

August 2010

Acknowledging the Negative in Leading Lasting Positive Change

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In my business planning and strategy work I remind people that, “we see more of what we look for.” That principle is fundamental to Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which asks questions about moments of success and triumph, then builds on the strengths we discover in those stories to explore bold—yet possible—stretch goals for the future.

One of the questions I am often asked is...what about the negative? How can we move forward when there is deep-seated pain and resentment that makes conversations about the positive and what’s possible *impossible* to initiate or comprehend?

Storms brew in many forms, and the pain they bring is real. Be the ill feelings from a company acquisition, an unwelcomed re-org, leadership change, or lost job, or from a fall-out with a friend, a lost loved one, broken home, community, or nation – hurt is hurt. So where does

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) – strength-based, *positive* change – fit when it comes to moving beyond *hurt and despair*?

Last November I had the pleasure of hearing Justice Albie Sachs of the Constitutional Court of South Africa speak at the World Appreciative Inquiry Conference in Nepal¹. He captivated his audience recounting his experience of being severely injured in 1988, losing an arm and sight in one eye when South African security agents placed a bomb in his car.

Sachs also told stories about South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which addressed the competing, yet often interdependent forces of accountability and amnesty. He recounted how certain persons who engaged in the most horrific criminal acts during the Apartheid regime gained amnesty when they were held

accountable to telling the truth.

The TRC was not a closed-room confession – it went public and involved the whole nation. Gross human rights violators testified before television cameras, radio, and the press in ways that allowed the country to relive the unforgettable horror and publicly acknowledge the nation’s moral defeat. With tears streaming down his face, one sergeant spoke of having placed a plastic bag tightly around a teenage girl’s head as she sang the national anthem. Another told of an outdoor barbeque where, within yards of grilled beefsteaks the bodies of the tortured were also burned. The horror was unfathomable, the tears real. In the auditorium of 350+ listeners one could hear a pin drop.

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As Sachs pointed out, the TRC allowed a sharing of knowledge with public acknowledgement; and from acknowledgement came reconciliation and a readiness to heal. South Africa [and the world for that matter] knew what happened during the Apartheid regime; but it needed to connect to that information in order to lay the foundation of national reconciliation. More than satisfying the *objective* of information gathering by the courts, the nation needed a *process* for healing – to connect to the information and acknowledge it together.

“It was not about victory for either side, but about victory for a set of values,” noted the Honorable Sachs. “It meant that for the first time, we as South Africans were living in the same moral country.” Amnesty in this sense, with the price of public acknowledgement, replaced impunity. And in Sachs’ view, it paved the way for a new democracy to be born.

On a personal level, Sachs recounted his reunion with the man who planted the bomb in his car, the acknowledgement that came with that experience, and the healing made possible thereafter. Following the TRC trials, and on the very grounds the prison that once incarcerated Nelson Mandela and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi once stood—a new court was built to symbolize healing, openness, and peace. The facility was decorated with artwork from around the country, and choirs are said to be seen singing on the grounds.



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Justice Albie Sachs

Hearing the honorable Justice Sachs speak in Nepal was an unforgettable experience. There are three points I’d like to draw from his message, all of which underline the importance of acknowledgement in leading *lasting* positive change:

1. Healing is more than the mere absence of pain.

2. The process is as important as the outcome.

3. Lasting change is at the scale of the whole.

1. Healing is more than the mere absence of pain.

Likewise, peace is more than the absence of violence; it’s about flourishing societies.

To heal from difficult experiences (regardless of context, culture, or scale), we need to do more than get rid of the unwanted or the negative. As Justice Sachs argues,

we need to acknowledge, and from this we can create space for positive growth. In South Africa’s case, healing was far more than the abolition of Apartheid, far more than the cessation of violence. The TRC enabled public acknowledgement in ways that paved the way for reconciliation and democracy – something far beyond the mere punishment or elimination of gross human rights violators.

Victor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist, wrote that optimism in the face of tragedy can turn suffering into a human achievement. He called this “tragic optimism” and related it to his own experiences as a Holocaust survivor. As a prisoner every freedom is taken away but “the last of human freedoms”—the ability to “choose one’s attitude in a given set of circumstances.”² No matter the circumstances, no matter how tragic or horrific the experience, we all have a choice in attitude

that makes possible positive growth. And far more than the absence of pain, the path of healing is one we must choose for positive growth to begin.

2. The process is as important as the

outcome. The “truth” is not something you “get” to but something you “talk” to. Justice Sachs originally recommended that the TRC hold trials in more intimate settings where, in his opinion, the criminals would be more likely to fully disclose their heinous crimes. Fortunately the TRC disagreed with him and instead went public. Many painful “truths” from the past were openly aired and acknowledged and a nation’s process of healing could begin – a process that was (and is) inclusive, dynamic, continuous, and ongoing.

Where most court systems rely exclusively on observational and logical truth, Justice Sachs speaks of “dialogical truth,” something you experience through dialogue and the exchange of stories. He has said that “judges are the storytellers of the 21st century”³, recognizing the unique responsibility and opportunity a judge has in integrating a judicial opinion with judicial passion in ways that generate meaning for society.

Storytelling itself is a process, and it is society’s oldest, most universal means of creating and sharing knowledge. Its power comes not only from the “data” it reveals but also from its generative process of engaging, moving, and inspiring connection – connection to new perspectives and learning, as well as connection among people.

Appreciative Inquiry can be a highly effective means of sparking the exchange of stories – stories that do more than “look for the positive,” but also force us to examine the assumptions we’re holding and look at reality a little differently. In his article “AI Is Not (Just) About The Positive,” Gervase Bushe encourages people to “be thoughtful in how we make a space for inquiry into hurt, anger, injustice,

despair – doing that in a way that contributes to the group’s ability to understand, and bring into being, its collective aspirations.”⁴ In *The Essentials of Appreciative Inquiry*, Bernard Mohr and Jane Magruder Watkins propose a list of helpful conditions for AI, the first being the following: “Humble beginnings: the organization honestly acknowledges any current difficulties without assigning blame and invites co-construction of solutions that do not yet exist.”⁵

3. Lasting change is at the scale of the whole.

We’ve all heard that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and yet we’re often challenged to expand our thinking around who/what really can and should make up the whole. South Africa didn’t

need another human rights violations report published by legal experts. It needed a nation to come together, publicly witness and acknowledge moral defeat, reconcile, and heal. This process didn’t require the wisdom of a handful of individuals; it took the wholeness of a nation [with the world watching].

To say that Sachs presentation moved me to tears is an understatement. As a mother – as a

human being – the stories were hard to bear, and near the close of his story I found myself surrounded by many tearful, even weeping conference participants. I retreated to a nearby ladies room for a tissue where a petite elderly woman from Korea approached me. She put her small hands on my shoulder, and we wept together, complete strangers in a strange place far from home. Just before parting she looked up at me with her tear-filled eyes, smiled and said, “We are one.”

And we were. It was what David Cooperrider later called a “prophetic experience⁶,” a shared moment where we experience the past, present, and future simultaneously in connecting to the “whole”. Justice Sach’s story let us relive his past in ways that fueled our compassion for the present, and stirred within us a compelling vision of hope for the future.

“The truth is not something you ‘get’ to, but something you ‘talk’ to.”

- Justice Albie Sachs

Following a physical injury, such as a cut or scrape, we bleed at first, then new tissue forms – not a fixing of the damaged old tissue (resolution), but creation anew (renewal). Renewal of this sort is at the heart of any lasting positive change effort, and Appreciative Inquiry helps makes this possible, elevating and increasing that which we value. We value acknowledgement. Furthermore, we value courage and compassion, and acknowledgement requires much of both. Sometimes with acknowledgement comes the release of deep pain and hurt, but if handled with courage and compassion, we can make space for lasting positive growth.

Endnotes:

¹ Justice Albie Sachs, World AI Conference, Kathmandu, Nepal. 19 November 2009.

² Sider, N.G. (2003.) “Discovering Resources for Post-traumatic Healing and Growth” in *Positive Approaches to Peacebuilding*. PACT Publications: Washington DC.

³ Gorman, N. (February 2010.) “Uncommon Interview with Justice Albie Sachs.” *Chicago Maroon*.

⁴ Bushe, G. (August 2007.) “Appreciative Inquiry is Not (Just) About The Positive.” Segal Graduate School of Business, Simon Fraser University.

⁵ Mohr, B. & Watkins, J. (2002.) *The Essentials of Appreciative Inquiry: A Roadmap for Creating Positive Futures*. Pegasus Communications.

⁶ David Cooperrider, World AI Conference, Kathmandu, Nepal. 19 November 2009.

About the Author

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