! I also have come to understand the terrible conundrum that what I say may never be understood to transmit what I thought I was saying!

Lately I have been pondering this in some depth as we work to finish the 2nd edition of "Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination." In the first edition, I was intrigued with the impact of the new sciences on how we make meaning of the world. In the decade since that book was written, an almost unimaginable shift has happened not only in the speed of change in our human systems, but also in the multitude of ways we are learning to communicate and make meaning of our interchanges. All of which leads me to reflect on what I have learned and continue to learn in my work with Appreciative Inquiry, a process that I originally understood to be simply a way to shift from negative to positive thinking.

The more I work with AI, the more I understand it to be theory and philosophy; and that recognizes the ability of human beings actually to create a world full of positive, generative and shifting realities. These come, not from scientific inventions or the actions of powerful people, but simply from the decision that each of us has the capacity to make – the decision to imagine, describe and co-create. Further, that process of co-creating our reality is ongoing, dynamic, and ever changing.

AI is a "decision!" It is a theory and philosophy that applies to any choice we make about seeing and understanding our world. In the field of Organization Development (OD) where AI was first widely applied at a systems level, we are not "doing" AI. We apply the theory and philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry to any existing change model; or, for that matter, to any life situation.

AI is a conscious choice to socially construct reality in generative, creative, imaginative and, of course, appreciative ways that leads us into a world of possibilities for our most desired future. As Harlene reminds us of Heidegger's words, "Changes in the world necessitate changes in language, and changes in language affect what we are able to grasp about the world [and how we grasp it.] By searching for new ways to speak about new situations and experiences, language develops." I add to that, language has the power to move us toward our preferred future! It is about the decisions we make.