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Amplifying Hope in Times of Despair

Edited by

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Photo by Jérôme Gilbert

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Joan McArthur-Blair and Jeanie Cockell

Joan McArthur-Blair and Jeanie Cockell, co-presidents of Cockell McArthur-Blair Consulting, specialize in designing strategies to surface the wisdom of individuals, groups and organizations to build positive futures. They are the co-authors of *Building Resilience with Appreciative Inquiry: A Leadership Journey through Hope, Despair, and Forgiveness* (2018) and *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force* (2nd ed., 2020) and many articles on leadership and AI. They bring to this issue a lifelong passion for and study of leadership and resilience.
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Amplifying Hope in Times of Despair

Authors in this issue, from around the world, have contributed to finding hope in times of despair with writings from the deeply personal to the theoretical. In an April 2020 blog, David Cooperrider wrote, 'It's not about positive or negative human experience but inquiry into life: the task of AI is the quest and search for what gives life and deep meaning – even in the midst of the tragic.' These articles join that quest.

*There can be no kind of beginning anew without fire.
A fire that burns bright in hearts and streets.
I am not talking about riots, no, no.
I am not talking about violence, no, no.
I am talking about the
Kind of flame no one but you can see and feel.
Its heat consumes you, occupies your space.
It burns away all – but the most essential self.
It opens your eyes to see anew, to begin.
To wonder, to fall to your knees in awe.
For you, I name this fire – HOPE
Light it in your world, let it rise up
To scorch the binds that hold you.
Let it rise,
I call out to you – let it burn, let it burn.
© Joan McArthur-Blair 2020*

There is so much happening in the world at the moment: floods, pandemics, climate change, explosions, social revolution. This issue brings you voices writing about these times and how people and organizations are finding ways of amplifying hope in times of despair. Some articles are about working with organizations and some are deeply personal; all foster our understanding of how Appreciative Inquiry (AI) lends itself to amplifying hope in the most complex of times. AI creates the conditions for a

practice of hope and a hopeful view. It allows each one of us to alter our gaze and find humanness and humanity within the tragic and the tragedies around us.

Building Resilience

David Cooperrider in his foreword to our book *Building Resilience with Appreciative Inquiry: A Leadership Journey through Hope, Despair, Forgiveness*, and in the recent blog [Appreciative Inquiry in a Broken World](#), writes about appreciative inquiry into the extraordinary; appreciative inquiry into the ordinary; and appreciative inquiry in the midst of tragedy. He has come to call these the “rungs of Appreciative Inquiry”, as described in this excerpt from the blog:

*At the lowest rung – and perhaps the easiest domain of all in which to practice Appreciative Inquiry – is the **appreciative inquiry into the extraordinary**, the best in human experience, those times of “positive deviance” that are literally way above the line and jump out.*

We are talking about the capacity for seeing the best in the seemingly ordinary and insignificant events, where there are no starbursts, no mountaintop experiences. Thank goodness, then, for the example of our gifted artists.

*At the second and sequentially more difficult rung, is the capacity to do appreciative inquiry during times of **the ordinary** – at those times that are so taken-for-granted that we often fail to apprehend, appreciate, or even attempt to search for everything that is giving life. Here we are talking about the capacity for seeing the best in the seemingly ordinary and insignificant events, where there are no starbursts, no mountaintop experiences. Thank goodness, then, for the example of our gifted artists and the many layers of meaning that they help us see and appreciate. Think of how a Vincent van Gogh teaches us to see the extraordinary in an ordinary tea-cup, an unpretentious vase of flowers, or a common scene of fruit on a simple table. William Wordsworth, as another example of the second level of appreciative maturity, encourages the cultivation of **appreciative intelligence in the midst of the ordinary**. He writes: “With an eye made quiet by the power/of harmony, and deep power of joy/we see into the life of things.”*

*And then there is a third developmental level for the practice of Appreciative Inquiry—and it’s the least understood. It’s the kind of Appreciative Inquiry sensitivity, skill, or literacy as evidenced by someone such as Victor Frankl, in his enduring classic *Man’s Search**

Appreciative Inquiry is not about positive or negative. Its call is to transcend this polarity.

for Meaning.¹ So, this, the third level of elevated AI capacity, is not an appreciative inquiry into moments of excellence or experiences of the life-giving in the ordinary, but appreciative inquiry in the midst of tragedy. Victor Frankl, as we all know, was in the horrific concentration camp where everything was taken from him and others. And yet, in the midst of his studies, he saw resources, relationships, and regenerative possibilities that gave life to many. There are examples upon examples of Frankl's idea of finding the life-promoting meaning amid extreme suffering; they are threaded throughout his accounts of the harsh conditions of the Nazi concentration camps. Frankl believed that "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." In his 1959 book, *Yes to Life in Spite of Everything*,² he said "What is to give light must endure burning."

What I would like to underscore here is that Appreciative Inquiry is not about positive or negative. Its call is to transcend this polarity. It's not about positive or negative human experience but inquiry into life: the task of AI is the quest and search for what gives life and deep meaning—even in the midst of the tragic. Indeed, in so many times of disruption, there is always the potential to surface and summon our better humanity.

The articles in this issue find hope within times of despair and occupy that third rung of Appreciative Inquiry – seeking to “summon our better humanity”. The articles range from the deeply personal to the organizational. Some authors write about the internal struggle to be present and hopeful in times of incredible uncertainty. Some offer glimpses of models and techniques to assist in navigating complex spaces in our worlds. Other authors tell stories of working within and for organizations and networks in this time in history, and how community and change can be generated by coming together virtually, and by seeking to know and understand the journey through hardship.

¹ *Man's Search for Meaning. An Introduction to Logotherapy*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2006. [First published in 1946.]

² *Yes to Life in Spite of Everything: A Psychologist Experience of the Concentration Camp*. Beacon Press, Boston, 2020. [First published in German in 1946. Translated into English, 2020.]

We felt like we had been invited into an AI salon where the world had gathered to uplift each other.

An invitation

There was something profound about the submissions to this issue for us as editors. We felt like we had been invited into an AI salon where the world had gathered to uplift each other: to deeply ponder the journey of finding hope in times of despair; to ask difficult questions of self and others; and to offer ideas for community and organizations to lean toward thriving. Like AI itself, every author entered into their story open to the emergence of process, thought and feeling. As we read these articles we were reminded that almost always we must trust the journey, knowing that the possibility of hope arriving anew is out there on the horizon.

We want to thank the authors who overwhelmed us with such an abundance of writing that we have had to split the conversation between two issues of *AI Practitioner*, November 2020 and February 2021: watch for more stories to come in a few months.

Joan McArthur-Blair & Jeanie Cockell
November 2020

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- Provides cutting-edge educational offerings in AI and Positive Organizational Development,
- Provides AI-related organizational consultancy services to organizations,
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- Learning is at the heart of what they do: they aim to create and facilitate powerful learning processes.
- The professionals from Kessels & Smit want to be good company to each other and to people they work with: they believe the best solutions are developed in partnerships.
- They strive to be a learning organisation, constantly renewing their work processes, structures and approaches. The company is their “laboratory”, where they experiment and find answers for learning and development and organisational questions.

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