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Cover image courtesy of Sabine Gressel-Soeder

Co-Authoring Our Lives and Our Future The 'Words Create Worlds' Principle in Action

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Nourish to Flourish



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

Voices from the Field



Keith Storace | Australia
Editor, Nourish to Flourish

Keith Storace is a registered psychologist with the Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA) and an associate fellow with the Australasian College of Health Service Management (ACHSM). He manages a private practice at Kiku Imagination where he applies the Appreciative Dialogue (ApDi) therapy program to assist individuals move toward, strengthen and enjoy what is meaningful while dealing with the challenges they encounter along the way. Keith has been the editor of the Nourish to Flourish column for *AI Practitioner* since 2016.

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Oona D'mello has become a familiar and valued contributor to Voices from the Field, and it is a pleasure to welcome her back once again. Since first meeting Oona at the 2019 World Appreciative Inquiry Conference in Nice, I have admired her thoughtful ability to bridge Appreciative Inquiry with broader conversations about human flourishing. In this article, Oona invites us to consider language not simply as a way of describing our experience, but as the very terrain on which our experience is shaped. Her reflections offer a compelling exploration of the words we live inside, the questions we ask, and the possibilities they create for ourselves and the systems of which we are a part.



Oona D'mello | India

Oona D'mello is an entrepreneur and educator whose work sits at the intersection of sustainability, e-learning, and human development. Co-founder and past CEO of MySustainOnline, her work has been showcased at the G20 Equity Lounge and published in *AI Practitioner*, Springer, and Vogue. She is certified in executive coaching and as an Appreciative Inquiry practitioner.

The Words We Live Inside

Language is not a vehicle for fulfillment. It must be recognized as the terrain.

Where Appreciative Inquiry meets human flourishing – and why the words we live inside determine the life we can imagine.

What if the words arrive first?

We tend to think of language as the medium through which we express what we already feel, already know, and already are. We experience an emotion – joy, a sense of purpose, perhaps, or belonging – and then we find words for it. Language, in this view, is a carrier, a delivery system for what we already know. Let's challenge this sequence, shall we?

What if the words arrive first? Would they hold the potential to shape perception before feeling even has a chance to form?

This is not a philosophical provocation. It is what we know about how human beings work. Before we act, we narrate to others and to ourselves. The internal language we carry about our sense of self, capacity, and worth becomes the emotional reality we inhabit. The terrain of a fulfilled life is built, in no small part, from the words we live inside.

Inquiry is a generative act

David Cooperrider's work in Appreciative Inquiry reframed the field of organizational change and the way individuals navigate it. The questions organizations asked about themselves determined what they found – and what they found determined what became possible.

Ask "what's broken?" and you discover a deficit. Ask "what's alive and working?" and you discover energy, possibility, the latent strengths that have been there all along, often waiting for the right question to bring them into view.

Inquiry is not neutral; it is generative.

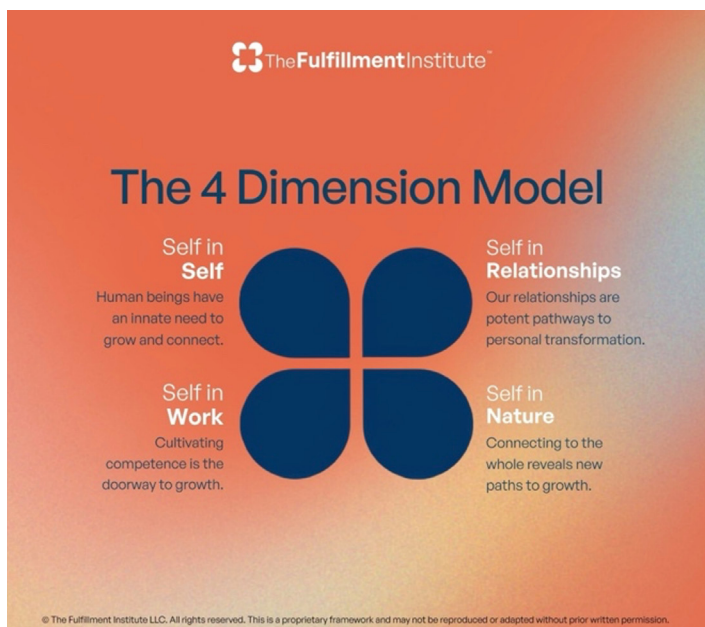
This is a foundational insight of Appreciative Inquiry: inquiry is not neutral; it is generative. Asking "what's alive and working?" goes beyond discovery towards creating a new reality.

Let me share some further context: one of the most ancient schools in Hinduism is the Bhakti tradition, where Kabir Das, a fifteenth-century mystic, speaks of *shabd* – word, in English. Kabir was a weaver and poet who lived in Banaras and wrote in plain, everyday language so that ordinary people could understand him. For him, *shabd* was not simply something we speak. It was the living word that shapes who we become – the word comes first; what we say, to others and to ourselves, quietly builds the reality we then live in.

This is the same truth The Fulfillment Institute works with, arriving from a much older place. The Fulfillment Institute (TFI) was founded on the principle of *purna* (Sanskrit for wholeness). The continuous reach for wholeness or fulfillment has been designed into the Four Dimensions of Fulfillment model,

which in turn has become the model through which we cultivate fulfillment across ecosystems. This lens helps us build an internal capacity for fulfillment, holding self at the core while exploring harmony in relation to: self in self, self in relationships, self in work, and self in nature.

The Four Dimension model
The Fulfillment Institute



The words we carry about ourselves, our worth, and our work become the ground beneath a life. When we change the words, we change what becomes possible. This is why the reach toward *purna* – wholeness – begins with the stories we tell ourselves. To choose our words with care is not a small thing. It is, in the end, how we author a self.

To choose our words with care is not a small thing. It is, in the end, how we author a self.

When a person in their relationship with themselves or in a system begins to ask different questions of their own life and ecosystem, something shifts. This shift will not come from the question “why does this keep happening to me?” Rather it lies in “when have I felt most fully alive, what was true in those moments, and what worked for me when I felt like my best self?”

This principle is at the heart of cultivating human fulfillment. This is its meeting point with language, the discovery that language, and specifically the quality of our inquiry, is not incidental to the work of flourishing. It sets the ground for the work and allows us to move beyond solving into creating. How we present ourselves is a feature of the language we use. There is a particular moment that makes this real: the moment we introduce ourselves.

Watch what happens in a room when someone is asked to speak about who they are and what they do. Some people expand – they inhabit their words,

Like all choices, they can be made consciously, from strength, from vision, from a place of genuine self-authorship.

Language is not one tool among many in the pursuit of fulfillment. It is the architecture of a fulfilled life.

they claim their story with quiet authority. Others contract – they qualify, they diminish, they rush past themselves as if their presence requires an explanation.

These are not personality differences. They are acts of language.

The way we introduce ourselves, describe our work, and tell our story are choices. And like all choices, they can be made consciously, from strength, from vision, from a place of genuine self-authorship. To speak ourselves into the room with clarity and care is not performance – it's the opportunity to set the ground on which we build, heal, nurture, and repair.

Dialogue as a key dimension of fulfillment

The Fulfillment Institute's Four Dimensions of Fulfillment (self, work, relationships, and nature) are not experienced in isolation. They emerge in conversation. How we engage others. How we listen. How we ask. And most importantly, how we speak to ourselves.

The dimension of self is shaped by the stories we tell about who we are – often, to ourselves. The dimension of relationships is shaped by the quality of our listening, the questions we bring, and the way we show up in dialogue. Even our relationship to nature – to community, to purpose, to the world beyond ourselves – is mediated by the words we use to locate ourselves within it.

Language is not one tool among many in the pursuit of fulfillment. It is the architecture of a fulfilled life.

Lastly, the lenses through which possibility is perceived

Appreciative Inquiry gives us a practice. Human fulfillment gives us the capacity, which, if leveraged, can help us build fulfilling lives. Language gives us the medium in which both can be realized.

The words we choose are the lenses through which possibility is perceived – or closed off.

To ask better questions of ourselves and of each other.

To listen to our internal narration with curiosity rather than compliance.

To step into the act of introduction, description, and dialogue, with the awareness that we are not simply reporting a self – we are, in an essential sense, authoring one.

The ground, it turns out, is far more responsive than we ever thought

This is what it means to recognize language not as a vehicle for fulfillment, but as its terrain. Not the path to the destination, but as the ground beneath our feet.

And the ground, it turns out, is far more responsive than we ever thought.

A Practitioner's Journey



Federico Varona | USA
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From an appreciative paradigmatic point of view, Betsy Martínez's article, below, makes an original and significant contribution: it applies the Appreciative Paradigm to the human experience of moving through adversity and, in doing so, reveals it in an organic, interdependent, and integrative way through its five essential components – ontology, epistemology, praxis, axiology, and language. From this new way of seeing and operating, which has been profoundly transformative for her, Betsy's article suggests, implicitly, the possibility of exploring beyond the methodological view of Appreciative Inquiry and of understanding the practice of personal and social change from the Appreciative Paradigm, which shows how everything is integrated, organic, and interdependent, and how this understanding radically transforms our way of seeing, interpreting, inhabiting, and accompanying processes of personal and social change.



Betsy Martínez Montero

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Life as Mystery: The Appreciative Turn When Facing the Trials We Are Called to Cross Through

There are days when life turns upside down and, without warning, places us before a path we did not ask for. The call that changes everything. The diagnosis. The goodbye. The job that comes to an end. And there, with a somewhat crumpled heart, we face doubts, exhaustion, and even fear; we understand that there is no shortcut: all that remains is to cross through.

Crossing through is not leaping over adversity or pretending it does not hurt. It is crossing a threshold: entering and holding steady, step by step, knowing that once we cross it we will not be the same. And it is not crossed by denying the storm, but by saying yes to life in the midst of pain, doubts, and fear. The suffering we did not choose does not disappear by ignoring it; it becomes inhabitable when we find, even there, a purpose.

In this sea of words, I share reflections from my own lived experience, and also from what I have learned while accompanying people on their journeys: you do



Even in the hardest moment, something that gives life opens a path toward the light.
Betsy Martínez

Change does not wait until the end of the road. It begins the moment we start looking with different eyes.

not need to feel brave when you are afraid, nor strong when you are exhausted. I discovered that crossing through is better done with an appreciative turn.

From the *Appreciative Paradigm* (Varona, 2025), beyond a new paradigm for change, I discover a new way of seeing, inquiring, transforming, valuing, and speaking about ourselves and the world: different ways of being in life that are also different ways of crossing through it.

Seeing differently

Appreciative ontology offers us a perspective that changes everything: life is a mystery to be inhabited, not a problem to be solved. When you stop demanding a solution from yourself, you can finally breathe within what you do not understand. And there is more: in every person, while crossing through their worst storm, there is a core of strengths waiting to emerge. The blows do not destroy that core; often, they are what is needed to reveal its light.

Inquiring into what gives life

Appreciative epistemology invites us to be curious, even in the midst of the storm, about what still enlivens us: in the ordinary, in the extraordinary, and even in the tragic. Instead of questioning only the wound – “what did I do wrong?” – we ask, “what in me has endured, what is still beating, what purpose is this serving for me?” Something extraordinary happens: change does not wait until the end of the road. It begins the moment we start looking with different eyes.

Transforming wholly and together

Appreciative praxis reminds us that no one crosses through completely alone: when your legs falter, someone else walks beside you. We cross through as a whole person: with the emotion that weeps, the reason that brings order, the intuition that sometimes knows before you do, and the will that takes one more step. Not with relentless strength, but with complete presence. From there, we build small prototypes of the future: a gesture, a loving boundary, an “I will solve it tomorrow”.

Valuing what sustains

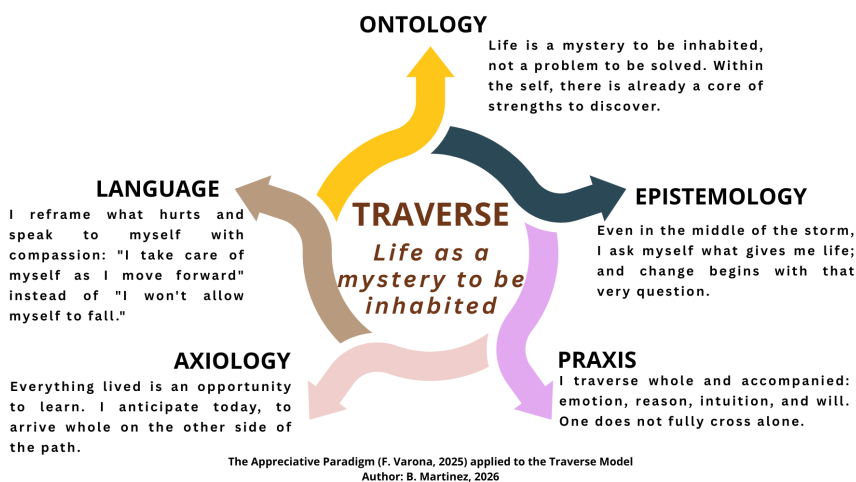
Appreciative axiology chooses to appreciate what gives life in any context, because it believes that everything that happens to us is an opportunity to learn. Here lives the anticipatory principle: we move toward the image we hold of the future. Imagining who you want to be on the other side is not denying the present; it is planting direction in the midst of the fog.

Naming anew

Appreciative language affirms that words create the world we live in and the one we want. That is why it listens to the negative in order to reframe it: “this thing that breaks me also shows me what matters to me”. And it seeks a committed language, moving from the impersonal “one must be strong” to “I will take care of myself as I move forward”. That nuance, so small, can sustain us through entire nights.

Five components that do not come one after another, but rather interweave each time we decide to cross through. And it is worth saying with tenderness: at some point in the journey you will feel that you are in no-man’s-land, where what came before is no longer there and what is new is not yet understood. That unsettled middle is not a sign that something is wrong with you; it is the fertile zone, the seedbed where, beneath the path, what is to come is being formed. And that middle cannot be rushed; the new beginning cannot be forced. It emerges when you are ready inside, at your own pace and not by anyone else’s clock.

Five different ways of seeing life
that are also five ways of crossing through it.
Betsy Martínez, 2026



I think of someone who lost their job at fifty and, instead of repeating “I am no longer useful,” dared to ask what they were made of; or I think of someone who lost a loved one and, instead of trying to “get over it,” dared to cross through grief without sweeteners or shortcuts. The storm did not change; the way of crossing through it did.

On this journey, we are not heroes without scars. We become more compassionate people, more attentive to what gives life, capable of naming the good even while life remains a mystery we do not control. We discover that strength was not the absence of fear, but companionship for fear. Today you do not have to be brave or relentless, nor cross in a single leap. Just take one step,

Just take one step, and then another, noticing what still blooms within you.

and then another, noticing what still blooms within you; sustaining yourself in a purpose that matters to you. That, too, is crossing through. And on the other side, I promise you, there is a version of you waiting to be inhabited.

Varona, F. (2025) *Appreciative Paradigm. From Methodology to Paradigm. A New Paradigm for Personal and Social Change and Social Sciences*. Available from Amazon in print and Kindle formats, in Spanish, English, and Portuguese.

Desde una lectura paradigmática apreciativa, el artículo de Betsy Martínez realiza una contribución original y significativa: aplica el Paradigma Apreciativo a la experiencia humana de atravesar la adversidad, y al hacerlo lo revela de manera orgánica, interdependiente e integradora a través de sus cinco componentes esenciales — ontología, epistemología, praxis, axiología y lenguaje. Desde esta nueva forma de ver y operar, que ha sido profundamente transformadora para ella, el artículo de Betsy parece invitarnos, de manera implícita, a explorar más allá de la mirada metodológica de la indagación apreciativa y a comprender la práctica del cambio personal y social desde el paradigma apreciativo, que muestra cómo todo está integrado, orgánico e interdependiente, y cómo esa comprensión transforma radicalmente nuestra manera de ver, interpretar, habitar y acompañar los procesos de cambio personal y social.



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La vida como misterio: El giro apreciativo ante los embates que nos toca cruzar

Hay días en que la vida da un vuelco y, sin avisar, nos pone frente a un camino que no pedimos. La llamada que lo cambia todo. El diagnóstico. El adiós. El trabajo que termina. Y ahí, con el corazón algo arrugado, nos enfrentamos a dudas, cansancio y hasta miedo; comprendemos que no hay atajo: solo queda atravesar.

Atravesar no es saltar por encima de la adversidad ni fingir que no duele. Es cruzar un umbral: entrar y sostenerse, paso a paso, sabiendo que al cruzarlo... no seremos los mismos. Y no se cruza negando la tormenta, sino diciéndole sí a la vida en medio de ella; con dolor, dudas y miedo. El sufrimiento que no elegimos no desaparece al ignorarlo; se vuelve habitable cuando encontramos, aun ahí, un para qué.

En este mar de palabras, comparto reflexiones desde mi propia piel; pero también, es algo que aprendí acompañando personas en sus travesías: no necesitas ser valiente cuando tienes miedo, ni fuerte cuando estás agotado. Descubrí que se atravesaba mejor con un giro apreciativo.

Desde el *Paradigma Apreciativo* (Varona, 2025), más allá del nuevo paradigma para el cambio, descubro una forma nueva de ver, indagar, transformar, valorar



Aun en el momento más duro, algo que da vida, abre paso hacia la luz.
Betsy Martínez

El cambio no espera al final del camino. Comienza en el instante en que empezamos a mirar con otros ojos.

y hablar de nosotros mismos y del mundo. Distintas maneras de estar en la vida que son también distintas maneras de atravesarla.

Ver distinto

La ontología apreciativa nos ofrece una mirada que lo cambia todo: la vida es un misterio que se habita, no un problema que hay que resolver. Cuando dejas de exigirte una solución, por fin respiras dentro de lo que no entiendes. Y hay algo más: en cada persona, atravesando su peor tormenta, existe un núcleo de fortalezas esperando emerger. Los embates no la destruyen; muchas veces son lo necesario para mostrar su luz.

Investigar lo que da vida

La epistemología apreciativa nos invita a ser curiosos, incluso en plena tormenta, lo que todavía nos anima: en lo ordinario, en lo extraordinario y hasta en lo trágico. En vez de interrogar solo la herida, “qué hice mal”, preguntamos “qué de mí ha resistido, qué sigue latiendo, para qué me está sirviendo esto”. Y ocurre algo extraordinario, el cambio no espera al final del camino. Comienza en el instante en que empezamos a mirar con otros ojos.

Transformar entero y acompañado

La praxis apreciativa nos recuerda que nadie atraviesa del todo en soledad: cuando tus piernas dudan, alguien más camina al lado. Se atraviesa completo, entero como persona: con la emoción que llora, la razón que ordena, la intuición que a veces sabe antes que tú, y la voluntad que da un paso más. No con fuerza implacable, sino con presencia completa. Desde ahí construimos pequeños prototipos del futuro: un gesto, un límite amoroso, un “mañana lo resolveré”.

Cinco maneras distintas de ver la vida que son, también, cinco maneras de atravesarla.
Betsy Martínez, 2026



Valorar lo que sostiene

La *axiología apreciativa* elige apreciar lo que da vida en cualquier contexto, porque cree que todo lo que nos pasa es oportunidad para aprender. Aquí vive el principio anticipatorio: nos movemos hacia la imagen que sostenemos del futuro. Imaginar quién quieres ser del otro lado no es negar el presente; es sembrar dirección en medio de la niebla.

Nombrar de nuevo

El *lenguaje apreciativo* afirma que las palabras crean el mundo en que vivimos y el que queremos. Por eso escucha lo negativo para reformularlo: “esto que me rompe también me muestra lo que me importa”. Y busca un lenguaje comprometido, del impersonal “hay que ser fuerte” al “yo voy a cuidarme mientras avanzo”. Ese matiz, tan pequeño, sostiene noches enteras.

Cinco componentes que no van uno tras otro, sino que se entretienen cada vez que decidimos cruzar. Y conviene decirlo con ternura: en algún punto de la travesía te sentirás en tierra de nadie, donde lo anterior ya no está y lo nuevo todavía no se entiende. Esa mitad revuelta no es señal de que algo ande mal en ti; es la zona fértil, el semillero donde bajo el camino, se gesta lo que viene. Y a esa mitad no se le puede meter prisa, el nuevo comienzo no se fuerza; brota cuando por dentro estás listo, a tu ritmo y no al del reloj de nadie.

Pienso en quien perdió su empleo a los cincuenta y, en vez de repetir “ya no sirvo”, se atrevió a preguntar de qué estaba hecho; o pienso en alguien que perdió a un ser querido y, en vez de intentar “superarlo”, se atrevió a atravesar el duelo sin edulcorante ni atajos. No cambió la tormenta, cambió la forma de atravesarla.

Solo da un paso, y luego otro, mirando lo que aún florece en ti.

En este viaje, no somos héroes sin cicatrices. Nos volvemos personas más compasivas, más atentas a lo que da vida, capaces de nombrar lo bueno, aunque la vida siga siendo un misterio que no controlamos. Descubrimos que la fortaleza no era ausencia de miedo, sino compañía para el miedo. Hoy no tienes que ser valiente ni implacable, ni cruzar de un salto. Solo da un paso, y luego otro, mirando lo que aún florece en ti; sosteniéndote en un para qué que te importe. Eso, también, es atravesar. Y del otro lado, te lo prometo, hay una versión tuya esperando ser habitada.

Varona, F. (2025) *Paradigma apreciativo: De la metodología al paradigma. Un nuevo paradigma para el cambio personal y social y las ciencias sociales*. Amazon. Disponible en formato impreso y Kindle, en español, inglés y portugués.