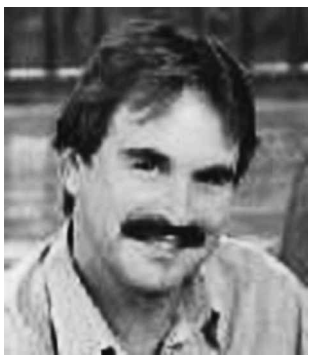
FEATURE

An Exploration of the Spiritual Heart of Human Science Inquiry

David Cooperrider and Frank J. Barrett



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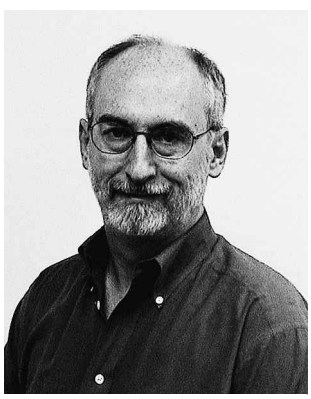

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> The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion, which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle.
>
> —Albert Einstein

What is the role of spiritual experience in human science research? What is the relationship between experiencing a sense of the sacred and our capacity to inquire, to ask questions, to wonder, to be surprised, to be open, and to learn? What do we mean by ''spirit of inquiry,'' and, in these words, do we really mean to take the word *spirit* seriously? If so, in what ways? What happens, for example, in an interview when the interviewer approaches his or her work with a sense of sacred vocation or, better yet, a genuine feeling of gratitude to be meeting with another human being as a precious soul, not just in some faceless or bureaucratic role? Will the relationship and dialogue be affected? How about the data? And, later, what about the writing itself?

Why is the language of spiritual experience something we generally restrict to religious people or mystics, but then in so many autobiographical footnotes of scientists like Einstein, we find quotes that rival the articulations of the Sufi poet Rumi and words that resonate, in concert, with the compassionate heart of His Holiness the Dalai Lama?

We began to wonder: If our aim as social scientists is not to map and reflect the world objectively, then what is the purpose of our work? Is it possible that through our assumptions, our topics, and our choice of questions, we largely create the world we later discover? Do we live—every one of us—in worlds that our inquiries create? Do human systems grow, construct themselves, or evolve in the direction of what they most persistently and genuinely ask questions about? If so, what should be the questions?

Likewise, we began to reflect on client organizations with whom we were working. Would the people at Roadway Express, one of the largest trucking companies in the US, be talking about reconceptualizing their entire organization based on McGregor's Theory Y if he, and Abe Maslow alongside him, had not dared in scholarship and articulated in speculative ways a new vision, an anticipatory theory, of what was possible? Why, in a world that is so vitally shaped through mental models, assumptions, idea systems, language, cultural constructions, our discourses—in short, the very ''stuff'' of theory—is there so little generative theory like McGregor's and Maslow's? More important, what can we do in our own work to rekindle the passion, excitement, inspiration, courage, and spirit required of a scholarship of transformation capable of breaking the barriers of accepted convention?

Our assumption is this: that the most defining and important feature of our field, the heart of our field, is what Schein and Bennis many years ago first talked about as the ''spirit of inquiry'' (1965). What this means to us today, and in what ways we can cultivate it, is what this reflection is about. We draw upon stories from our work with a special action-research approach we have called *appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider, Barrett, and

Srivastva, 1995). It involves lessons from our experience and grows from the simple question: When have we felt truly alive in inquiry, and are there ways to actively cultivate more of ''it'' in our work and lives, and with what benefits?

Love the Questions Themselves

Here is a story to illustrate what we have learned about cultivating a spirit of inquiry.

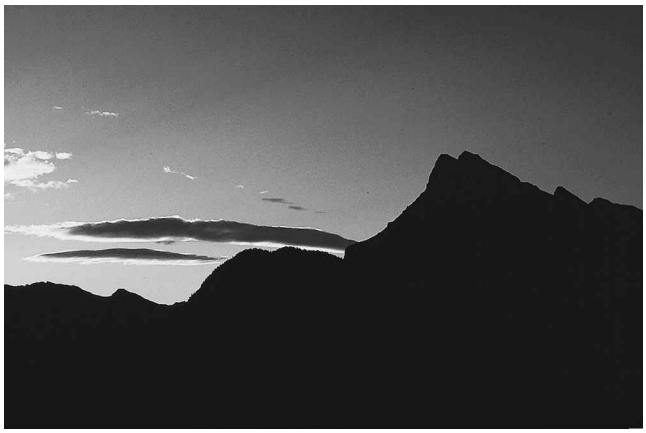
Park Plaza was a flea-bitten, one-star hotel that was taken over and challenged to transform itself. The mandate to the managers of this low-cost, high-turnover, poorly managed hotel was frightening: the new parent company wanted a rapid turnaround in service from one star to four star, an externally determined rating. They immediately invested $15 million into transforming the physical setting to marble floors, exotic furniture, new rooms, and the like. But they did nothing on the human side. So a year later, nothing had really changed. We were asked to do action research that would engage everyone in a collaborative diagnosis and creation of an action plan that would help the hotel reach four-star status. In the meantime, people feared they would fail and be fired; there is always the possibility of wholesale housecleaning in any takeover of this kind.

When have we felt truly alive in inquiry, and are there ways to actively cultivate more of ''it'' in our work and lives, and with what benefits?

While the story is very involved (see Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990), there was one moment of powerful learning. We proposed, in the organization-assessment phase, that we let go of all diagnostic, problem-oriented analysis—literally put a moratorium on all deficit analysis of low morale, turf issues, gaps in communications, mistrust, and bureaucratic breakdowns. But the general manager would not accept it when, for example, we said that the deficit-based assumptions would make the organization change come to a slow crawl, that is, if we treated and defined the system as ''a problem to be solved.'' What might happen, we suggested, if we engaged everyone in an inquiry with an alternative metaphor? The CEO almost laughed when we suggested that ''organizations are centers of infinite relational capacity, alive with infinite imagination, open, indeterminate, and, ultimately—in terms of the future—*a mystery.*'' One of the ''issues,'' for example, was the horrendous lack of responsiveness to guests and a culture of not caring. So we proposed an experiment.

We would ask one group of employees to do an organization diagnosis. In the prep workshop, we gave them classic analytic models, and they created problem-finding questions: *What are the largest barriers to your work? What are the causes of breakdowns in responsiveness to guests?* The other group would have a workshop on appreciative inquiry. We asked them to ''try on'' a half-full *assumption:* that the capacity for caring was in fact everywhere in the system, and there were moments of revolutionary responsiveness to guests in which people went way beyond job descriptions to go the extra mile and serve with passion. The core question in interviews, which the employees created, was something like this:

> Revolutionary Caring for Guests: The mark of our hotel, when we have been really good and beyond even our most common best, has been when we have responded to and exceeded our guests' expectations. Our assumption is that you too have been part of those times—perhaps once or many times. We want to know your story and then your vision of our future.
>
> A. Can you share with me a story about when you were part of a successful, even revolutionary, moment of responsiveness to a guest, when you and others met and exceeded needs on both sides? Describe the situation in detail. What made it feel radically different? Who was involved? How did you interact differently? What were the outcomes and benefits you experienced?
> B. Now with that story told, let's assume that tonight, after work, you fall asleep and do not wake up for 10 years. But, while you are asleep, a miracle happens and our entire hotel, as an organization, becomes the kind of organization you would most like to see. Many positive changes have happened. So now you wake up, it is 1999, and you come to the hotel. What do you see happening now that is different, new, or better?



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When the two workshops were completed, we asked the groups to do separate interviews with different people in the hotel. We did not mention, however, how the two groups differed. They did *not* share the different questions. Each group was to do 30 interviews each and prepare a thematic report of the findings. They would come together, for the first time, to share their organizational assessment in two weeks.

So far, so good, until the day of the reports. The appreciative group was the first group that volunteered to share. Each person was visibly excited and had a role in the session. Their energy was infectious. They had discovered that every employee they talked to wanted to participate in building a four-star vision and that there was one story after another of exceptional responsiveness to guests. In addition, the images of the future were compelling and inspired. The group shared wonderful quotes from the people they interviewed. The problem-finders sat motionless and then made a tough charge: ''*Where did you find all this? Certainly not here at this hotel, with all its breakdowns? We did not hear anything like what you are saying. Why are you fabricating?*''

Now the tables turned. We said, ''Hold on, let's give the other group a chance to report.'' So the second group presented (or one person presented, while the others sat back) a listing of about 50 serious problems, such as negative supervision, interdepartmental friction, and statistics on rock-bottom customer satisfaction. The scenario they had heard and painted of the future was dismal, loaded with a vocabulary of threat. Some people felt that housecleaning should indeed take place. There were anonymous quotes saying the hotel should close. The first group questioned the authenticity of the data: ''These are not the things we heard in the interviews.'' Both groups were now confused.

We then asked everyone to exchange interview guides and to read the questions. This set the stage for one of the best conversations about social construction of reality we have ever had: language and reality, the impact of analysis on our feelings of motivation and fear, the impact of human inquiry on the development of relationships, the idea of culture and narrative, notions of reflexivity and the ''enlightenment'' effect of inquiry, and the relationship between inquiry and change.

Our pragmatic question was this: In relation to helping propel good change, which data set do you think would honestly bring us together to create the future we want? The story ends dramatically. The hotel embarked on a four-year process of appreciative inquiry, and a doctoral dissertation traced the whole system transformation and showed how discourse precedes changes in structures, systems, policies, and even *awareness.* A short time later, the hotel received the coveted four-star status, without layoffs, and the Academy of Management gave our theory piece written about it an award for the best paper of the year (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990).

Two major learnings deserve more research. The first is the proposition that we live in worlds that our questions create. The questions we ask structure what we find; what we find becomes the basis for our conversation and dialogue; and this all becomes the ground from which we imagine, make sense, narrate, theorize, speculate, and construct our future together. Questions do more than gather information. Inquiry intervenes: it focuses attention and directs energy; it provides a container delimiting or expanding what is there to see; it affects rapport and relationships; it sets agendas, lifting up what is deemed important; and it ignites conversational universes based on the symbiotic relationship that exists in the *two* key elements of language, namely, the intrinsic relationship between questions and statements (Goldberg, 1997). Consider the difference. One supervisor begins the weekly meeting by saying: *Why do we still have these problems? Why do you blow it so often? What resistances do you think we will face?* Another says: *Okay, group. Let's start. What possibilities exist that we haven't yet thought about? What's the smallest change that could have the biggest benefit? Is there any other way to think about this?*

The omnipresence of questions, and their inherent potential to evoke whole new worlds of possibilities, suggests a second insight that is even more central here. What we have found, in our own lives, is that *we too* move—emotionally, theoretically, relationally, spiritually—in the direction of what we ask questions about. Inquiry intervenes, and it works both ways; it intervenes ''in here'' as well as ''out there.'' In other words, the questions we ask have a double import.

Appreciating the Miracle and Mystery of Life

The way we conceive of the social world is of consequence to the kind of world we ''discover'' and, through our reconstructions, even helps to create it. Managers or action researchers, like scientists in other areas, tend to approach their work from a framework of taken-for-granted assumptions and vocabularies: what we are doing, what we are looking for, why we are doing the inquiry, ways of talking, specialized vocabularies, and so on.

There is one metaphor that dominates the arena of applied inquiry—whether talking about medicine, action research, community assessment, organizational analysis, or management as inquiry. Indeed, in many ways, it is not even thought about as a metaphor at all, but reality. It is that our institutions are ''problems to be solved.'' It is not that our organizations have some problems, but they are a problem—therefore inquiry equals problem solving; to do good inquiry means to solve ''real problems.''

Organizing was not a problem to be solved, we hypothesized. No organization was created as a problem to be solved. Organizations were created as *solutions,* not problems. Would a solution metaphor change our inquiry? After short experimentation, we realized that we were embedded in the same vocabulary of problem solving, locked in a universe of understanding in which the world is defined a priori in deficit-based ways. ''Solution,'' we realized, still implies a problematic something.

What would happen to our inquiry, we asked, if we shifted the story we tell ourselves about ourselves: organizations are not problems to be solved but rather are centers of human relatedness *alive* with infinite capacity and filled with ''more than what is knowable'' in terms of creative, relational possibility. The *miracle and mystery of inter-being* could perhaps be a metaphor that would, almost by definition, be an inexhaustible starting point for raising an endless array of questions of human and global significance.

New understanding emerges when we begin our inquiry from a different starting point, one in which we welcome the unknown. It means throwing away old certainties and entering mystery. Such are the pragmatics of inquiry.

Organizations are not problems to be solved but rather are centers of human relatedness alive *with infinite capacity.*

Since our earliest work with appreciative inquiry, we have come increasingly to understand that we are in the midst of inquiry when, in fact, we experience a sense of awe, when we are capable of appreciating, even in the smallest way, the miracle of life on this planet. *Inquiry is the experience of mystery that changes our life.*

Appreciative inquiry involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential—linking people, as it were, to the ''positive core'' of their past, present, and future capacities, including those available in their nested set of relations from the local to the universal. One thing is evident and clear as we reflect on the most important things we have learned: human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about, and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated.

We conclude with another story to illustrate this.

Early in the 1990s, on his first trip to Jerusalem, His Holiness the Dalai Lama proposed: ''If the leadership of the world's religions could simply get to know one another . . . the world could be a different, a better place.'' So several meetings were scheduled in various places, from Washington, DC, to Jerusalem; the most recent was at the Carter Center in Atlanta (see Cooperrider, 1990). The purpose of the meetings was to create a secure, private, small, and relatively unstructured forum where leaders could have con-

Questions from Dialogue Interviews

1. A story from your life journey.
One could say a key task in life is to discover and define our life's purpose and then accomplish it to the best of our ability.

- Can you share a story of a moment or a period of time when clarity about life's purpose emerged for you—for example, a moment when you were called, when there was an important awakening or teaching, when there was a special experience or event, or when you received some guiding vision?
- Beyond this story, what do you sense you are supposed to do before your life is over?

2. Insights from important interfaith encounters, exploring the personal meeting and friendship between people of different religions.
We have all been changed both in outlook and in our lives because of encounters with people from other spiritual traditions or religions. In your work as a leader, you might have had one, two, or perhaps many encounters with people of other traditions that stand out as particularly significant.

- Can you share a story of one experience that stands out in your memory—for example, an encounter outside the normal "safety zone" where you were surprised or humbled, or where there was an experience of healing and hope, or where there was a genuine experience of compassion, joy, love, or friendship?
- Whether it was difficult or easy, what did you come to respect most, not just about that person, but about their particular religion or practice?

3. Qualities that would make meetings like this significant and effective.
You probably already know, based on years of experience, the kinds of things that would make a meeting among leaders of the world's religions worthwhile, meaningful, and successful.

- What qualities of relating would help make it work?
- What qualities or gifts do you and/or your religious tradition bring to this kind of meeting?
- *What would make meetings like this worthwhile to you?* (This question was also discussed when we returned to the whole group.)

4. World events and trends during the past 100 years.
Taking steps to create an enduring dialogue among leaders of religions does not happen in a vacuum. Think about the five most important historical events that have occurred during the past 100 years—global or local events and trends that give *you* a sense of urgency, readiness, or calling for the work here.

- What trends or challenges do you see as most significant? Examples?

5. The emerging story of relationships among religions.
The *1996 Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* lists more than 15,000 global problems and documents, for example, that half of the armed conflicts in the world in early 1993 were not between nation-states but between groups from different religions. Against the background of many world problems and conflicts, there is also a hopeful story that offers a glimmer of what is possible when we find ways to promote peace rather than war, cooperation rather than prejudice, and sustainability rather than environmental degradation and human oppression.

The century since that historic gathering in Chicago in 1993—the Parliament of World Religions—has seen a vast widening of interfaith dialogue, interreligious prayer and meditation, pilgrimages, joint action, and study in world religions. Indeed, it appears there is a worldwide urge for an enduring, daily

versations with one another, know one another in mutually respectful ways, and reflect on the hard issues of the world without binding any institution to another. Appreciative inquiry was selected as the action-research model for data gathering, bringing people together, and creating together. The hope was that representatives of the different religious groups could get to know one another—in some cases, groups had not spoken in 400 years.

By any measure, the meetings were successful. A major contributor to this success was, we believe, the questions posed in the opening appreciative inquiry interviews. After His Holiness the Dalai Lama shared his vision, we went in pairs into the interviews—across religious traditions and beliefs—and later engaged in dialogue with the whole group. (See the sidebar for the questions that structured the opening dialogue interviews.)

From the opening interviews through the whole group dialogue that followed, the new insight for us was the ''surprise of friendship'' that emerged in and through the sincere and deep appreciative interchange—the sharing of stories and the search for understanding life's purpose and best qualities. Of particular importance was not that the

cooperation among people of the world's religions to make peace among religions and to serve, in the presence of the sacred, the flourishing of all life. As leaders in these arenas, what are we most proud about? What are we most sorry about?

- Think about the most significant achievements, milestones, developments, and infrastructures that have happened locally or globally in your lifetime. What developments are you most proud of?
- Conversely, as you look at events or trends in the world, and the current responses of religious leaders, including yourself, what are you most sorry about or, more important, what should we be doing more of or differently?

6. Your vision of a better world and the special tasks and significance of the world's religions in the new century.

Dag Hammarskjöld, former UN Secretary General, said: "I see no hope for permanent world peace. We have tried and failed miserably. Unless the world has a spiritual rebirth, civilization is doomed. It has been said that the next century will be a spiritual century or it will not be."

Think about the next 30 years, a generation or so, in the future. Even though the future is, in so many ways, a mystery, we want to begin to visualize the kind of world you feel we are being called to realize, a better world, the kind of world you really want. What do you see in your vision of a better world?

- Specifically what are three changes or developments in your vision? What is happening in the world a generation from now that is positive and different, and how do you know? How would you feel if these three things were realized?

7. Your vision of the relationships among the world's religions and leaders.

The assumption in the invitation to this meeting is that there needs to be, in today's complicated and interconnected world, an ongoing and sustained conversation among the religious leaders of the world. The simple hypothesis: the world will be a different place, a better place. It is easy to see the value of something like this, is it not?

Let's imagine a scale from 1 to 10—where a rating of 10 represents *the ideal kind of relationship among leaders* of the world's religions and spiritual traditions. Leaders of the religions are relating in ways people would be proud to point to—as examples or stories for the world's children.

- What does your "10" look like? The quality of relationships? Kinds of contact and communication?
- Let's assume a significant and growing number of leaders from the world's religions do choose "to get to know one another"—and it begins to succeed. A safe, confidential, ongoing, and nonbinding forum is created. How might the world benefit? How might you and your faith community or organization benefit?

8. Next steps

Again, putting yourself in the future, let's suppose that, in fact, a high-quality and enduring forum for dialogue has been successfully created. It is a safe and level playing field where leaders and their envoys can come together to talk, in confidence, about the hard issues of the world.

- As you imagine such a forum (and we can design it in any way we want, assuming resources are not a constraint), what are some things that could happen, or should happen, to make it a win-win-win for everyone—for the world, for work in our respective traditions, and for interfaith relationships?
- *What would make it significant, exciting, or high-priority and meaningful for you?*
- What are some possible places for a next meeting?

leaders came up with common values, shared vision, or joint projects and the like, because, at this stage, these would likely be impossible between, for example, people from the Vatican's Roman Catholic group and the Orthodox group. But something more important started, which one might call the positive chemistry of interaction. It was not only the surprise of beginning to know one another, but also the surprise of liking one another, the glow of new acquaintance.

When we are really in a mode of appreciative inquiry, doors into appreciable worlds are opened everywhere. Entering into those worlds—those locked-up conversations—would not have happened without the question. The feeling of wonder is the outcome. We know that we are doing inquiry when, at the end of the day, we feel more spirit.

The essence of what we are proposing is that our metaphors matter; that we might actively change them much like a sailor changes sails to concentrate the power of the wind; that inquiry *is* the experience of mystery that changes us when we enlarge our sense of the miracle of life on this planet; and that nothing is more practical for realizing

our desire to open the world to new possibilities than approaching our work in ways that cultivate our own sense of awe, love, surprise, and curiosity. Is this easy to do? Or are these qualities simply for great mystics or the birthright of people with exceptional genius, such as Abe Maslow, who said, ''Not only does science begin in wonder, it ends in wonder''?

We have found our own sense of inspiration, hope, and joy expanding with each story and precious new relationship. In other words, we can cultivate, actively, our own spirit of inquiry simply by doing more of it.

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