"How did the URI generate the extraordinary global participation and local leadership to accomplish this act of creation and subsequent phenomenal growth? It is impossible to answer that question without understanding Appreciative Inquiry and the ways it can be used – in business, government and civil society – to foster and sustain cultures of participation."

Appreciative Inquiry

Creating Cultures of Positive Participation

By Diana Whitney and
Charles Gibbs

In June 1997, two hundred people from forty countries and dozens of religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions – Buddhists, Muslims, Baha'is, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jews, Jains, Hindus, Christians, Kollas, and Lakotas – came together at Stanford University for the second United Religions Initiative (URI) Global Summit. Women and men, young and old, they were religious and spiritual leaders; business people and scholars; leaders of non-governmental organizations and artists. Mostly strangers, they were pioneers on a journey of creation to produce an unprecedented global organization whose goal was to change human history through globally linked grassroots interfaith cooperation.

The purpose of the summit was to create a community of dedicated participants who would collaboratively generate plans needed to extend the United Religions Initiative into new parts of the world and begin the process of writing a charter. To be successful, the work of this community was to build upon and integrate with prior and ongoing work to establish the URI. At the same time, in the ways that people were invited to meet and interact with one another, it was to be an exemplary experience of the relational organization that would emerge. A carefully adapted Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process was the structure for accomplishing the work.

By the end of their week together, summit participants had collectively created the vision of a globally connected organization that would be inclusive,

decentralized, locally self-organizing and focused on action; and they had self-organized into 20 research and development teams, each focused on a core issue relevant to the creation of this innovative, new paradigm global interfaith organization. The members of this summit community dispersed, no longer strangers but friends and colleagues, convinced that the new organization was on its way and committed to its realization through ongoing prayer and meditation, research and development, and AI based interfaith organizing throughout the world.

Three years later, on June 26, 2000, people all around the world signed the URI Charter, giving birth to a fully global United Religions Initiative. By June 2006, the URI's global community included 300 locally inspired groups – Cooperation Circles – in 60 countries, with over one million people a year involved in activities for peace, justice and healing.

How did the URI generate the extraordinary global participation and local leadership to accomplish this act of creation and subsequent phenomenal growth? It is impossible to answer that question without understanding Appreciative Inquiry and the ways it can be used – in business, government and civil society – to foster and sustain cultures of participation.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

There are many ways to describe Appreciative Inquiry (AI): as a life affirming relational philosophy; as social

constructionist methodology for human organizing and change; and as a central force in a growing movement for positive approaches to organizing that include positive spirituality (Fox, 2000), positive psychology (Seligman 2002, Fredrickson, 2003), and positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton and Quinn, 2003). AI is indeed an invitation to a positive revolution in organization

human, nor the process of human organizing on a global scale is a singular, one-dimensional phenomenon. Each person lives and embodies a multi-relational identity – connected to both the socially constructed and natural worlds, and a unique set of "gifts and potentialities" – spiritual, emotional and physical. We who practice AI recognize the richness of human life personally and collectively and

another, each nation danced, the ancient music of their chants rising past the clouds, past the moon, to the great spirit of life. Then all four shared a common dance.

It was an historic moment. Because of ancient divisions, they had never before danced together. The previous night, they had struggled way past midnight seeking a shared vision of how to lead the whole group in sacred ritual for healing and peace. Finally, in the clarity and courage early morning can bring, one person suggested that if they were to lead a ritual for healing and peace for the whole group they must first heal ancient enmities and make peace among themselves. Their shared dance was the expression of their commitment to healing and a better future together.

Grounded in social constructionist theory, AI is a process for engaging large numbers of diverse people in creative conversations and activities through which shared futures are enacted and sustained.

development (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

At the philosophical heart of AI is a commitment to the positive potential of people personally, relationally and collectively. As Margaret Mead famously said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Significant social change occurs when the people – no matter how dispersed and diverse they are – have opportunities to participate in conversations with one another about their shared future. Conversations that enable them to get to know each other in deep and meaningful ways, and to authentically express what matters to them in ways that are life affirming. Conversations that enable them to heal, enhance, build and "restory" relationships. Conversations through which they can design and care for the world they collectively inhabit.

In the URI, these conversations have taken the form of one-on-one interviews, small and large group dialogues as well as ceremonies and rituals. We have learned over the years that meaningful conversations may be verbal or non-verbal, sung, chanted or even danced. They are as likely to take place by sharing prayers and drawing upon sacred texts and teachings as they are by sitting in conference rooms talking.

Neither the experience of being

invite people to show up and participate polyphonically so that diversity within and among people is experienced and honored thus allowing a new spirit of unity to prevail.

As follow on to the 1997 global summit, the United Religions Initiative hosted regional summits in Europe, Asia, South America and North America. In May 1999, we co-sponsored an historic interfaith conference in Brazil. One-hundred-and-twenty-five people from 35 different religious, spiritual and indigenous traditions gathered to celebrate existing interfaith work in Brazil, to explore connections between Brazilian interfaith work and the United Religions Initiative's global effort and to begin to forge strategic alliances for future work.

A powerful AI process allowed a vivid living image of the future the URI wished to create to materialize on the second night of the conference. It was an extraordinary and memorable experience. In a clearing on a mountain, in the middle of the Brazilian rainforest, participants formed a circle in the dark. The only light came from a bonfire in the middle of the circle and the full moon. Our leaders were members of four indigenous nations which had been pushed to the brink of extinction by the ancestors of many of the people standing in the circle. Dressed in their ceremonial clothing, they spoke to us through a ritual of sacred dance and chant. One after

Then the leaders invited the whole group to dance. Everyone joined hands and danced themselves into an exhilarating exhaustion. Around the circle were indigenous people in their native dress, a Zen Buddhist monk in her robes, a Tibetan Buddhist monk in his robes, two Dominican monks in their robes, a Hindu swami in his robes and a Muslim sheikh. All sizes, shapes, ages and colors of men and women in regular clothes and in ritual clothes; hands joined, dancing together as one community, extraordinarily diverse and yet united. In that moment, the group was an embodiment of its shared visions of a better world, and the cooperative seeds of peace, justice and healing were planted to grow to fruition during the rest of the conference and beyond.

It is from a belief in the positive collective potential of people, an abiding acceptance and sincere curiosity about the myriad of differences that constitute our human family, and an understanding that conversations – in many forms – matter, that the methodology of AI unfolds. Grounded in social constructionist theory, AI is a process for engaging large numbers of diverse people in creative conversations and activities through which shared futures are enacted and sustained.

More practically put, AI is an action research process, through which people inquire into, learn about and then build upon the strengths, best practices, most

cherished values, beliefs, hopes and dreams of one another. With AI there are no experts who collect data, analyze it and then tell others what it means. Everyone – the whole system – is involved in data collection through appreciative interviews, making meaning through small group dialogues, creating images of vibrant and vital futures through large group activities, and determining paths forward together.
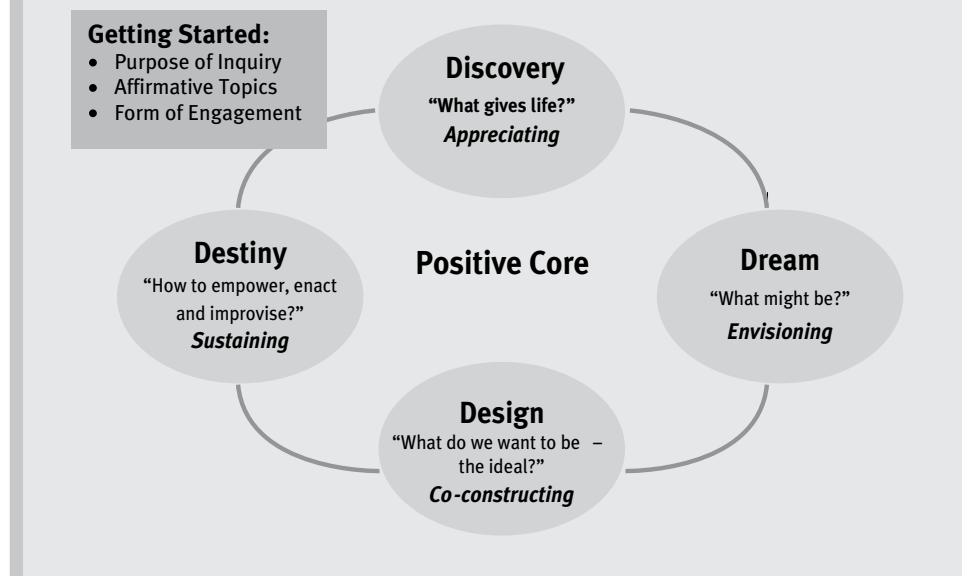
The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle

Each Appreciative Inquiry must be designed and carried out to be appropriate to the time and situation. The purpose of the inquiry must guide who is involved, what is studied and how the process is conducted. With the URI, the guiding purpose over five years of sustained appreciative inquiry was to create an unprecedented global organization dedicated to interfaith cooperation for the good of all. This purpose led us to involve thousands of people from around the world in local face-to- face meetings, annual global summits and on-line discussions.

In a smaller project, a high school whose purpose was to redesign its academic schedule engaged faculty, administrators, students and parents together in a two-day AI process with extensive follow-up activities. In a business case, Nutrimental, SA closed its food processing plant for five days and engaged 700 people, including customers and community members, in an Appreciative Inquiry Summit (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffin, 2004). The purpose was to create a new strategic vision and plan. In this case, the AI based culture of participation resulted in enthusiastic commitment to the renewed strategic plan and a 300% increase in sales within nine months.

While there is no one formula for AI, most successful AI processes flow a series of activities described as the AI 4-D Cycle. This cycle can be as rapid and informal as a conversation with a friend or as formal and long term as an organization or community-wide process involving all stakeholder groups.

FIGURE 1: Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle

Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle

As *Figure 1* illustrates the four key phases of an AI process are:

» **Discovery** – engaging the whole organization or community in appreciative interviews and dialogues to identify everything that can be learned about the people, organization or community when they have been or are at their best.

Appreciative interviews delve into the "poetics of practice" – what people do and say that is most effective, and the underlying teachings, beliefs and values that guide their practice. The focus of discovery is on the collection of narratives – stories and quotes that illustrate what the organization or community stands for and how it operates when most successful in social, economic, spiritual and environmental terms.

The analysis and meaning making that results from discovery leads to a profile of the organization's or community's positive core – that fusion of its unique strengths that is central to its success and positive potential.

» **Dream** – using the stories that were collected as a foundation for engaging in dialogue to envision and to articulate images of higher purpose. Dream activities are visionary and futuristic as well as grounded and practical. They

answer questions such as, "What is the world calling us to be, to do, to become?", "How can we cooperate to bring our highest vision for the world into being?".

Recognizing that we do not change an organization or community on the same level of abstraction that it was created, dream processes engage people in dialogue about possibilities that are more inclusive, cooperative and far reaching than their usual conversations. The result of bold, collective dreaming is both a realization of shared vision and a sense of enhanced relational responsibility for the future.

» **Design** – creating "provocative propositions," statements of the ideal organization or community that are a desired and consciously chosen stretch beyond the status quo; articulating a purpose and set of principles capable of drawing upon and magnifying the identified positive core and worthy of collective action.

Designing requires consciousness. It is a process of spanning "now and then." While living and working in varying degrees of "command and control, fear based, oppressive organizations" we seek to leave a legacy of greater freedom by consciously articulating and giving life to organizations and communities that liberate the human spirit and enable the realization of dreams. This requires

a shift in our deepest understanding of the purpose of human organizing. A shift from forms of organizing that privilege some at the expense of others, to forms of organizing that ensure freedom of expression, health and peaceful co-existence for all. No organization, business, school, government or community should be designed for any less purpose.

This requires careful attention to the words, ways of knowing,

of the "ideal organization;" and repeatedly turning to inquiry as a way of maintaining openness and humility, ongoing learning and sharing of best practices from across diverse experiences and situations.

The 4-D Cycle: A Call for Celebration

While each phase of an AI 4-D Cycle is distinct and meaningful there is one common element not to be forgotten along

appreciative interview, a one-on-one dialogue among organization or community members and stakeholders using questions related to highpoint experiences, valuing and what gives life to the organization or community at its best. Questions are developed from generic questions such as:

1. Tell me about a time in your organization or community that you consider a highpoint experience, a time when you were most engaged and felt alive and vibrant. Describe the situation, who was involved and what made it a highpoint.
2. Without being modest, what it is that you most value about yourself, your work and your organization or community?
3. What are the core factors that give life to your organization or community when it is at its best?
4. Imagine your organization or community ten years into the future, a time when everything is just as you always wished it could be. What is different? How did it come into being? How have you contributed to the realization of this "dream organization or community?"

Muslims and Christians asked each other to share the greatest gift they had received from their tradition, and to offer a teaching, a prayer or a sacred text that inspired them to make a positive difference in the world. By the end of the interviews, the uneasiness had vanished completely, replaced by new community – a culture of positive participation – whose diverse members were eager to work together.

authority structures and practices that give form to human endeavor. At its best, designing is a process of mindfully imagining values in form, of establishing forms of human interaction that render desired values inevitable. Take for example, the value of equality of women and men. In order to design an ideal organization full of equality among women and men, participants would have to determine – how will such equality occur in decision making, in committee structures, in communication practices, in hiring practices, in promotional practices, in pay practices, in childcare, etc?

» **Destiny** – strengthening the affirmative capability of the whole organization or community and supporting it to build and sustain momentum for ongoing "higher" performance as proscribed by its purpose and principles.

Destiny involves attention to continuously extending and deepening relatedness; consciously living into the questions posed by the principles

the way – Celebration. At each step in the process there is an imperative to celebrate. In the beginning of most AI initiatives, it becomes apparent that a diverse and perhaps improbable group of people have been convened. This realization creates a palpable call to celebrate. It soon follows that what is learned in the discovery phase is a joyful appreciation of resources, gifts, strengths and positive potential. In the next phase, bold and inspiring dreams are themselves a celebration of the human spirit. Taking time to lift them up in song and dance enlivens the collective spirit for the work that follows. This was certainly the case in the URI experience in Brazil. The design phase of AI lifts up a sense of hope, a deep understanding that we are collectively responsible for the world we live in and together we can make it better. Hope for the future inspires action and a deep desire to create a world safe for all to celebration.

Appreciative Interviews

For many the essence of AI is the

Bridging Improbable Pairs – Appreciative Interviews are most often shared by people who don't know each other, or don't know each other well. We encourage and at times even match interview partners to optimize diversity. Experience shows us that when we ask people who are different to identify commonalities they tend to differentiate and highlight differences. When with AI, however, we ask people who are vastly different from one another to inquire into, learn about and appreciate "the other's" life, loves and raison d'etre, we find that people inevitably identify and later express commonalities. It seems to be a paradox of human organizing. When given the freedom to be different, and to be heard and respected for our uniqueness we more readily move to bridge our differences.

Creating a Narrative Rich Culture of Participation – Good Appreciative Questions draw out stories. They

ask for descriptions of situations, events, experiences, wisdom from the interviewee's life events. They are intended to stimulate the recall of favorable and emotionally enlivening events, events worthy of learning about and entering into the collective wisdom of the group. We encourage the expression of stories for two important reasons. One, we learn from stories. We remember them and draw meaning from the values and practices they convey. Two, sharing of stories builds intimacy and harmony among group members. While we may argue with someone's list of what makes a great team, we listen in awe to stories of great teams. A narrative rich culture tends toward harmony and respect among people with differences.

The information and stories that come out of the Appreciative Interviews are shared throughout the organization or community resulting in new, more compelling images of both the present capacity of the organization or community and its future potential.

A stunning example of the power of appreciative interviews occurred in May 1998 in Nairobi, Kenya during a URI regional conference for 60 men and women, young and old, representing 14 faith traditions from eight East African countries. As was often the case in URI's groundbreaking work, the people coming together represented traditions frequently at odds with each other and whose understanding of each other came mainly through negative stereotypes or a history of hostility. Understandably, people's uneasiness was apparent as the conference began.

But that uneasiness was transformed as strangers engaged with each other in appreciative interviews. Muslims and Christians asked each other to share the greatest gift they had received from their tradition, and to offer a teaching, a prayer or a sacred text that inspired them to make a positive difference in the world. By the end of the interviews, the uneasiness had vanished completely, replaced by new community – a culture of positive participation – whose diverse members were eager to work together.

The morning after the appreciative interviews, the following comments were shared, *"I am a Muslim and I was afraid to come here because I thought I would have to sit down with a Christian."* Or, *"I am a Christian and I was afraid to come here because I thought I was going to have to sit down with a Muslim."*

Both Muslims and Christians continued, "But I conquered my fear and came. And I'm glad that I did. Because I did have to sit down with a Christian/ Muslim and I discovered that it wasn't so bad. Yes, we have differences, but we want the same kind of future and I believe we can work together."

Two-and-a-half years after the 1998 Nairobi conference, a URI trip to Africa revealed firsthand some of the fruits that had grown from the new relationships catalyzed by Appreciative Inquiry. In Kampala, Uganda, representatives of 12 locally organized URI Cooperation Circles shared from their work, which included interfaith dialogue, education, AIDS prevention, economic development and conflict transformation. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the local Cooperation Circle (CC) inaugurated the first URI office outside San Francisco. The CC members were a consistent force for interfaith peace building during the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and engaged in empowering peace education for young people. These groups bound together by the URI's Charter, with autonomy to organize their own activities, and support as part of a global organization, were making the URI Charter a living reality.

Appreciative Inquiry with a Purpose

Getting started with Appreciative Inquiry means getting clear on the purpose of the initiative, selecting affirmative topics and determining what "Form of Engagement" to use. Clarity of purpose is essential as purpose is the seed that gets planted at the beginning, germinates and sprouts in the process, and grows to fruition thereafter. Or as a Taoist saying suggests, "As it begins so it ends." The purpose of an AI initiative must be clear, compelling and inspiring enough to warrant the participation of a diverse group of stakeholders. A small purpose will, at best, get a small result. In all likelihood, a small purpose will seem like a waste of people's time and energy and lead to low levels of engagement. A high purpose is a call to participation and an imperative to cooperation. A good purpose for an AI initiative is one that requires the input, ideas and involvement of the whole system, something that no one person or group can accomplish alone. For instance, the purpose of the URI's 1997 global summit was *Chartering the United Religions – Building Worldwide Commitment.*

Affirmative Topic Selection

The selection of AI topics sets the stage for the inquiry to follow. They are two to three word phrases that convey something you sincerely want to learn about and develop in your organization or community. Choosing Affirmative Topics may require that organization or community members make a 180 degree shift in their thinking. For example, one company was struggling

FIGURE 2: Organizations and Their Purpose for Applying AI

United Religions Initiative	Co-Create a Global Organization
Hunter Douglas WFD	Corporate Culture Change
GTE/Verizon	Union Management Partnership
US Navy	Leadership Development
John Deere	Cost, Quality and Cycle Time
Lovelace Health System	Nursing Retention
British Airways	Exceptional Customer Service
World Vision	International Development

with costly, high rates of turnover. They did study after study of turnover only to learn more about turnover and less about what they really wanted which was a dedicated, highly-engaged workforce. In the process of selecting affirmative topics their logic shifted from: turnover to retention; from retention to high engagement; and from high engagement to "magnetic work environments." Their subsequent study of the Affirmative Topic "magnetic work environments" gave everyone involved a great opportunity to discuss what was most magnetic about their current environment and what their hopes and dreams were for a work environment that would magnetically hold them to the company.

AI Forms of Engagement

There are many ways to apply the AI 4-D Cycle (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003). From mass mobilizing interviews across an entire city, to small groups of nurses interviewing colleagues within their hospital and other hospitals, to simultaneous interviews among two hundred factory workers in the same company as a prelude to dream, design and destiny within a 5-day AI Summit. Each application liberates the power of inquiry, builds relationships and unleashes learning.

As well as being used for early meetings to envision and design the URI, AI has helped the URI grow appreciative genes that enrich and guide the global community's ongoing work – the importance of relationship; of deep listening and sharing; of living with generative questions rather than rushing for answers; and, of being drawn to the future we wish to co-create rather than being shackled to the problems of the past and present. Over the years the URI community has used AI in a wide range of settings – home discussions, global summits, global council meetings, regional summits, etc. – to become collectively conscious of the deepest and best of each other, our values and our practices as we together create a global community that is a living, inspiring, invitational model of peace, justice and healing.

Conclusion

As the URI story demonstrates, results generated through Appreciative Inquiry are immediate, profound, often surprisingly dramatic and broad in scope, and sustainable. They include personal and large-scale transformation, creating new possibilities, powerful alliances and unprecedented cooperation. In a world, and in individual lives often overwhelmed by the negative, AI lights a positive path to be traveled with open hearts and minds and a desire to work cooperatively for a better future. We invite you to join the journey.

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