May 2023
Volume 25 Number 2

ISBN 978-1-907549-55-7
dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-55-7

AI Practitioner
International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



Appreciative Inquiry for Life: Working With Nature in a Time of Ecological Crisis

Edited by
Joeri Kabalt

Photo by Din van Helden

Co-publishers

The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry and Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company

AI Practitioner.com

www.aipractitioner.com/subscriptions

Sign up for our free AIP eNews

May 2023
Volume 25 Number 2

ISBN 978-1-907549-55-7
dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-55-7-2

AI Practitioner



Margaret Gearty

Dr Margaret Gearty is an action researcher, writer and founding director of New Histories Ltd. She is a professor of organizational learning at Ashridge Hult Business School in the UK. Her research interests include systemic change, activism(s) and learning histories.

Contact: margaret.gearty@ef.com
www.newhistories.co.uk

Wilding Moments

How might we make space for the natural world to accompany us in our working lives when so much takes place at a distance from nature? This glimpse takes place within a day-to-day learning setting. The practice described is about cultivating a sense of our own wildness via 'wilding moments' – invited in through improvised moments of poetry, presence and pause.

Here I am on a Wednesday morning in September standing, shoulder-to-shoulder in a tight oval, with twenty students and my co-facilitators. We are taking a moment together – as has become our custom these past two years – before starting our final workshop on the Ashridge Masters in Sustainability at Hult Ashridge Business School in the United Kingdom. I've come to relish these in-between moments, where anyone can offer anything – a poem, thought, a reading or an exercise – to help us start the day.

It is a ritual that has arisen in our student community over the past couple of decades. Until now there has been a continuous cycle. As one cohort goes into their future, a new one starts, replenishing our work in the field of sustainability with new stories, ideas and questions. This has made us feel like we are part of something living and life-giving.

As we approach this final workshop there is a heightened sense of significance. Recent changes in strategy at institutional level mean we may well be the last cohort to go through this programme. The title of the workshop – the Business of the Future – points to a future more precarious than ever on the global stage as well as closer to home. I arrive a little foggy, having tossed and turned as windows rattled in storms last night.

It feels fitting that we have a rare opportunity to start our day outside. We are standing on a patio set within a perfectly formed walled garden adjacent to our meeting room. The garden is set within the timeless Ashridge estate, with its acres of gardens that have been landscaped and tended for centuries, since a monastery was founded here in 1243.

The wind, little more than a breeze, is lessening now after the turbulent night. The gentle September sun is in my squinting, half-closed eyes. I am neither

ISBN 978-1-907549-55-7

here nor there – between night and day. Shakti, a student from South Africa, stands tall beside me and shares some lines from Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day", finishing with:

> *What is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

He pauses before repeating the line. The question suffuses the air – half reminding, half inviting. After a while, I decide to follow Shakti with some lines from another poem by Mary Oliver, "Sleeping in the Forest". They bubbled up during the winds last night and, for reasons I can't quite explain, they feel fitting to the mood here today.

> *All night I'd heard the small kingdoms breathing around me, the insects, and the birds who do their work in the darkness*
>
> *All night, I rose and fell, as if in water grappling with a luminous doom. By morning I had vanished at least a dozen times into something better.*

We pause again, as though the poetic words give us permission to dwell a little longer in this slightly wild place betwixt and between. Why not wait here just a moment before vanishing into something better? Is there something better?

The vase of daffodils

I recall the vase of daffodils at the centre of our circle when we first convened eighteen months before, their buds remaining resolutely closed throughout. It had been a convivial but sobering few days as we explored the global systems challenge humanity now faces, whilst a philosopher came and helped us explore the human capacity for denial.



Potted daffodils – a symbol of work ongoing

Photo courtesy of the author

A year later, I'd brought potted daffodils from home – open and in the soil. There was hope and energy then. The students were engaged in all kinds of initiatives that were life-giving and, in the broadest sense, ecological, in their homes, workplaces and communities. D had convened a singing group in her workplace; R had developed daily practices of sketching as a way to resource her work as a climate advocate in the health service; S was working with refugees in Denmark and reflecting through walks in the snow on all she was learning from them. The memories fly through my mind in a flash – just as the two years have flown by.

How might we invite the natural world to be even more present today I wonder, thinking of the poetry we've shared. How might Mary Oliver's "small kingdoms doing their quiet work around us" continue and stay close?

ISBN 978-1-907549-55-7

How might we invite the natural world to be even more present today?

On this September morning, I suggest to the group that we might want to bring bits of the "wild" into our workshop room through the next few days. There is a small table already there in the centre. On it is a solitary vase of autumn flowers in rich purples and pinks.

We disband now; people shake out and chat as they move indoors. Our workshop on "The Future" begins. Or perhaps it has already started.

What are these moments? On the face of it they are just breathing spaces that exist between the "real" work. They resource us – and are often vital for our wellbeing. Yet the ecologically minded philosopher John Foster warns us to be careful in pursuing a wellbeing that is human-centred, still alienated from the earth. He suggests instead that we pursue "wildness, not wellbeing" and encourages us to live "as whole natural beings, undisintegrated and unalienated" (2014, p. 12).

Turning towards a wild and precious life

I like to think that we *were* pursuing wildness together that September morning. That we were turning a few degrees towards that wild and precious life that Shakti had invoked. Through a series of intentional but fleeting and improvised practices, like sharing poetry and foraging in the gardens of Ashridge, we were strengthening our connection to place, to each other and to the natural world. In this way we were inviting the natural world to become more of a wild presence in and alongside us and less of a separated anthropomorphised symbol or aesthetic centrepiece, as it had been in that first workshop. The aim of such wilding moments, then, is not wellbeing so much as it is about accessing a less alienated wildness within and around us. Perhaps in this way we might be better placed to do the work of and as the natural world?



Bringing the wild inside

Photo: Shakti Satyapal

Back at Ashridge, the days of our workshop press on. There is intensity in our work as we map the horizons of the future, considering trajectories of health, energy, food and agriculture.

Meanwhile, wordlessly, the table in the middle starts to fill.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Cooperrider, D. L. & Srivastra, S. (1987) Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life. In Pasmore. W.A. & Woodman, R.W. (Eds) *Research in Organizational Change and Development* , vol. I. JAI Press.

Foster, J. (2014) *After Sustainability: Denial, hope, retrieval.* Earthscan Books.

Back to Table of Contents