

Savouring the Gifts in the Appreciative Inquiry Community

Image



Asking into a new calling for strengths-based working and living

The warmth, humanity and beauty of those working with Appreciative Inquiry emanates yet again through a recent gathering in Williamsburg, Virginia. Asked to give the experience a colour, some say a rainbow, as a symbol of hope in these stormy times and the blending of possibilities through diversity. Yellow is also suggested, for “sunshine, joy, new beginnings to another day and another chapter for the Appreciative Inquiry community.”

The gathering was originally intended to be a small get-together of folks who’ve long known and appreciated Jane Magruder Watkins, to celebrate her more than 30 years

of working in the field of Appreciative Inquiry. But it quickly blossomed into much more, in the end drawing about 50 people from as far away as the U.K., France and Holland.

Participants described a “family gathering” feel to the weekend event as new and more senior “family members” shared memories and stories of their experiences with Jane as well as the Appreciative Inquiry practice and philosophy.

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David Cooperrider and Jane Magruder Watkins at the Feb. 19-21 gathering in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Maureen McKenna, a longtime Appreciative Inquiry practitioner and founding partner of [Innovation Works](#) says the gathering brought home to her the power of spending time together in these days of quick fixes. Taking the time, according to Merv Weisbord of Future Search, requires two sleepovers – just the length of the gathering.

“Too often people want those quick hits through webinars, for example,” Maureen says. “Coming together in community and celebrating each other was a very emotional type of deep learning and trust building.”

Some of the most poignant moments occurred as Appreciative Inquiry pioneer, David Cooperrider, and Jane shared the platform to exchange stories of their early days of working together. Laughter rippled as they bantered about who had inspired and supported who, though David was clear that as a young professional feeling vulnerable about his foray into publicizing his work, Jane played a deeply valued role in strengthening his sense of what was possible.

The gathering was especially meaningful as Jane’s life and work are changing with the effects of what her friends and family call “cognitive aging.” It was beautiful to see how present she became, surrounded by friends and colleagues, says Maureen.

“The gift of bringing like-hearted people together to celebrate Jane was so therapeutic for her. Every day for the last couple of weeks she talks about what a gift it was for her to receive so much love and recognition,” Maureen says.

In many ways, the gathering was an experience in savouring the gifts of the Appreciative Inquiry community, past and present, with the celebration of Jane as one of those precious gifts.

A New Calling

However, as Appreciative Inquiry always invites, there was also an intentional focus on what a new calling or callings might be.

For Marge Schiller, also a long-term Appreciative Inquiry practitioner, the challenge of the future is an intergenerational one. “How do we attract people of multiple age groups to learn and work together? How can the past, present and future of Appreciative Inquiry and strength-based approaches be integrated in the communities of Appreciative Inquiry and in ourselves? Will we individually and collectively aspire to be an emboDyment of inquiry and appreciation? The fourth ‘D’ has been called Destiny, Delivery and even Doing. Let’s add emboDyment,” Marge says.

For Tony Silbert, [Spartina Consulting](#) partner, and others, the new possibilities are linked to connecting and sharing Appreciative Inquiry research and practice and through that co-creating the field versus simply mirroring it.

Maureen agrees. “As practitioners we have done great work but collectively we need to publish more about the work we have done,” she says. “(There needs to be) the merging of research and practice.” It’s been identified that the David L. Cooperrider Appreciative Inquiry Center will be the “backbone” in enabling this to happen.

Energy is also alive around integrating Appreciative Inquiry into what David is calling Positive Institutions, or inspiring IPOD ([Innovative Positive Organizational Development](#)).

Tony and others also see exciting possibilities in continuing to cross-pollinate with adjacent schools of thought and practice, as well as industry. “The magic is in the intersection of philosophies, thought/practice and industry,” Tony says.

But perhaps the most deeply felt possibility of the future has to do with making sure the community gathers again.

“Great energy was created to continue,” says Dawn Dole, executive director of the [Taos Institute](#), a key organizing partner - to continue to connect and celebrate, to

deepen old friendships and ignite new ones, and to receive fresh bursts of energy and insight for persisting in this important work of creating a “positive revolution in change.”

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