

**Diana Whitney, Ph.D. interviewed by Kathryn Gaines, Ph.D.**  
**President, Chesapeake Bay ODN**  
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**Kathryn:** What drew you to the field of Appreciative Inquiry (AI)?

**Diana:** I first met David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, the originators of Appreciative Inquiry in 1990 or 1991. At that time no one would have described Appreciative Inquiry as a field. In the late 1980s there were only a handful of presentations, articles and texts including Cooperrider's dissertation putting forth AI as a theory of change management and calling for a shift from "deficient based change to positive change." By the early 1990s experiments applying AI, primarily in the arena of international development, were proving its viability as a new philosophy and methodology for change. When I learned about AI I found it to be a very interesting and innovative hypothesis about human organizing and change. It was congruent with my prior work: high engagement merger integration and large-scale culture transformation; my spiritual practice: seeking to live in the energetically positive; and my theoretical stance: social constructionism.

David and I began working together on two large-scale projects: culture change at GTE, now Verizon, and the founding and design of the United Religions Initiative, a global interfaith organization. Our work using AI at GTE won the ASTD award for best culture change. And the URI now exists in over 400 locations around the world. The success of these two very significant projects opened the way for AI to become a field. I decided to nudge it along and wrote my first book, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* with Amanda Trosten-Bloom. My fifteen book, *Appreciative Leadership*, will be out this summer. And I continue to speak and teach about AI every chance I get.

So you might say that I was drawn to Appreciative Inquiry because it works. I sensed a call to help AI evolve and mature as a practice, and to expand its reach by writing and teaching it to others. I said yes to the call and joined with others committed to AI, around the world, to create the field.

**Kathryn:** How has your thinking about AI evolved over the last 20 years? What has changed about how you apply AI to organizations?

**Diana:** For the past 20 years I have been privileged to be witness to human and organizational transformation through a positive, life-affirming lens by facilitating inquiry and dialogue into people's strengths, capacities and dreams. As a result, my commitment to appreciative ways of working, life affirming human organizing, and positive change has deepened. I have had the good fortune to introduce AI to corporations such as British Airways and Merck, to religious communities like the Sisters of Good Shepherd, and to health care institutions including the University of Virginia Health System. I have taught AI in countries as different as Nepal, Japan, Croatia and Cuba. Over and over again I have seen that when people are invited to

participate in AI, to share their stories in ways that they are heard, to share hopes and dreams for the future and to have a voice in creating their own future, relationships deepen and inspired action takes place.

What has changed over these 20 years? Appreciative Inquiry has matured. More people know about it and believe it can be serve their purposes, from culture change to strategic planning, from community engagement to developing the human resource function, from new business startup to leadership development. In conjunction with this many derivatives of AI have been created. Dr. Jackie Stavros, for example, has created an appreciative model for strategic planning called S.O.A.R. – strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results. Barbara Lewis has bridged AI with public participation, winning awards for her work in community planning. Ron Fry, Amanda Trosten-Bloom, Jay Cherney and I have taken AI into the realm of team development with a book called Appreciative Team Building. And the list goes on.

In addition, AI has become mainstream in many graduate education programs. Case Western Reserve University has a splendid Masters in Positive Organization Development. And, AI is woven into several excellent PhD programs: Benedictine, Felding, Saybrook, Naval Post Graduate Institute, and Taos Insititue, as well as the AU/NTL program.

All in all, over the last 20 years AI has come of age. Never the less it continues to be an experiment. Each and every initiative is different because the people and purpose are different. The way AI is used in corporations, or educational settings will not necessarily work in health care or even communities. Every AI initiative must be designed, not just tailored but actually designed, by the people and for the people using it. For example, at Hunter Douglas WFD people were able to organize their time to do hour-long interviews and to attend a two-day AI Summit. People could rearrange their work or find someone to ‘cover’ for them. In a medical center this is simply not possible. Think about the emergency room or a surgical team. Interviews must be short, one question at a time, spread out over days, or done as part of a two-hour workshop so that people can schedule it around their work demands. This is where the fun is –helping people design AI initiatives that work for them.

**Kathryn:** What are three ways in which AI can empower OD professionals to lead transformation?

**Diana:** Appreciative Inquiry can help OD professionals embrace and live by three principles that I believe are essential to greatness as a change agent:

1. To thy own self be true
2. Love your clients
3. Trust the process

First, OD professionals can use Appreciative Inquiry to study their own practices. They can interview clients and colleagues and collect stories about their work at its best. Then by doing a narrative analysis of these stories they can discover what we call their “positive core.” This can include their values, strengths, high performance patterns, in essence all of the “root causes of their success.” In this way they can build a framework for their ongoing success that can be turned into a strategy for business development, client relationships and collaboration with colleagues. Appreciative Inquiry posits, “The questions you ask are fateful.” By discovering their positive core OD professionals create a framework for attracting the kind of work they are good at and enjoy doing.

Second, Appreciative Inquiry can help OD professionals ***Fall in Love with Their Clients***. I am a firm believer that we must love our clients. In order to ask our clients to put their hearts into the work we do with them, our hearts must be in it too. We almost always participate in appreciative interviews and dialogue with our clients. We interview them and allow them to interview us. In this way we get to know each other relationally, not just as roles or job titles. In addition, by helping clients craft AI questions, conduct interviews and make meaning on topics related to their values and what they want more of in their lives OD professionals are able to join with the collective consciousness of the organization or community. AI is “an invitation to work in the unconditionally positive.” This means helping people change the focus of their conversations - from the habitual “ain’t it awful” to courageously discuss what matters most to them. AI is rigorous and disciplined heart work. It is a large-scale process for helping hundreds or thousands of people change their conversations, both whom they talk with and about what they talk. AI can help OD professionals elevate their language, stories and questions to invite new and more life affirming realities to emerge through their work.

Third, Appreciative Inquiry lets OD professionals ***Trust the Process***. AI is a philosophy, a set of principles and a process for change. The AI 4-D Cycle: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny, has proven to be a very effective roadmap for change. Many people are using appreciative questions in their work, as an icebreaker, as a way of collecting data, even as a way to change the conversation. The real power of AI, however, is in using it as a template or process for change. This means engaging people through inquiry and dialogue to *discover* their positive core, share their *dreams* for the future, make decisions and *design* their ideal organization, and plan how to live into their *destiny*. AI can help OD professionals take on the challenging task of designing life affirming organizations. It is no secret that the organizations and institutions around us are failing. They must be re invented and redesigned for a sustainable future. AI is a process that can be used to do this because it is congruent with the kind of organization we hope to see: collaborative, life affirming, equal voice, honoring people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives, successful in terms of the triple bottom line: people, profit and planet. The AI process can help OD professionals be the change they want to see.

**Kathryn:** Much has been written lately from the position that the “positive revolution” has gone to far, that Americans are obsessed with being happy to the extent of losing their critical faculties for judgement and balance. What is your response to this view?

**Diana:** Personally I cannot imagine a world of too much happiness, goodness or beauty. Ultimately, I believe it comes down to a choice: What kind of person do you want to be? What energy do you want to add to the world? What do you seek to see and notice about others and the world around you? About what do you choose to talk and with what language and tone? What gives you pleasure, joy and a sense of wellbeing? For me AI is a way of living my spiritual values and beliefs. On my good days I live it. And like everyone else, on occasion, I get off the path. The key for me is get back on with grace. This takes personal reflection, humility, forgiveness - of self and others and above all it takes compassion.

There will always be cynics and skeptics. My dear friend and colleague Peter Lang in the UK says, “behind every cynical or skeptical statement is a dream wanting to be fulfilled.” The question then becomes how do we listen deeply to the call of the skeptics and cynics and help them realize their dreams? At its core AI is a deeply accepting orientation. A masterful AI practitioner listens deeply and is able to help everyone be heard and included. It is an art for elevating human potential and creating collective wisdom.

**Kathryn:** Can you share an example/story with us of how AI enabled organizational transformation?

**Diana:** AI is about changing the conversations in an organization or community. It is about helping people make meaning in new and more life affirming ways. I will share one seemingly small yet profoundly meaningful example. The Sisters of Good Shepherd, PMNA used Appreciative Inquiry for direction setting among their Sisters and Lay leadership. A core team of 35 engaged over 400 people in appreciative interviews and small group discussions. They collected hundreds of pages of stories and hopes for the future. They narrowed them down and articulated a set of 6 directions and recommended action items. The directions were reviewed and reflected upon in each of their local communities. They were revised and then discussed and accepted by over 200 Sisters at their Chapter meeting.

In the course of this process the name used to describe their centers for healing and elder care shifted from ‘Infirmaries’ to ‘Wisdom Centers.’ Using AI they were able to discuss the challenging issues of declining numbers and an aging population with grace, openness to change and wisdom.

This is a small example that touched my heart. For more information on how the Sisters used AI and for many examples from a wide range of organizations and

communities I suggest you read, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*. The newly released second edition contains a whole new chapter on AI in communities as well as the story of Hunter Douglas Window Fashion Division's 10 year history with AI.

**Kathryn:** Is there anything else you would like to say to our OD membership regarding AI and Leading Transformation in Complex Times?

**Diana:** I think I'll save it for my speech at the conference!