

In Appreciation – Setting the stage for Appreciative Inquiry
A service by Laurie Stuart, Transitional Minister
South Nassau UU Congregation — November 9, 2014

CALL TO WORSHIP

This is a new day that has been given unto us.

Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.

And let us count our many, many blessings:

Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,

And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.

Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.

And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

(Duncan Littlefair, adapted)

CHALICE LIGHTING

Be careful of your thoughts, for your thoughts become your words. Be careful of your words, for your words become your actions. Be careful of your actions, for your actions become your habits. Be careful of your habits, for your habits become your character. Be careful of your character, for your character becomes your destiny.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION MOMENT — Avery Benson

Today I want to tell you a true story about a middle school football team who had a secret plan to help one of their teammates feel like they belong.

One member of the football team thought up the plan and everyone agreed that it was a good one. In between classes, they met and planned how they were going to do something for a special player. This player, his name is Keith, had special needs and he was exceptionally sweet and adores all of the football players. The others wanted to help Keith do something that he would not have a chance to do by himself: make a touchdown. They didn't tell anyone their plan, not Keith, not even their coach.

The day came for them to do their play, it was at a home game. The first part of the plan was a long pass that someone caught right next to the goal line. But instead of running into the endzone, they touched the football on the ground, right next to the goal line. The crowd was not happy. On the next play, they handed the ball to Keith, surrounded him so that he was protected and he took the ball into the endzone and made the touchdown.

His mother and father in the stands were surprised.

“Was that Keith who just made that touchdown?” his mother asked.

“Quick,” his father said, “Get out your camera.”

Keith was really happy. And the rest of the team was very happy too.

One of the players said, “When I saw Keith go into the endzone, I had a smile on my face from here to here.”

He said that it wasn’t his idea and he never would have thought to give Keith a moment of glory, but he was really happy to be a part of it and said that it had changed him.

“I went from mostly caring about myself and my friends to caring about everyone and trying to make everyone’s day, in everyone’s life.”

The team wanted to show Keith that he really belonged on the team. And because they did that for him, the whole team was so happy and felt that they all belonged together.

Click here for the original video newsstory: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8_RpyfyNs4

Thank you Avery for telling that story.

This story is a story about when a football team worked together at its best. They used teamwork and compassion. Today in the sanctuary and at the Intergenerational Lunch that follows the service (hint: there is no coffee hour today and everyone is invited to come to the RE Wing for lunch and a belonging exercise that is being cosponsored by the RE Committee and the Transition Team), we’ll be playing around with the idea of how when we concentrate on what’s going well and analyzing what is going right in our organization or team, we can use those strengths to help other areas in our lives or organizations that are not working so well.

READING: Turning to One Another, by Meg Wheatley

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask: “What’s possible?” not “What’s wrong?” Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don’t know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear. Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.

Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness.

Stay together.

CHORAL ANTHEM: Gaudeamus Hodie, traditional, music by Natalie Sleeth

SERMON: In Appreciation

“Appreciative Inquiry is about the coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them.

“In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives ‘life’ to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.

“AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It centrally involves the mobilization of inquiry through the crafting of the “unconditional positive question” often-involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people. In AI, the arduous task of intervention gives way to the speed of imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design.

“AI seeks, fundamentally, to build a constructive union between a whole people and the massive entirety of what people talk about as past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul-- and visions of valued and possible futures. Taking all of these together as a gestalt, AI deliberately, in everything it does, seeks to work from accounts of this “positive change core”—and it assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link the energy of this core directly to any change agenda and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.” (*A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry*, David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, page 3; (appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/uploads/whatisai.pdf)

Wow. Appreciative Inquiry is the exploration of what happens to individuals and communities when they function at their best. It is about doing more of what we are good at, rather than the problem-solving approach, which is doing less of what we are not good at.

What we focus on becomes our reality – words create worlds.

So how about it? Do you want to do more of what we are good at or do you want to do less of what we are not good at?

Same difference, no? No! Not same different. Consider this Native American wisdom story where a Native American elder once described his own inner struggles in this manner:

“Inside of me there are two dogs. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time.”

When asked which dog wins, he reflects for a moment and replies,

“The one I feed the most.”

The one I feed the most. So do you want to talk about your problems or do you want to talk about your successes?

Me, I want to talk about successes? You?

Appreciative inquiry (AI) considers the positive rather than the negative.

Appreciative inquiry is a model for analysis, decision-making and the creation of strategic change, particularly within companies and other organizations. It was developed at Case Western Reserve University's department of organizational behavior, starting with a 1987 article by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva. They felt that the overuse of "problem solving" as a model often held back analysis and understanding, focusing on problems and limiting discussion of new organizational models. (Wikipedia, accessed 11/7/14)

So as a methodology, Appreciative Inquiry focuses on the following assumptions: (Please hold up your fingers from one to 10, with 10 being the highest whether you think these assumptions are true.)

Appreciative Inquiry assumptions:

1. In every society, organization, or group, something works.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality.

From Sue Hammond's Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry

So those are the assumption of Appreciative Inquiry and it seems from your response that you agree with them. But why are they important and what role do assumptions play?

In order to understand Appreciative Inquiry, it's helpful to understand the role of assumptions in organizations. In Sue Hammond's Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry, she writes, "Organizations are made up of individuals who form groups to get work done. The groups behave according to rules of behavior created by that group either consciously or unconsciously. Assumptions are the set of beliefs shared by a group that cause the group to think and act in certain ways. The longer the belief is in effect, the harder it is for the group to see any new information that contradicts the belief.

"The beauty of assumptions is they become shorthand for the group. When faced with similar situations, a group just acts and doesn't re-evaluate each time. Groups have a large number of assumptions operating at an unconscious level. Shared assumptions allow the group to function efficiently because they don't have to constantly stop and determine what they believe and how

they should act. The downside is that the group may fail to see new data that contradicts their belief and they may miss an opportunity to improve their effectiveness. This is why it is important to bring to the surface and evaluate group assumptions every so often to see if they are still valid. It also helps to listen to new members who aren't yet limited by the group's thought patterns."

— The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry

So that's why assumptions are important: shared assumptions help an organization run efficiently. And at its core, appreciative inquiry says that when shared assumptions are focused on what is going right, rather than what is going wrong, then things go better.

Our chalice lighting came at this from a preventative direction.

"Be careful of your thoughts, for your thoughts become your words. Be careful of your words, for your words become your actions. Be careful of your actions, for your actions become your habits. Be careful of your habits, for your habits become your character. Be careful of your character, for your character becomes your destiny."

What we focus on becomes our reality. Our thoughts become our destiny.

But how do we change our thoughts? How if we are a person who traditionally sees the glass half empty do we retrain ourselves to look at the glass half full?

To that I offer that we can set them in a different perspective. To illustrate what I mean I would like to use a wisdom story from the Zen tradition.

There once was an aging master who grew tired of his apprentice's complaints. One morning, he sent him to get some salt. When the apprentice returned, the master told him to mix a handful of salt in a glass of water and then drink it.

"How does it taste?" the master asked.

"Bitter," said the apprentice.

The master chuckled and then asked the young man to take the same handful of salt and put it in the lake. The two walked in silence to the nearby lake and once the apprentice swirled his handful of salt in the water, the old man said, "Now drink from the lake."

As the water dripped down the young man's chin, the master asked, "How does it taste?"

"Fresh," remarked the apprentice.

"Do you taste the salt?" asked the master.

"No," said the young man. At this the master sat beside this serious young man, and explained softly, "The pain of life is pure salt; no more, no less. The amount of pain in life remains exactly the same. However, the amount of bitterness we taste depends on the container we put the pain

in. So when you are in pain, the only thing you can do is to enlarge your sense of things. Stop being a glass. Become a lake.”

Here’s another story that illustrates the same point:

Cancer doctor Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. in her book of essays “My Grandfather’s Blessings,” tells the story about a 17-year-old boy who has been diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. ... Like an animal in a cage he flung himself against the limitations of his disease, refusing to hold to a diet, forgetting to take his insulin, using his diabetes to hurt himself over and over. His parents insist that he go into therapy, which he did, with Rachel Naomi Remen. After about six months without making much progress, he has a dream, so intense that he did not realize he had been asleep until he awoke. Something deep and unsuspected in him had pointed its finger and shown him the wisdom in his situation.

“In his dream, he found himself sitting in an empty room without a ceiling, facing a small stone statue of the Buddha. ... Although he had seen many pictures of the Buddha, this statue was different. He was surprised to feel a kinship toward it, perhaps because this Buddha was a young man, not much older than himself. ... It seemed to be listening to something deep within himself. ... He felt more and more at peace with himself.

“He had experienced this unfamiliar sense of peace for a while when, without warning, a dagger was thrown from somewhere behind him. It buried itself deep in the Buddha’s heart. David was profoundly shocked. He felt betrayed, overwhelmed with feelings of despair and anguish. From the depth of these feelings had emerged a single question: “Why is life like this?”

“And then the statue had begun to grow, so slowly that at first he was not sure it was really happening. But so it was, and suddenly he knew beyond doubt that this was the Buddha’s response to the knife.

“The statue continued to grow, its face as peaceful as before. The knife did not change either. Gradually, it became a tiny black speck on the breast of the enormous smiling Buddha. Watching this, David felt something release him and found he could breathe deeply for the first time in a long time. He awoke with tears in his eyes.

“... David had seen this dream much as the opening of a door. When his doctors had told him that his disease was incurable, his response had been rage and despair. He had felt that the life in him had been stopped and there was no way to move forward. But in the most exquisite way possible, life had shown him something different. His dream offered him the hope of wholeness and suggested that, over time, he might grow in such a way that the wound of his illness might become a smaller and smaller part of the sum total of his life....

“Often people with chronic illness may become trapped and invalidated, not by the force of their disease but by the power of their beliefs about it.”

To make a point, I repeat that assumption “Often people with chronic illness may become trapped and invalidated, not by the force of their disease but by the power of their beliefs about it.”

The power of their beliefs about it. The power of the assumptions they hold.

This is the beauty of appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry examines assumptions and it looks at what works in an organization. It encourages enthusiasm. It is not just a fluffy way of analysis – it is a systematic way of looking at things. It allows us to widen the picture – create a larger container. Something always works in an organization – and the trick is to analyze what works and apply it to what doesn't.

In Remen's essay, David begins to understand that he can experience wellness within his disease; expanding it beyond the concept that his disease would rob him of his wellness.

This expansion is what Appreciative Inquiry does.

In Cooperridge's model, Appreciative Inquiry is a four-phased process.

1. Discovery—mobilizing a whole system inquiry into the positive change core;
2. Dream—creating a clear results-oriented vision in relation to discovered potential and in relation to questions of higher purpose, i.e., “What is the world calling us to become?”
3. Design—creating possibility propositions of the ideal organization, an organization design which people feel is capable of magnifying or eclipsing the positive core and realizing the articulated new dream; and
4. Destiny—strengthening the affirmative capability of the whole system enabling it to build hope and momentum around a deep purpose and creating processes for learning, adjustment, and improvisation like a jazz group over time.

In our service next week, we will systematically begin the Discovery phrase. And I urge all of you to come back next week and be part of the process. I invite you to come to the Intergenerational Lunch this noontime to play with this concept that in joy we find enthusiasm and make sure that everyone who cares to work on what's possible is invited in. (Not to mention have amazing food, and be efficient in creating community and feeding ourselves!)

Last night, I had the pleasure of attending the Margarita and Lip Sync event. Participants lips synced to their favorite music. They stretched out of their usual personas. Everyone who performed had a huge smile on their face, and you could see their spirits shining through. I was struck with idea that for many, you found your way here because of your liberal religious values. It's intuitively obvious – of course these people think alike. But we don't always see our connections when we are dissecting and holding up all of the places where we disconnect. I understood the connection between people when I saw their joy and I saw their playfulness. There was a bit of truth in Sharon Nanos' selection Dancing in the Moonlight, in the lyric “we like our fun and we never fight, you can't dance and stay uptight.”

Do you want to spend our time together talking about what we don't well? Do you want more of that? Or do you want to set our sights on the brilliant ways that things do work, can work and discover, dream, design and create an amazing destiny.

We're walking an amazing path of abundance, and I invite you to take steps on that journey by joining together at the Intergenerational Lunch this noon, urging your friends to come to the service next week, and taking whatever obstacles you encounter and moving them into a larger container, where what works can point the way for what doesn't.

In closing, consider these words by Quaker poet Fred LaMotte: "If you convince me to believe what you believe, believe me, it won't do either of us any good. Your opinions interest me even less than my own. Your concerns don't concern me: I already have enough to weigh me down. But if you share some hint of your Wonder, a moment of your Joy, a whisper of your Love, my heart might expand, awareness awaken, and the whole world could change in an instant."

May it be so.

CLOSING WORDS: Connections, by Marge Piercy

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
You cannot always tell by looking at what is happening.
More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.
Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet.
Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree.
Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden
Gnaw in the dark, and use the sun to make sugar.
Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.
Live a life you can endure: make life that is loving.
Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, a thicket and bramble.
wilderness to the outside but to us it is interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.
This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always.
For every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.

Resources:

A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry, David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, page 3; (appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/uploads/whatisai.pdf)

Hammond, Sue Annis; The Thin Little Book on Appreciative Inquiry, Thin Book Publishing Company, Bend, OR; 2013

Remen, Rachel Naomi; My Grandfather's Blessings, Penguin Group, New York, NY; 2000.