

Nourish to Flourish

Nourish to Flourish brings together practitioners' voices and creative practices, and wide-ranging reviews of books that support strengths-based approaches to human interactions.

Book Appreciation



Neena Verma

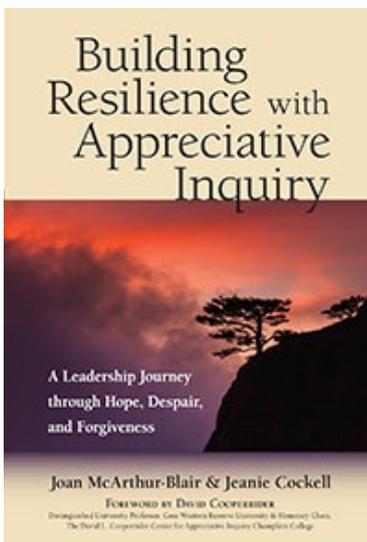
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Building Resilience with Appreciative Inquiry: A Leadership Journey through Hope, Despair, and Forgiveness

By Joan McArthur Blair & Jeanie Cockell

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018

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Building Resilience with Appreciative Inquiry is a book truly from the authors' hearts to that of the reader. There are several poetic invocations running through this book. One such invocation calls the reader for new knowing ...

*There are times
You are called to new knowing
And you are compelled to answer*

And that is what this book is all about – new knowing for leaders to build resilience using Appreciative Inquiry.

The authors begin by presenting their book as a commentary. They have various reasons for doing so – what appeals me the most is their submission that this book represents “our perspective, not the only perspective.”

Most leadership approaches and models focus on the outer world in which leaders must lead with strength. Few touch upon the inner world where leaders must acknowledge their own vulnerability, allow it an honest, compassionate expression and inquire appreciatively into the complex phenomena of hope, despair and forgiveness. That is what makes this book stand apart with meaning and courage. The authors present a model called “Appreciative Resilience” to help leaders explore and develop ways to foster resilience for themselves and the people they lead. Let us have a brief view of the unique leadership model this book presents.

Core proposition

The authors present a model called 'Appreciative Resilience' to help leaders explore and develop ways to foster resilience for themselves and the people they lead.

The authors' unique construct of appreciative resilience aims to help leaders build a personal call to resilience. Their work is rooted in Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a strengths-based approach to deep systemic change and development. The outer circle of their twin-circle Appreciative Resilience model explains its guiding pillars – Appreciative Inquiry (AI); AI principles; AI processes; AI leadership; and “being AI”. While AI is clearly the “catalytic force” of their model, to me the essence of all these pillars is perhaps being AI – the embodiment of AI principles and process in one's leadership work and resilience practice. The authors' elaboration of AI principles in the context of appreciative resilience is delightful reading, not just for the uninitiated, but also for the seasoned AI practitioner.

The inner circle of their Appreciative Resilience model is the essential offer of this book. This circle is formed of an interplay of what the authors call the states or elements of appreciative resilience – hope, despair and forgiveness.

Hope – The authors emphasise that hope is a matter of intentional practice. In the context of leadership, the authors aver that a conscious intent and effort to create a space for hope is essential to foster appreciative resilience. While they acknowledge that hope is not always a reflex or easy response, they also explain with snippets how Poetic principle of Appreciative Inquiry helps one to choose focus, re-perceive, reframe and practise a hopeful view. They support their belief that “knowing leadership has a rhythm of growth and loss, holds one to hope” with a touching account of a leader whose leadership is embedded in the “hope of the gardener” metaphor...

...sometimes, despite all the necessary prep ... the seeds blow away, the plant withers, the bugs attack or the bloom fades before it flowers ... I prepare again ... next time the garden will be different and will grow ... always be the gardener, revel in the possible, despite stormy weather, scattered seeds, invasive pests

The authors emphasise that hope is a matter of intentional practice.

Despair – The authors underline that despair is an essential companion of leadership. As humans, we all know despair well and also understand its dense nature. Authors focus on leadership and organisational despair. They emphasise that systemic forces make it hard for leaders to separate personal and collective despair. They present the appreciative practices of tracking and fanning to help leaders stride meaningfully through collective immobilisation.

Forgiveness – The authors' approach to forgiveness embodies grit and grace. Their notion of forgiveness is founded in the human phenomena of equanimity, compassion, unconditional regard and human goodness. They describe forgiveness as a “conscious act” that helps one understand that:

- The worldview of the other person may have more merit and there is sense in allowing meeting of two perspectives. This calls for *heightened awareness of perspective*.
- Forgiveness is much more complex than most other psychological experiences. It is a profound choice. It calls leaders to have a *steely appreciative will* to practice forgiveness.
- By choosing to forgive, leaders *foster future focus*, generate possibilities and enable movement for growth.

Perhaps one of the most poignant calls that the authors offer is a “determination to see that others both deserve and don't deserve forgiveness, and to offer it up anyway”.

Relevance

The authors' approach to forgiveness embodies grit and grace.

The authors' offer of appreciative resilience is not just reflective or philosophical. They share enough to support its active practice. There are stories and prose, reflection prompts, practices, exercises, interview questions, even a workshop design. For scholars, this model is founded in the science of Appreciative Inquiry, and artfully built on the authors' personal and professional practice of their model. They seem to have researched widely and deeply. While their model remains at the center, the simplicity and lyrical feel of the writing is almost equally captivating. Expressions like “inviting tension as a muse” and the “ability to see the horizon” inspire meaning and stir thought.

What stands out for me

The authors' courage to bare their hearts and their generosity in sharing make this book special for me. They hold themselves with rare gracefulness and strength while sharing their own struggles and vulnerability. I find the authors' approach to forgiveness and resilience uniquely inspiring. It is amazing how they have humanised the same in a leadership context.

The authors offer a 'determination to see that others both deserve and don't deserve forgiveness, and to offer it up anyway'

What resonated deeply with me is the poetry at the start of each chapter, not just because I am a poet myself, but more so because of its invocative appeal. Reading about the authors' model, named ALIVE (appreciate, love, inquire, venture and evolve), took me back to my first meeting with them. In a corridor conversation after attending their workshop at World AI Conference 2012, I offered ALIVE as an acronym of my experience to Joan McArthur-Blair. I was touched by her openness to understand my view of love, appreciation and evolution, and the grace with which she asked for my consent to use this acronym.

I am sure their work is much more expansive than my in-the-moment reflection and gift of an acronym. Yet I felt both humbled and happy to find it holding a space in their consciousness. Apart from this, there are many other facets of their model and book that feel "like my own" or "about me", and I believe other readers may also feel the same. This is the beautiful highlight of this book – it enlightens what is deeply personal yet essentially universal with a poignant feeling and thought.

The authors emphasise that the "appreciative resilience model and this book are not linear journeys". They encourage the reader to make the meaning personal and chart their own journey to resilience through hope, despair and forgiveness.

What else

They hold themselves with rare gracefulness and strength while sharing their own struggles and vulnerability.

There are aspects of authors' model and this book that may come across as more philosophical than practical, more personal than universal. That said, book is full of stories and vignettes that the authors share from their practice, lending their model integrity. The authors' poetic style of writing may not find favour with the readers who prefer a more prosaic style of writing. But that exactly is the unique value of this book – combining philosophical with practical and poetic with prosaic.

On the surface, this book seems to be about "resilience". In effect, the authors offer leadership concepts, insights and practices for deep learning and

transformation. I would encourage leaders, leadership professionals, teachers and students alike to read with faith and objectivity alike.

I will close with a quote from Nancy Ortberg:

Leadership stands at the crossroads of what we do and who we are, and that is a profound place. It requires that we become stronger in our resilience and forgiveness and determination and love.

(From Nancy Ortberg, *Unleashing the Power of Rubber Bands: Lessons in Non-Linear Leadership*, published by Tyndale in 2008.)

Building Resilience with Appreciative Inquiry: A Leadership Journey through Hope, Despair, and Forgiveness is easily available from all online market places.



Dr Joan McArthur-Blair is an inspirational writer, speaker and facilitator who specialises in the use of AI to foster leadership, strategic planning and innovative strategies for organisational development. She loves writing, speaking and facilitating, and works with groups of all kinds to make a positive difference.



Dr Jeanie Cockell is an educational and organisational consultant. She is a leader in AI, with extensive experience in facilitating, presenting, training, coaching, conflict resolution, leading and collaboratively designing strategies for individuals, groups, organisations and communities to build positive futures.

Together

The authors are co-presidents of Cockell McArthur-Blair Consulting. Grounded in a life time of leading, they have co-authored *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force*, and *Building Resilience with Appreciative Inquiry: A Leadership Journey through Hope, Despair, and Forgiveness*.

Discover more about them and the book at <https://cockellmcarthur-blair.com/>..

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