

“Appreciative Inquiry: Reshaping Ourselves Through Powerful Questions”

By Rev. Kim D. Wilson

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos

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I’d like to start by telling you a story. Once, there were two sets of identical twins –2 girls and 2 boys. When they grew up, the two young men married the two young women in a joint ceremony, and, soon afterward, they moved into their new homes, which were right next door to each other. Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice (no relation to the movie characters) all came up with an idea: “Let’s buy each other house-warming presents.” They went to the local nursery. They picked out two healthy young maple trees and when they got home, they exchanged their gifts and planted the trees in their respective front yards.

Now, as it turns out, these were no ordinary maple trees. They were very sensitive to the environment around them. But no one knew this yet.

Early in their marriages, everything was perfect. Bob and Carol were madly in love with each other, and the same was true of Ted and Alice. After a few months, though, Carol began to notice some things about Bob that really annoyed her. For instance, he often left his dirty clothes on the floor instead of putting them in the hamper. He never remembered to hang up the bath mat when he was done taking a shower. Worse, he had terrible table manners, chewing with his mouth open and talking with so much food in his mouth that half the time she couldn’t even understand him. Why had she not noticed these things before?

Bob, too, noticed that Carol was not the perfect woman he had thought she was. It seemed that she had started criticizing him a lot, and nagging him about picking things up and even how he chewed his food! She was no angel, herself. She squeezed the toothpaste from the MIDDLE, for God’s sake. Worse, she couldn’t seem to pull the car straight into the garage –there were two scrapes on the right hand side of the car and a dent in the front bumper, where she had hit the lawnmower.

Carol and Bob each found themselves obsessed with these negative thoughts. They began arguing frequently, or just avoided talking to each other.

A year went by. One spring morning, Carol went out into the front yard to see how their gift, the little maple tree, was doing. To her shock, there were only a few leaves on it! She looked down at the ground, and there she found a whole pile of green, withered leaves.

“Bob!” she shrieked. “Come out here, quick!”

What now? thought Bob, but he went out and stood next to Carol, as they both stared at the poor tree.

“Carol, didn’t you water the tree like you promised?” asked Bob.

“Of course I did!” Carol replied indignantly. “This must be your fault. You’re so forgetful; I bet you never pruned it.” A leaf fell from the tree: “Be-ooop…”

“I DID so! God, you’re so critical!” Bob said, starting to lose his temper. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, another leaf went, “Be-ooop,” and fluttered to the ground.

The two of them couldn’t help glancing over to Ted and Alice’s front yard to see how THEIR tree was doing. When they did, they were shocked. Ted and Alice’s tree was the picture of health, lush and green, with so many leaves on it you could hardly see its branches!

Just then, Ted and Alice came out their front door, holding hands, and, seeing Bob and Carol, they waved. “Wow!” said Alice. “What happened to your tree?”

Bob called back, “We have some ideas about that, but what about yours? What did you do? It’s beautiful!”

Ted replied, “Oh, nothing special. Alice just watered it faithfully, and I pruned it a little last winter.”

Carol and Ted just looked at each other, no longer angry, just puzzled. Bob nodded in the direction of his brother and sister-in-law and said, “What’s with the hand-holding? I mean, we’re not newlyweds anymore, ha, ha.”

Now it was Ted and Alice's turn to look puzzled. Alice looked into Ted's eyes as she said, "I just love Ted so much," and Ted added, "And I just love Alice so much." To everyone's amazement, Alice and Ted's tree shot out two fresh leaves: "Boink! Boink!"

Bob said, "Well, I guess it's different for everyone. We just seem to have a lot of problems we can't seem to get past. I mean, we can't even grow a decent tree!"

Carol chimed in, "Well, if you'd pruned it" -- but Bob cut her off and said, "You mean, if you'd watered it!" Carol and Bob's tree dropped two more leaves: "Beoop, beoop..."

Everyone stared, first at the almost-dead tree, then at the healthy tree and finally at each other. "Hey" ...one of them said. "Do you think....?" "Nah," the others said. "Impossible."

Now, the two couples saw each other all the time, but they had never talked about their relationships. Ted and Alice invited the other two over to sit on their front porch. Carol asked Ted and Alice, "What's your secret?" Bob added, "You two still seem so happy."

"Oh, we are!" Ted and Alice replied enthusiastically. They told Bob and Carol about a workshop they'd attended shortly after they were first married. In the workshop, they learned about the Daily Three: Every day, Compliment each other; express Gratitude about something your partner said or did that, and practice Acceptance, which means remembering that your partner is doing the best he or she can.

Out of the whole workshop, though, the most important thing they learned was this: What we focus on becomes our reality. Neither Ted nor Alice was perfect, but they were so busy focusing on how to be kind, considerate and loving toward one another that things like wet bath mats, a few clothes on the floor, or squished toothpaste tubes were minor details.

It wasn't easy, but Bob and Carol decided to work hard to put into practice what their siblings had learned. And guess what? Every time someone complimented the other, "Boink!" a new leaf appeared on their magic tree. Every "thank you"

and every kind word or gesture resulted in – “Boink! Boink! Boink!” -- more healthy, green leaves on their tree.

One day, a few months later, Bob and Carol emerged from their house, hand in hand, and walked over to check out their tree. “Wow!” Bob said. “Thank you so much for watering the tree. It’s doing beautifully! You have such a great way with plants.” (“Boink!”)

“Thanks,” said Carol. “But actually, I haven’t even watered it. I was going to thank you for doing the pruning. You always do such a good job.” (“Boink!”)

“Nope,” said Bob. I haven’t touched it. But thanks for the compliment.” (“Boink!”) They both saw the new leaf at the same time. “Do you think...?” mused Bob. “I don’t know,” answered Carol. “All I know is that life has been so much better since we started focusing on all the good things in our relationship.” Bob and Carol took hands, and, smiling at each other, they headed back into their happy home.

Obviously, this tale oversimplifies what it takes to have a healthy relationship; nevertheless, the focus on the positive can make a huge difference in how a couple feels about their relationship.

The important insight that Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice shared was, What we focus on becomes our reality. This maxim is just as true in congregations as it is in a romantic partnership. All too often, congregations, like couples, can become mired in the paradigm of “what’s wrong and how can we fix it.” Often, congregational leaders believe that their charge is identifying the problems and figuring out how to fix them. It’s not surprising.

That has been the standard approach in congregations, in business and other organizations for years. It’s still the way modern medicine works. What’s wrong and how do we treat the problem? The basic premise is that something is missing from the whole. It’s a scarcity perspective. What’s missing, what’s wrong.

Appreciative Inquiry is a philosophy and process for organizations that starts with the question, “What’s working?” as opposed to “What’s not working?” So the perspective is one of abundance. What do we already have, and what is already

working well? How can we create more of it? It assumes that the organization is whole and has many resources on which to draw.

Back in the early 80s, a doctoral student named David Cooperrider began a project of assessing an organization, the Cleveland Clinic. His approach was based on the wisdom of the day, which was to determine what was “wrong” with the organization. Once the diagnosis had been made, then “treatment” would be applied to the causes of the problem. This approach was based on the assumption that development occurs through the continual solving of problems.

Something unexpected happened, though. As Cooperrider gathered his data, he became amazed at the level of cooperation, innovation and organizational effectiveness at the Clinic. So he changed the focus of his assessment from “what’s wrong” so that he could find out more about “what’s working and why.” What he discovered was the more he asked questions and had people share stories about what was working and life-giving in the organization, the more these life-giving realities grew. He continued to study the phenomenon of focusing on what works, rather than preventing what doesn’t work. The outcome of his research is an approach to change called Appreciative Inquiry.

Appreciative Inquiry is a personal and organizational change strategy based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational.

Through the process of Appreciative Inquiry, in a group like our fellowship for example, we would interview each other, so that we can hear each other’s stories about what we remember as our best times with UUF; each person’s sense of what UUF’s strengths are, and what each of us wishes for the future of UUF. Through pondering and answering questions like these, it encourages us to appreciate what we do have, and also to dare to dream. Each person also feels heard, and therefore a part of the process of taking the stories and values and wishes and creating a vision for our future –and then making it a reality.

Just as Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice learned, each time we speak of the best parts of UUF’s past, or the best of UUF today, or our best wishes for UUF’s future, we add leaves to the tree of UUF. We make our tree fuller and stronger. We make our congregation even more alive, more exciting, more fulfilling than it

already is now. Remember, What we focus on becomes our reality. That means each one of us has the power to help shape our reality.

Today is Pledge Sunday, and I encourage all of you to stay for our luncheon, AND for a chance to try out these Appreciative Inquiry questions with each other. If we decide that we like this process, in the future we can continue using Appreciative Inquiry as a larger, more in-depth project. Who knows what kind of metaphorical tree we can create. This is an exciting time in the history of this congregation. I am so glad to be a part of it. May we all join together to be a part of the growing tree of UUFP.