

“What creates a sense of wonder as we inquire into organizational life, and what spoils it? What are the varieties of wonder? What is the connection of wonder to knowledge?”

The Child as Agent of Inquiry

By David L. Cooperrider

*“The sense of wonder, that is our sixth sense. And it is the natural...”
—D.H. Lawrence*

WHAT IS THE role of wonder in OD? What creates a sense of wonder as we inquire into organizational life, and what Spoils it? What are the varieties of wonder? What is the connection of wonder to knowledge? To the imagination? To the flowering of relationships? What happens to the storyteller, for example, when the room is filled by people sitting forward, listening, even smiling, with a sense of wonder? Why is uninhibited wonder something we generally restrict to children? If doing good inquiry is at the heart of OD, why then so little talk of things like awe, curiosity, veneration, surprise, delight, amazement, and wonder - in short, everything that serves to infuse what OD has traditionally referred to as the “spirit of inquiry”.

Presented here is a thesis, a proposition, regarding the future of OD. It is a stand which I take with some hesitation, even with some tentativeness. It is a proposition I will illustrate with an “N” of one, hardly a proof. But it has, I think, some wis-

dom in it; one might even argue the idea was modeled in the lives of early pioneers like Kurt Lewin, Mary Parker Follett, Herb Shepard and others. The thesis emerges from years of experimenting with what my colleagues and I have termed “Appreciative Inquiry”. It goes something like this: We have reached “*the end of problem solving*” as a mode of inquiry capable of inspiring, mobilizing, and sustaining human system change, and the future of OD belongs to methods that affirm, compel, and accelerate anticipatory learning involving larger and larger levels of collectivity. The new methods will be distinguished by the art and the science of asking powerful, positive questions (soon there will be an “encyclopedia of questions” that brings together classic formulations like Maslow’s interview protocols on peak human experience and Vereena Kast’s exceptional studies of joy, inspiration, and hope). The new methods will view realities as socially constructed and will therefore become more radically relational, widening the circles of dialogue to groups of

100s, 1000s, and perhaps more – with cyberspace relationships into the millions. The arduous task of intervention will give way to the speed of imagination and innovation; and instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there will be discovery, dream, and design. Social construction will mean constructive constructing. And the metaphor speaking best to our primary task and role – “the child as the agent of inquiry” – is one where wonder, learning, and the dialogical imagination will be modus operandi.

**LET’S ILLUSTRATE:
IMAGINE OD WITH A WHOLE CITY**

I want to tell you about a successful businesswoman – a corporate banking executive for 16 years at First Chicago – who one day decided to leave it all to devote her next 10 years to transforming the city’s future. Trained in OD, savvy in action-research methodologies, and a visionary in her own right,

Bliss Browne asked the question; “What might happen if all of Chicago’s citizens were mobilized to give public expression, continuously, to their imagination about a healthy future for the city as a whole, and were invited to claim their role in bringing that vision to life?” Could it be, she paused,we human beings create our own realities through imagination and conversational processes, and *the creation of positive images on a collective basis in our three million person city might well be the most prolific activity* that individuals and organizations can engage in if their aim is to help bring to fruition a positive and humanly significant future?

Preposterous? “Perhaps”, commented a Chicago Tribune journalist; “But Browne is the sort who thinks big and takes

unorthodox action... She’s used to challenges. Browne was in the first class of 125 women who graduated from Yale University in 1971, and she was among the first women ordained into the priesthood of the Episcopal Church in 1977 (and then her career as corporate executive).¹

It began, then, with a conference where community and business leaders met to discuss how imagination, economics, and faith could make the city a better place. But there were major concerns; surveys for example, showing 85% of Americans losing faith in both the future of our cities as well as the institutions that govern them; images of cities as hellholes (just look at the demonized picture of urban America in our movies and the nightly news); and the malaise of our young where the negative images have been correlated with apathy, cynicism, fear, discrimination and other damaging behavior. Ways are needed, agreed the participants, to rebuild essential connections, to renew hope, and to reinvigorate human creativity and leadership at all levels. A “How one conceives of the city 5 shapes how one lives in the 5 city” argued Browne. Even more, “Cities echo creation. They are a living symbol of our ability to imagine and create, to turn our visions into tangible products. They are an inventory of the possible, and incarnation of human capacity and diversity. Cities concentrate forces of darkness and light, and hold the world in miniature.”

IMAGINE CHICAGO, now four-years-old, located at 35 E. Wacker Drive, was born out of that and subsequent meetings. IMAGINE CHICAGO is a catalyst for civic innovation, working to bring people who live and work in Chicago to the realization that they are the owners and creators of Chicago’s future.² The MacArthur Foundation funded the first several years’ pilot. And when theories and practices of change were sought out, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was selected as the

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Dr Cooperrider has served as researcher and consultant to a wide variety of organizations including, BP America, NYNEXXC, U.S. Agency for International Development, World Vision, Nature Conservancy, The American Hospital Association, Cleveland Clinic Foun-

dation, Kaiser Permanente, Technoserve Inc., Omni Hotels, Federation of African Voluntary Development Organizations, and the World Mountain Forum. Currently, as part of the grant, David and his colleagues have organization development projects going on in 57 organizations working in over 100 countries. Most of these projects are inspired by the “Appreciative Inquiry” methodologies for which David is best known.

David’s ideas have been widely published in journals such as *Human Relations*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *Contemporary Psychology* and in research series such as *Advances in Strategic Management*, *Research in Organization Development and Change*, and *Inquiries in Social Construction*.

approach most likely to help serve as “a catalyst for civic innovation”.³

The outcomes have been dramatic. The “pilot” included more than 800 individuals in more than 40 neighborhoods with involvement of more than 100 community organizations and schools. For example, IMAGINE CHICAGO, in collaboration with Barbara Radner, Director of The Center for Urban Education at DePaul University, developed a citizenship curriculum now being used by 4000 Chicago public school students (more on these exciting results later). Though only a young organization, IMAGINE CHICAGO has already attracted broad recognition; a national award in 1995 from Eureka Communities in Washington D.C. for its “exemplary work on behalf of children and their families”; citation by the Mayor’s Youth Development Task Force in 1994; and perhaps the most profound recognition, that of being emulated... there is now an IMAGINE DALLAS organization, as well as plans in other cities and in other parts of the world, namely an initiative called IMAGINE AFRICA.

A MOST EXTRAORDINARY LEARNING

One of the important logistical questions for IMAGINE CHICAGO had to do with scale; How to create an appreciative “action research” cycle with such a large system. When I first met with the design team they asked about “mass mobilization” methods for each of the phases (see Figure 1) in appreciative inquiry; Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny.⁴

There was talk, very early on, of wanting to conduct appreciative interviews with one million people – at least one interview for every household in the city Now it appears, as the

whole thing is blossoming, that many more than that will happen as new requests, programs, opportunities, and technologies are multiplying. But more important than scale was the other key question: *Who* should do the interviews? Should data collection be done by professors? OD consultants? Doctoral students from University of Chicago?

This is where the remarkable learning happened.

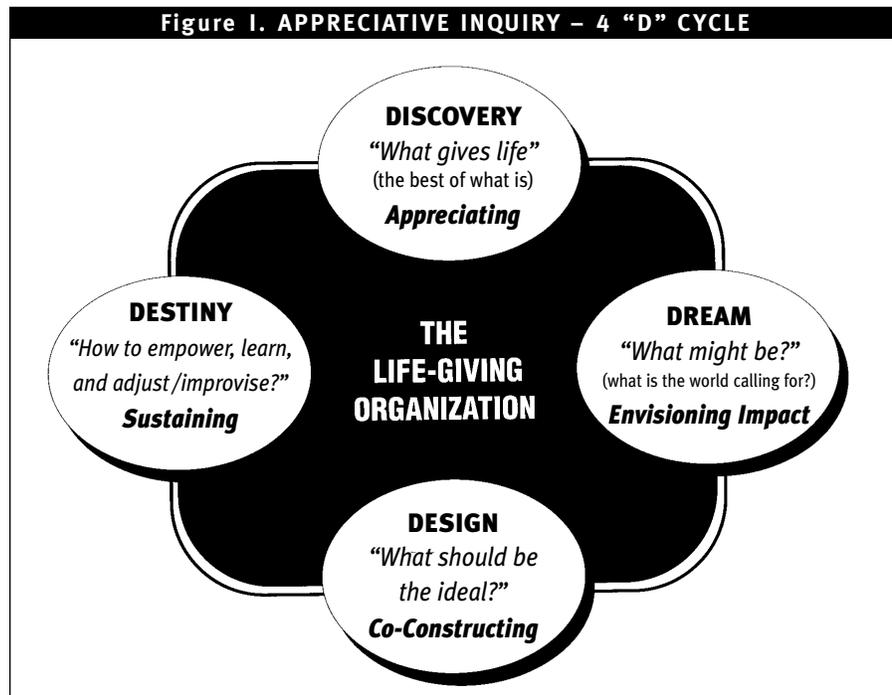
It is one that continues to leave me breathless. The pilot’s very best interviews – resulting in the most inspiring stories, the most passion filled data, the most textured and well illustrated examples, the most daring images of possibility – were all conducted by *children* of Chicago. The most powerful interviews were when children of all races and cultures did interviews with the city’s “elders” – priests, CEO’s school principals, parents, entertainers, artists, activists, mystics, scientists. It was the *inter-generational dynamic of the dialogue* that made the data collection stage soar. One is reminded of Margaret Mead’s hypothesis that the best societal learning has always occurred when three generations come together in contexts of discovery and valuing – the child, the elder, and the middle adult. Let’s look further.⁵

APPRECIATION AND WONDER

An observer described the chemistry in the interviews as “magical”. One 72-year-old respondent said at the conclusion of his interview: “I really thank you for this conversation. You got all of me. That hasn’t happened too often in my life. You forced me to share my visions, and crystallize them into clear images. This has given me tremendous hope. Now that I can articulate clearly I know they are do-able.”

In the classic interview, for example, a 13-year-old requests a time to meet with his principal. As interviewer he raises many questions: “As you reflect on your career, can you tell me the story of a high-point, a time you felt most alive, most impactful, most successful in terms of contribution to this school and community?” The principle scratches her head, even starts a bit slowly, but soon is in full voice. The youngster, listening to the drama, gets so excited with the story of courage and conviction that he cannot sit quiet He interrupts the flow and blurts out – “so what was it about you that made it a high point... what are your best qualities... can you tell me what you value most about yourself?” A little later the topic switches to more volatile topics, like race relations. Again the positive query: “Thinking about your school’s contributions to building higher quality multiracial and/or multicultural relationships, what have you

Figure 1. APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY – 4 “D” CYCLE



done in this area that has made the biggest difference? What one thing are you most proud about?" The stories are told, one after the other. The interview lasts an hour longer than planned.

Later, an evaluation team follows up with the school principal to get feedback on the dynamic of the interview. Typical comments included:

- "I've never been asked these types of questions by youths in this school. When I do converse with the students it is usually for disciplinary reasons;"
- "That night, after the interview, I laid wide awake. I could not sleep. I kept replaying the conversation. I got back in touch with a lot of things important to me..."
- "You know, during that interview I really felt like I was on the pulpit. I got animated. I was literally looking into the face of the future, exploring the essential elements of the good society. This conversation *mattered*."

Barbara Radner's studies are now showing that when the appreciative civic inquiry methods are brought into the curriculum (in 13 Chicago Public Schools) children's achievement in all areas including math, reading, writing, etc., rises significantly in comparison to controls. In doing the interviews, children are hearing stories they would never hear on the news, on TV, or even in the more common cynical discourse of society at large. They are developing their own images of possibility and hearing experiences where change has happened for the better. One young person, Willie J. Hempel, was so excited and moved by his experiences he started volunteering his time to IMAGINE CHICAGO every day after school: "It was during my interview with Ed Brennen, CEO of Sears, that my dreams and hopes were ignited. You find you have so much in common in terms of hopes for our city. And you find out people like Ed really care, not just about money but social justice causes, about me as a young person and about our future... my ideas about people like Ed and the politicians I interviewed all changed, and so has my life. That is why I want to volunteer my time now; it is all about making change happen." *Where appreciation is alive and generations are re-connected through inquiry, hope grows and community expands.*⁶

Today, IMAGINE CHICAGO is taking the lessons of its pilot into five major project initiatives: The Urban Imagination Network, City Dialogues, Creating Chicago: A Citizens Guide, City Connections, Citizen Leaders, and Sacred Places. In all of these, the spirit – if not the actual process – of the intergenerational inquiry and change methodology will guide the way.

Dag Hammarskjöld once said, "but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason." The *child as the agent of inquiry* is something I think all of us in OD need to reclaim and aspire to: openness, availability, epistemological humility, the ability to admire, to be sur-

prised, to be inspired, to inquire into our valued and possible worlds, to wonder. In my own work in OD I have found that it does not help, in the long run, to begin my inquiries from the standpoint of the world as a problem to be solved. I am more effective, quite simply, as long as I can retain the spirit of inquiry of the everlasting beginner. The only thing I do that I think makes the difference is to craft, in better and more catalytic ways, the *unconditional positive question*.⁷

Unfortunately, and this is true of myself, it is not often that I begin a new OD inquiry feeling a profound state of wonder; what William James so aptly called the state of "ontological wonder". For me, the doorway into wonder is more matter-of-fact. Pragmatically, it is not so much a process of *trying* romantically to go back to the state of being a child; nor is it the same path as taken by the person in spiritual retreat. It begins in ordinary circumstances of discovery, conversation, and the deepening relationship – all endowed by the positive question. *Inquiry itself creates wonder. When I'm really in a mode of inquiry, appreciable worlds are discovered everywhere. The feeling of wonder is the outcome. Of course it also cycles back. A good positive question, like Karl Weick's notion of "small wins", can change the world.*

IMAGINE CHICAGO, as a nascent example of one, is hardly enough to say that it provides answers for the future of OD. But there are clues, insists

Browne: "My job, our job, is to be a home to the mysteries of city and its future... it is not about having answers." Albert Einstein put the option best, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." ■

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