

Birth of Global Community: Appreciative Inquiry in Action by Charles Gibbs and Sally Mahe, 2003 Lakeshore Communications Inc.

FOREWORD

By
David Cooperrider

In 1937, about ten years before his assassination, Mohandas K. Gandhi made a plea for a new mode of relationship between people of diverse faiths. It was a radical plea. Sitting in the turbulent vortex of ethnic and religious conflict which was often perpetuated in the name of God, Gandhi called not just for non-violence or tolerance, but for a much more radical kind of appreciative interchange. He called for a stance of openness and learning whereby people would actively seek to know the deepest and best in each other's religious wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual practice. He called it a "reverence for other faiths"-- something that with simple humility recognizes how all faiths are imperfect ("as they pass through the human medium") and that all have something to teach and share. He went even further, however. He proposed that we might, in our active appreciation of the other, discover surprising things that are so good in the Other's tradition that *"we would not only not hesitate, but would think it our duty, to bring into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths"*.

Radical for Gandhi's times? The answer is obviously yes, as tragically Gandhi himself was shot for such views. But the real question is *what about our times?* Still radical? How about Catholics and Protestants sitting down together in this Gandhian-like way in Ireland? Or Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews in Jerusalem—searching for the deepest and best in each other and each other's religious and spiritual traditions? Impossible? Read on.

This book is about the most important agenda of the 21st Century and how a new kind of global organization is being created to carry it out. It is about the dramatic story of the birthing of a United Religions, something which in spiritually appropriate terms could be to the world of religions what the United Nations is to nation-states. And it is about Appreciative Inquiry ("Ai") -- a leading approach to organization development and change-- and how *it* has simultaneously been challenged, humbled, and inspired in this new domain of unimaginable complexity.

My own life changed dramatically when I first heard about a Bishop's vision. It was on a Saturday morning in 1995, during the 50th anniversary celebration of the United Nations. I was home reading the morning paper, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, and in it there was a picture of Bishop William Swing making a speech at the United Nations 50th anniversary celebration. It was a tiny picture of the Episcopal Bishop of California combined with a tiny one-paragraph news report (later I learned that the press release leading to this article was picked up nationally and internationally in only one paper— The Cleveland Plain Dealer). When I read the piece—articulating a vision for a United Religions to compliment the work of the UN-- I remember being slightly impressed; but I must have felt it was impossible, so I

tossed the paper in the recycling bin. Not another thought. But later in the afternoon I shared what I had read with Nancy, my wife. She said she wanted to read it too. So I recovered it from the recycle bin in the garage and we read the article together. This time my heart started pounding, for one thing because my research interests at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University had recently turned to studies of “new forms of human cooperation and global action”.

While most of my work was in the business world I started to think about the implications of a United Religions. Its purpose would not be to create one unified world religion (just like the UN is not to take away from the sovereignty of nations) but a place to work out our global interdependencies. The logic was compelling. Indeed reports show that over half the world’s armed conflicts are not between nation states at all but between groups of differing ethnic and religious identities. What are our world’s religious leaders doing, not alone but together, about these conflicts?

Why too, I asked myself—after we have seen CNN pictures of black and white coming together like Mandela and DeKlerk spontaneously holding up each other’s hands in the soccer stadium—why no similar pictures of our religious leaders, for example the Pope and Dalai Lama, doing the same? Do many of us believe—did I believe—that *religions together* could be more of a worldwide force for peace and cooperation than bitterness and separation? I turned to Nancy and said: “if something like a UN among people of the world’s religions could be created, it might well help change human relationships more than any other kind of organization I know”.

As a scholar and researcher I wanted to study it. I wanted to see the whole thing evolve from the beginning moments of creation. I wrote a long letter to the Bishop that night and I sent him a chapter from a new book I was writing with Jane Dutton at University of Michigan on The Organization Dimensions of Global Change: No Limits to Cooperation. But I was open about it: “we are infants in our understandings about how to create organizations of the kind you are speaking about so it would be an amazing privilege to be able to observe, to document, and to learn”. Three days later I received a call from the Bishop’s key colleague in the initiative, the Rev. Charles Gibbs. He came to visit us right away at Case Western Reserve University and shortly after that an advanced doctoral student in Organizational Behavior Gurudev Khalsa, and I, visited the initiative’s whole team in San Francisco. Bishop Swing had just returned from a trip around the world. His report was split right down the middle. About half the world’s religious leaders thought the idea was totally utopian. The other half said it was absolutely needed. Almost all said they would pray for it.

Within thirty minutes the Bishop challenged us when he said: “we do not need you to stay in the ivory tower and study the effort at arms length. We invite you right here to join us, to bring your organization development backgrounds and the spirit of the appreciative inquiry to our first summit”. Gurudev and I signed on. We agreed, without any need to discuss it, to partner. And we said yes about bringing the AI Summit approach—a whole systems, strength-based, large group planning methodology—to help launch a five year process for creating a vision, charter, and plan for a United Religions.

Two minutes after that meeting we jumped right into another, with Sally Mahe and Charles Gibbs, the authors of this amazing book. They introduced us to the host committee for the

first global summit for creating a charter for a United Religions. The summit dates were already set. And the summit, which was to be held in the room where the UN Charter was drafted at the Fairmount Hotel in San Francisco, was less than two months away. We started designing and preparing for it that day. It was thrilling.

This book tells the organization development story of the next five years: the global AI Summits held at Stanford University, the Fairmount Hotel in San Francisco, and Pittsburgh; the charter writing meetings taking in places all over the world like Caracas, Oxford, Buenos Aires, Nairobi, New York City and others; the dozens of organizational design meetings with brilliant business leaders like Visa's Dee Hock; and of course, the exciting moments of birthing the URI at the charter signing celebration at Carnegie Music Hall in June of 2000. Right now, as I write these words, there are over 200 United Religions centers or "cooperation circles" on every continent bringing together Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Zoroastrians, Jains, Indigenous spiritual traditions, Bahai and many more. The mission is strong: *The purpose of the United Religions Initiative (URI) is to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, end religiously motivated violence and create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings.*

I believe the URI is an organization that could, like the International Physicians for Nuclear War, be one of the very few *organizations* that are nominated for and receive a Nobel Peace Prize. The work of the URI is that important. It could happen in our lifetime.

Remarkable in its depth is a view of the promises and potentials appreciative inquiry, organizational design, large-group summit methods, and spiritual practices for bringing people together across boundaries of all kinds. This book is a unique resource for people involved in organization development and change leadership. To be sure, this volume *is* a practical guide with tools and insights. But it is not your typical guide. It is not superficial. It is not just about forms and worksheets. It is a narrative guide, probably the very best kind, of teaching while telling a story. It shows the reader a "way" without prescribing a narrow or misleading "six sure fire steps". Work in the real world is emergent and dazzling. And this book is about the real thing. Through storytelling like Margaret Mead might do, one learns at levels that are tremendously beneficial. This book should be in the library of every person interested in organizational design, interfaith and international relations, social movement organizing, and appreciative inquiry.

My many feelings of gratitude are offered to Charles Gibbs and Sally Mahe and all the people of URI who have helped to lift up a new hope in the world. In this seminal work Charles and Sally have provided each one of us a gift. It is a gift of passion and compassion, of courage and humility, and of literary inspiration. Most of all it is a precious example, much like the Dalai Lama's *The Good Heart*, of the power of appreciative ways of knowing, valuing, and learning from the Other.

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