

## THE PILGRIMAGE TOWARD GLOBAL DIALOGUE: A PRACTICAL VISIONARY APPROACH

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Imagine you are about to embark on a very special pilgrimage. This being the era of technology, your mode of travel will be by rocket ship rather than by foot. And this being the dawn of a global era, you will be joined in this pilgrimage not by numerous members of your own tradition, but by pairs of representatives from all the diverse cultures and faiths across the world. Your journey will be into the void of outer space and your ultimate destination, the future -- a desired future for the Earth and all living beings. For when you return in the next millennium, it will be the responsibility of your group of pilgrims to lead us by your example into a new paradigm of global relating across cultures, one in which we have learned to honor one another fully and act out of the best of all our traditions, with reverence for all life.

What wisdom will you pack for this pilgrimage? What ways of being will you choose to leave behind? What! gifts do you have for your fellow travelers? And how will you talk and live with each other across the boundaries of culture in the limited space you share aboard the ship?

These are not idle daydreams, for as we hurtle toward the new millennium, there are many gatherings that will call upon us to address questions such as these, not the least of which are the UN Global Assemblies-of the Peoples of the World, and of the Governments of the World. But how can we attain the aims of learning from the wisdom of all cultures and achieving a genuine dialogue among civilizations?

These are big questions and I have only small answers; only together do our answers become large enough to address the questions. But I am honored to share with you, from the leading edge of my field of organizational development, a theory and a process that aims as high as these lofty aspirations, yet provides practical and simple means for moving toward them. It is called Appreciative Inquiry (AI).

When the Dalai Lama, in partnership with others, convenes a forum where a small group of leaders of the world's religions gather twice a year in mutual respect and dialogue, AI originator David Cooperrider acts as their facilitator, and AI is the means by which their first meeting was guided. When over 200 representatives of the world's faiths and spiritual traditions have gathered each of the last three years in a series of global summits to dream and design the United Religions Initiative (a kind of spiritual sibling to the United Nations, whose charter will be signed next year), I and a global facilitation team have used AI as the foundation of our conference designs. And when we do capacity-building work to help Northern and Southern nongovernmental organizations work toward genuine partnership with each other (under a \$6 million, 6-year cooperative agreement with the US Agency for International Development), AI is again at the heart of the dialogue-rich planning processes we customize.

Each of these ! efforts has humbled us by its magnitude, filled us with lessons, and yet offered tangible evidence that the dream of deep dialogue across even the most challenging of cultural boundaries is possible. So what is this thing called AI all about? More than just a methodology, at its best, it is a "way of being" that draws upon the twin gifts of appreciation and curiosity through inquiry to uncover the "best of what is" in each other and our respective traditions and experiences. Discovering from the outset (through mutual interviews, introductions, and group dialogue) what incredible beings and resources we are surrounded by, whether in a small group or a huge summit, we then deepen our inquiry to imagine what we can do together that builds upon those gifts. Plans and commitments evolve naturally as a result of a set of relationships that have been grounded in friendship, steeped in authentic communication with one another, and leavened with mutual sharing of dreams for the future. As both a way of being and a process for working with change in any human system, here is one definition of AI:

Appreciative Inquiry is an assets-based capacity-building approach to development and change that selectively seeks to locate, illuminate, and leverage the life-giving forces within an organization, group, or community. Seeking out the best of "what is" to help ignite the collective imagination of "what might be," AI aims to generate new knowledge that expands the "realm of the possible" and helps people both to envision a collectively desired future and to carry forth that vision in ways that successfully translate possibility into reality, and belief into practice.

The affirmative cycle of change that generally provides the structure for any AI process is called the 4-D model, which works through four phases before circling back to the beginning: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. Imagine now that you are back in that spaceship, as I illustrate a little of what each phase might look like on your transformative journey toward the possibility of global dialogue.

In the Discovery phase, we would begin with diverse pairs interviewing each other using a protocol that uncovers each other's passions and gifts, starting deep with the very first question. For example, for the group of religious leaders that included the Dalai Lama, the first two questions were these:

- Can you share a story of a moment, or a period of time, where clarity about life purpose emerged for you -- for example, a moment where your calling happened, where there was an important awakening or teaching, where there was a special experience or event, or where you received some guiding vision?

- Now, beyond this story, what do you sense you are supposed to do before your life, this life, is over?

Imagine the power of the stories that were told -- that would be told by anyone, if we began this personally and this deeply. Moving from the personal toward the institutional level with these questions, telling stories that illustrate our capacities at various levels, we ground our inquiry in a profound awareness of our own and each other's gifts and experiences. Included might be questions such as: "Tell me a story of your most memorable experience of meeting and working successfully across the boundaries of culture or faith. What was happening? How did you feel? What made it possible?" Not only is the information rich, but the process of storytelling is healing, uncovering connections we did not know existed, generating a practice of curiosity and rapt listening from the moment we embark. From pairs to small groups to the whole gathering in our spaceship, these stories would be the foundation of how we know and introduce each other as we work.

The power of the Dream phase stems from the twin attributes of 1) rooting it deeply in what we value most and have experience in achieving (as revealed by our Discovery phase work) and 2) from this ground, co-creating images of the future that are a kind of vivid anticipatory reality. Kenneth Boulding speaks of our images of the future acting as a field, with our behavior moving in the direction of the most highly valued part of that field. Using a variety of approaches to build our images of what we value most, from pictures and metaphors to words and symbolic artifacts, small groups containing maximum diversity may work toward a creative presentation of their dreams. This is often an emotional high point of an AI Summit; artwork, skits, poetry, and songs abound. From these shared dreams, we distill the common ground of what we want to work toward, discovering in the process how each of our dreams, say of "Dialogue Among Civilizations," connects to the wisdom of the whole system represented in our spaceship.

The next step is to Design systems for taking action that are truly aligned with our deepest values and highest visions. This might involve discerning a purpose and set of governing principles that describe the heart of our organization or community. It might involve generating experimental initiatives freely developed from the most heartfelt interests of those gathered, ensuring that commitments are aligned with passions. We often use a process called "Open Space" here to maximize the likelihood that people of overlapping interest will connect in a co-creative effort. Finally, we work toward a truly democratic organizing structure, modeled in what we have experienced together, where no one element can dominate, all have the opportunity to be heard, ownership and authority are widely spread, and creative action initiatives aligned with our vision abound -- all interconnected within the whole. As we continue our journey, it is the practical plans we devise toward experiments in global dialogue that will generate the next round of development, encompassing an ever wider and deeper group of stakeholders once we return.

The Destiny phase is like the point of transformation and the beginning of the next cycle, where we return to Earth and can experience how our pilgrimage has transformed us. As we live into the action initiatives, as we involve and share with others in our own constituency, we do indeed (like Gandhi) become the change we wish to see in the world, allowing our actions to speak as loudly as our words. At its best, the AI approach has allowed us to leave behind the "push of the past" and surrender into the "pull of the future," where we no longer experience the world as a problem-to-be-solved but find our selves living it, truly, as a mystery-to-be-embraced, with wonder, awe and reverence for all life.