

Using Appreciative Inquiry with Journalists

Robin Shoheit and Ben Fuchs

Robin's Story

In September 2003 I was introduced to Mark Brayne, Director of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma in Europe. Dart's aims are to help journalists to look at the causes of stress in their work and to help to promote emotional well being, particularly for those who have been witness to traumatic events.

There is now increasing recognition that the journalist as a detached observer does not fit the facts, and indeed is a myth that is costly in terms of stress and burnout as this myth forces them into a denial of their feelings. Mark's idea was to create a forum whereby journalists felt safe enough to talk about the traumas they had witnessed and how they had been affected, and to make a connection between trauma and spirituality. We decided to run a day's workshop in March 2004 on journalism, trauma and spirituality using appreciative inquiry as a launching pad for discussion. This was a bold step as both topics of trauma (their own as opposed to others') and spirituality are not natural foci for journalists.

I have always found appreciative inquiry to be an excellent way of generating conversations. It works on many different levels. It is safe, the theory is simple without being over simplistic, it brings people into relationship and for those who already know each other it deepens relationship. This group was already skilful at interviewing and it gave them a chance to be on both ends of the successful interview techniques they used in their jobs. It also helped to break down barriers of scepticism. As one person commented, 'In the news business, scepticism shading into cynicism is in effect part of the job description.'

The stories were very moving, as they are in every appreciative inquiry event. One participant, a well known broadcasting correspondent, noted that just the first five minutes of sharing experiences made the day worthwhile for him. Another participant said, 'It opened my eyes to a variety of issues, from the spectacles we wear while reporting to coping mechanisms. It made me realise that I am not alone in the way I feel about the world I live in as well as my job as a journalist.' And another commented that the AI was an important lesson in how to create processes and spaces which support journalists in their own experience and reporting of human distress. I was particularly moved by a reporter who had been to many of the war zones of the world and had been close to burnout and breakdown. Sitting in his tent in Iraq full of despair, he cried, 'I

can't go on', when he heard a voice that said, 'This is not about you.' He was able to transcend (as opposed to deny) his personal feelings and do the job that needed to be done with a sense of peace inside him. It was a profound spiritual experience that moved the whole group.

We decided to hold another event and pursue the topic of spirituality under the heading of forgiveness. I had co-facilitated an international conference on forgiveness with Ben Fuchs in 1999 and so asked him if he would join me.

Ben's story

Bringing appreciative inquiry into mainstream journalism seems to me one of the most powerful ways to effect positive change in the world. So when Robin invited me to co-lead an event for journalists using AI to look at trauma and forgiveness, I jumped at the opportunity. Robin and I had run an international conference on Forgiveness and Reconciliation and we had been on the same AI training course. So it was easy for us to combine on this project.

The one-day event in April 2005 was sponsored by the Dart Centre, with about fifteen journalists and editors, mostly from television and radio news organisations. What struck me immediately on the day was how warm, open and willing to engage personally these people were – quite different from how I might have expected, based on the style of many news broadcasts.

We started with a brief explanation of the underlying principles of AI, which they grasped immediately. Then we moved into doing a discovery protocol telling stories of when we looked at the world, or a situation, with a 'forgiving' mind (or accepting mind).

After working in pairs, some of the stories were told in the larger group, followed by a lively conversation about the AI approach and the process of healing from trauma. One participant later reported; 'Approaching stories with a forgiving mind is a good exercise in objectivity. A forgiving mind accepts that this is how it is, without imposing judgments, or at least helping us become more aware of our judgments and prejudices. That's something I've been working on since I became a journalist—making sure I'm reflecting as best I can the whole of the story from as many angles as possible. I never connected the word forgiveness with it, until it was called acceptance.

Focusing on positive elements isn't something we journalists do a lot of, largely because many stories are about what's wrong with a government, or about conflict'. Of course, inquiring about an accepting mind in the group generated a wonderful atmosphere of acceptance, where people felt free to share more personally and deeply than they might otherwise be willing to – especially in front of colleagues.

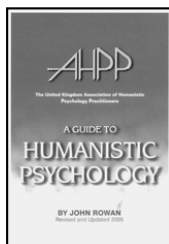
In the second part of the day, we invited them to dream into their future – imagining what life would be like in a year if they stayed in a forgiving/accepting mind for an entire year. Specifically; how had your life changed in this past year; what is different about the way you approach your work; what previously held assumptions or beliefs did you need to question?

This led to another lively round of dialogue, linking back with the broader aims and intentions of the Dart Centre. The day ended with much appreciation for the AI approach and informal connecting for like-minded journalists. The feedback on the day was very positive. It expanded the way some of the journalists view stories. It also expanded my own understanding and appreciation of journalists.

www.dartcentre.org

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Ben Fuchs specialises in transforming conflicts and building cooperation in diverse settings. His work brings together perspectives from group dynamics, organizational development, social complexity and participatory leadership. His current focus is facilitating post-conventional approaches to leadership and decision making. email: ben@cohesiveid.com



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