

YOUR INTERVIEW

The Philanthropic Quest

Enlarging Our Understanding of What Just Happened

You've experienced an interview that you may have found somewhat unusual. Perhaps you're wondering why we asked some of the questions we did, in the way that we did -- and why we *didn't* ask others. Some background and perspective on the approach we're using may make this experience more meaningful to you.

1. What do my personal experiences have to do with advancing society?

We so rarely talk about this, but when you think about it the moments when we're *investing* ourselves in society, in others -- these are among the times we're at our best, would you agree?

And so what if we made a conscious effort to bring our contributions, our resources, strengths, gifts, and talents (in the ancient meaning of both deeds and dollars) to the foreground? And what if we lifted up our aspirations and dreams to center stage -- and *kept* them there? Perhaps life on this planet could become even more meaningful, rewarding and fulfilling for each of us. And perhaps we will be emboldened as we see how much we have to draw on, how much potential we have to tap into -- and all of the difference we can make.

Moreover, the power of our example will inspire others, now and for generations to come.

That's why you've been encouraged to spend some time reflecting on your personal experiences, and sharing them. In the end, our communities -- and our causes -- are made up of the stories of its people. They're made up of the stories of the past and present, which hold the seeds of the future.

2. Why are we talking only about what's positive? Shouldn't we concentrate on solving our problems?

In both the personal and social realms, we *can* choose to focus on problems, needs and deficits -- the traditional problem-solving approach. This way has

served us well. Or we can choose to see assets, capabilities and possibilities. This is the basis of a new theory of human and organization development known as *appreciative inquiry*, or AI -- keystone of the Philanthropic Quest.

AI is a *generative* process that aims to develop our capabilities by focusing on what's *right*, rather than what's wrong in a given system. It has much in common with the "capacity-building" movement -- which focuses on the *assets and capabilities* of a community, rather than its needs.

This is much more than "positive thinking;" it's a real discipline. In essence, the process works like this:

- By asking positive questions, we bring to the surface stories that describe our *best* experiences of the past and present -- those times when we felt most connected, most effective, most alive.
- These stories give rise to new and compelling images of what *could* be -- for ourselves, our community and our world.
- These *images of the future* and their vitality can inspire us to pursue new possibilities with increased energy and confidence. More "want-to" and "can-do" are developed.

As the inquiry unfolds, each of us will come to a new appreciation of the ways in which our personal strengths, values, and aspirations contribute to our envisioning what those organizations and causes -- the ones we are most invested in -- can be to the community and world.

3. How can recalling our past experiences help us to think about our future?

Because they come from our personal experience, the "best moments" of our past provide irrefutable *proof* of our capabilities individually and collectively. They also give rise to new *expectations* of what the future could be. These images of the future are *grounded in our realities* -- not just speculation or philosophizing. That's why the stories we tell, and the images they generate, have the power to raise our sights; energize us; and create the confidence to *aspire and act boldly*.

And when we bring our experiences forward, we make our hidden wisdom accessible to us and others. In this way, we are more able to work from what each of us has learned, not just what we've been taught.

4. If we want to be realistic and practical, don't we have to face up to our limits and constraints?

In everyday life, most people and organizations are bounded by the *perception* that their resources, and hence their horizons, are limited. This notion -- that we must "face realities" -- is without a doubt the greatest single constraint on human imagination, vision and enterprise.

The approach we've been using in this interview begins with a different set of assumptions. We begin with the belief that we have a *choice*. Rather than "accepting reality," we recognize that we can consciously choose what we "see" and act upon.

What we call "reality," then, is actually defined by the choices we make -- and it follows that we have the capacity to *create* the kind of future we desire.

This approach is about seeing that which others may not see. It's about heightening our awareness of the value, strength and potential of ourselves and others -- and overcoming the limits that we impose, often unconsciously, on our own effectiveness.

5. How about an example?

One example of great historical significance is the way that Winston Churchill appealed to the beleaguered British people in the darkest days of the Second World War. Rather than worries, deficiencies, and limitations, he could see that which had fundamental strength and value in his people and his country.

Most of us have had glimpses of these possibilities. And yet, the pervasive "background music" of our culture seems to draw us all into a chorus of negativity, irony and despair.

Churchill and many others have demonstrated that we *can* find signs of life and hope, if only we decide to look for them -- and that what we *choose to pay attention to* has everything to do with how we see ourselves, how we envision the future, and how the future actually turns out. In this sense, what

we *see* has less to do with our perceptions of a reality “out there” and more to do with a reality that we construct “in here,” in our minds, in our conversations, in our relationships.

6. Why can't we just get on it with it and raise the money?

We could, for an organization content with ordinary results. However, if we want people to attach their own significance and meaning to their commitments – to answer their own “why” – it takes a more serious approach to see extraordinary results.

It's time well-invested when the result is a commitment that makes a statement. In garden-variety (even very successful) fundraising that step is skipped.

7. How were these ideas developed? Have they been tested and applied successfully?

The meta-theory we're working with is social constructionism (Berger, Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 2010). The aspect most relevant to us here is the idea that *what we consider possible is carried in our conversations*, where we collectively create future realities.

Beginning in the 1980's, the kinds of questions in the interview – central to the theory and practice of appreciative inquiry (AI) -- was developed by Dr. David Cooperrider and a group of colleagues at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. It is an alternative to the conventional problem-solving methods of organization development. (Cooperrider, 1987)

A few years earlier, Jim Lord was popularizing, through his book *The Raising of Money: 35 Essentials Every Trustee Should Know*, the notion that “organizations have no needs;” they have capacities and potentials – and most effectively draw more resources when they speak to the assets and capabilities they already hold.

(David joined Jim in his first Quest workshop more than 25 years ago when the two realms converged; David was interested in major philanthropy.)

David developed the initial theory and practice of AI at one of the world's leading medical centers, The Cleveland Clinic Foundation. International

relief and development organizations, as well as *Fortune* 500 corporations, were among the first to use the new approach successfully.

Although AI originated in the field of organization development, it soon became clear that AI represented a new way of seeing the world -- a new way of thinking, acting and *being*.

Today, in this emerging work, we have been using a carefully designed set of questions to discover the best of our past as *contributing members of society* -- in order to "ignite the collective imagination of what can be."

To date, quietly and behind the scenes, more than 500 professionals and volunteers have been selected by Jim Lord and Pam McAllister to receive intensive training in his particular application of AI to the philanthropic and societal realms (most often at Cambridge University in England). "Alumni" of the program are currently working with leading organizations in the United States, Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Germany, Kenya and other nations.

Welcome to the adventure!

What are you curious about? Tell us, and we have a series of one-pagers, and can send a few to you.