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

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When Life Knocks, Listen

Chris Nichols finds that life floods in for free with the simplest ways of inviting groups to share what brings them alive.

Pasternak¹ said, “when something great calls it often knocks no louder than a heartbeat, and it is very easy to miss”. Nowadays I seek to bring a stillness into my work, making space for the living world to be heard at the doorway. I’ve found that it’s always there, knocking.

Often this work is no more technical than asking people in a circle to talk about what really matters to them and inviting them to listen to each other with care. The main effort I put in is in getting space on the agenda – a story circle of this kind, with the average executive team of eight or so, can take four hours. I secure this space by explaining that the time is never wasted, that the deepening of relationships will pay dividends in more effective working on the tough issues that every executive team must face. My experience is that once people hear this, they make the space to do the work.

Framing the conversation

In the story circle I frame the conversation by encouraging people to speak about what is real for them. I often tell a story of my own, showing what matters to me in my life and work. This framing seems to help, because the talk rapidly drops beneath the surface concerns of organisational life. People talk about their families, their struggles and their hopes. When people talk deeply enough about what brings them alive, a love for the living world floods in for

¹ Boris Pasternak, quoted in J. O’Donohue (1997) *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*, Bantam Books, London.

The art is to let the main thing emerge, to trust the group to ask the questions that need to be asked.

free. Often, I need to do nothing more. Sometimes I notice connections, amplify patterns that are emerging, notice the shifting energy.

I may ask people to take a walk, maybe in pairs, to reflect on the circle. The right question comes to me at the right time, though good starting questions might be “What in that circle was valuable for you and for us? What should we agree to take into our practice from now on?”. The art is to let the main thing emerge, to trust the group to ask the questions that need to be asked.

Artful inquiry

Very often we’ll conclude using artful inquiry², a way of exploring through any form of artistic practice. We have often made a shared collage or created a found-object sculpture to inquire together into what it would be like if we worked closely with the wider living world more fully in our organisation or team. I also ask the team to consider how they will take a first step in practice – perhaps by coming back to their intention as a cycle of learning each time they meet.

These days I see what I do as mycorrhizal, subterranean, quiet, undramatic. Helping people to build a deep-seated and nourishing awareness of being not only connected to each other, but of being connected to a wider living web of which we are all an interwoven part. Nourishing this web is never wasted; people tell me that their relationships are changed by it.

² For more information on artful inquiry please see the following report: C. Seeley and E. Thornhill (2014) *Artful Organisations*, Ashridge, UK.