

Draft only—2007 David Cooperrider, Case Western Reserve University

## **Business as an Agent of World Benefit “Awe is What Moves Us Forward”**

### **A Special Gift from a Guiding Light**

It was perhaps 20 years ago, yet I remember my first meeting with Willis Harman in vivid color. Fresh out of my doctoral dissertation research on the idea of *Appreciative Inquiry*, I was taking the next big step, working on an interdisciplinary understanding of the relationship between images of the future and human action in the present, especially the relationship between *positive* guiding images and the possibilities for *positive* action in human systems.

Meeting Willis Harman in his office in 1987 was like opening the doors in the mind. We all have those precious moments—a seemingly chance encounter with people who can only be described as guiding lights—and its only much later you realize enormity of the person’s impact and gift, not only to you, but to humankind and the life of our planet as a whole.

Of course this is not the place to go into a full display of Willis Harman’s future-oriented analysis and forecasts. But a simple re-reading of volumes such as *Global Mind Change* and *Creative Work: The Constructive Role of Business in Transforming Society* are stunning for their prescient accuracy. Harman predicted the epic shift in consciousness now underway and how someday the idea of mind-as-causal would transform the human sciences and our understanding of ourselves as active, deeply connected participants in the creation of reality.

However beyond awakening us to the powers of “global mind shift” and the possibilities inherent in a new era conscious co-evolution Willis Harman had huge concerns when examining the negative patterns—the ever multiplying signs suggesting that the modern world was at the end of its tether—of irreversible, man-made climate change; extinction at an horrific rate; deforestation and desertification; growing scarcity of fresh water; accumulations of toxic chemicals; chronic poverty and hunger in large portions of the world; the seeming inevitability of growing terrorism; the instability of the debt-ridden world economy; and the ever-present threat of nuclear accident or unimaginable war.

His analysis of the future, 20 years ago, was uncanny. And for Harman there was no question that every epochal shift holds explosive potential for great turbulence, chaos, and dangerously out of control systemic failure. So his real concern was the question of *how*. As an honest and disciplined future-oriented thinker he knew that there could be no accurate forecast of future outcomes but rather that one could, in a sense, begin to place bets as to where we might put our precious collective attention and energy if our aims were to single out sources of opportunity to make the transition moment as “salubrious” or healthy as possible.

After systematic observation and analysis as well as intuitive reading of all the signs, Willis Harman came to a major conclusion—reluctantly. He surprised himself and others with what he was about to declare. His conclusions would be challenged. Some people, even

friends, would be taken back. But then he said it: “we need to spread as widely as possible the image of business as one of the great creative forces on the planet.” Rather than choosing a conservative skepticism with regard to the massive array of planetary challenges, Willis Harman decided to make a choice as he put it “to explore the optimistic hypothesis” that business—with the most adaptable organizational forms ever invented and its agility, innovative capacity, its potential for dignified and meaningful work, its reach and connective technologies, and its penchant for pragmatic entrepreneurship and continuous learning—could contribute to the well-being of many. “It is rapidly becoming clear what is not working; we have yet to form a vision of the global society that does work.”

This visioning—creating the new images of business and society for the 21<sup>st</sup> century—could become, as Harman once again prophesized “a task of historic proportion.”

I had no idea how that first meeting with Willis Harman over 20 years ago would change my career. I came away from the meeting inspired and convinced that the best way to be involved with the profound global complexities of our day is to respond positively to the challenge: to create a better world than this planet has ever known.

### **With the Compass Set: A Call to Worldwide Dialogue and Deeper Inquiry**

Suddenly corporate sustainability is creating more buzz and debate than almost anything we have ever seen in the business world. Conferences, UN Summits, new books, management schools, and the media—including major journals and magazines devoted to everything from economics to spirituality—are delving to the heart of the debate. The recent headline in one such magazine framed it in the form of a common question: “Will Big Business Destroy—or Save—the World?”

The questions we ask often set the stage for what we find and what we find creates the context for our dialogues. Unfortunately all too often the voices in the argument line up predictably on both sides of the question listed above, and the clashes seem endlessly to continue in a repetitive fashion. Especially perplexing is the ethnocentric multiplicity in views concerning business-in-society (imagine Osama Bin Laden and George Bush debating the question), as expressed across cultures and civilizations.

In many ways the intensifying fire and ethnocentric heat in the debate around business and society was vividly symbolized not so much by the words business-and-society, but the equivalent words “world” and “trade”. Was it an accident that the 9-11 targets of terror were called *The “World” and “Trade” Towers*? The relationship between business and society—including business’s search for mutually beneficial advances that address the world’s most pressing global needs—has become, as Willis Harman predicted, one of the defining issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century where the future of business is literally a front-and-center matter of world affairs.

As important as the question “Will Big Business Destroy—or Save—the World?” appears, there is perhaps another more important question or larger framing to consider. For something as vitally important to us as the accelerated articulation our highest visions of business and society for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a whole human family (including our differences),

how might we create not a polarizing ethnocentric debate but a world-centric dialogue? How might we—in the service of accelerating our capacity to learn as a whole interconnected and coherent system-- meet one another across civilizations, cultures, belief systems, nations, traditions, and worldviews not with frozen positions and answers but with creative questions, a deep and sincere spirit of inquiry and an openness to discovery, surprise, new knowledge, and sense of awe?

The posing of the central question for such an inquiry, it can be proposed, should not fuel hostility, polarizing debate, and a recycling of exhausted belief systems. Is it possible to envision a new kind of world-elevating public dialogue? Can we imagine an apt metaphor for an appreciative approach to global inquiry and accelerated world learning? Is global learning, in metaphorical terms, best seen as single loop learning much like a **machine** or a thermostat that automatically adjusts itself to a proscribed status quo state? Is worldwide learning, perhaps in a more powerful way, to be accelerated through images of a **global brain**, where intuitive leaps and reflexive double loop *learning about learning* are possible? How about images of the **web of life** or the metaphor of a universe that is a deeply connected “**whispering pond**”—an image that suggests, as Ervin Lazlo so scientifically and poetically describes it, where our every positive or negative thought, utterance, and relationship resonates widely, instantly, and eternally? We know that our metaphors matter. However, whatever our generative images might be, the question remains: how might they inspire new ways to close the global societal learning gap, that is, the distance between the growing complexity of our own making and the lagging connection of our capacities to innovate, anticipate, and collectively synchronize in health-giving, life-giving ways?

### **Anticipatory Learning and Appreciative Inquiry**

On June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004 Case Western Reserve University announced the opening of its new Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit housed in an astonishing Frank Gehry building. The initiative’s first major project was to help design a multistakeholder learning process with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and 500 CEOs, civil society executives and citizens, and nation-state leaders including Presidents and intergovernmental leaders. The Leaders Summit, as it was called, was the largest of its kind ever held at the UN and it was catalyzed by a growing recognition that the world will not be able to realize its’ millennium development goals—for example eradicating extreme poverty by 2015 and creating green sustainable societies economies—without tremendous innovation and a viral-like spread new models, stories, or cultural codes/memes of enlightened business. The session was inspired by the Secretary General’s desire to create a new pattern of learning through dialogue and the approach of Appreciative Inquiry, or “AI”, was selected. More will be said on this but for now it is good to simply highlight that AI is a positive, dialogic process that is based upon a celebration of the Other, involving systematic inquiry seeking to discover sources of strength, wisdom, and vision not simply in the self, but in the Other including the *positive core* of capacity latent in universe of strengths inherent in the integral whole. AI searches for everything that “gives life” to living systems—groups, organizations, cultures, etc-- when they are most alive, effective, creative, and healthy in their interconnected ecology of relationships. In the language of today’s positive psychology movement and the new science of human strengths it means adopting a positive or life-centric bias—seeking fresh understanding of dynamics described by words such as *excellence, thriving, abundance, resilience, or exceptional and life giving*.

The Secretary General's own words—words that have now catalyzed over 3,000 corporations to sign on to the mission of the UN Global Compact—begins to highlight the essence of taking a strengths-based appreciative inquiry approach when he opened the meeting and said:

“Let us choose to unite the strengths of markets with the power of universal ideals. Let us choose to reconcile the creative forces of private entrepreneurship with the needs of the disadvantaged and the requirements of future generations.”

Following the Summit Kofi Annan wrote about the need to renounce our monological habits of (e.g., talking heads and predetermined outcomes) and to embrace new inquiry-based and strength-based forms of whole system joint creation. After the historic meeting concluded he wrote the Case Western Reserve University team and said:

“I would like to commend you more particularly for your methodology of Appreciative Inquiry and to thank you for introducing in to the United Nations. Without this, it would have been very difficult, even impossible to constructively engage...”

In essence the core question of the meeting was not “Will Big Business Destroy—or Save—the World?” Instead the summit focused on a cross-cultural search for the best in the Other in relation to breakthroughs, innovations, next practices, new solutions and higher visions of *business as an agent of world benefit*: “Where are the pioneers and surprising new leaders in your organization and culture? Can we locate the “golden innovations”—stories of courage, strength, and elevated practice that are emerging and working successfully that, if further developed and applied, could vitally transform the world toward human, economic, and ecological well-being? What are your society’s best, most compelling visions of the relationship of business and sustainable society for the future we want? Can we articulate both the common ground and the higher ground, and at the same time come together to learn about and honor our special differences?”

Within minutes after Kofi Annan’s welcome, diverse pairs-- for example Lord Brown the CEO of BP in conversation with Thulani Gcabashe, Chief Executive of South Africa’s ESKOM-- were invited to “mutual interviews” searching for everything of value worth valuing, using questions that helped establish center-to-center union to the best in the Others’ experience, organization, and culture. The room of 500 people was instantly energized. Thousand of stories were being told, and like a special kind of time-lapse photography which can show us life bursting out and blooming right in front of our eyes, it was clear that a resonating tipping-point might well be underway: Stories were surfacing, one after the other, of architects designing green factories and buildings in ways that give back more clean energy to the world than they use. Bottom-of-the-pyramid strategies demonstrated how business can eradicate poverty through profitability. There were powerful stories of business as a force for peace and reconciliation in high conflict zones. Discussions proceeded forward on how to globally scale-up micro-enterprise innovations. Twenty of the world’s largest financial houses—holders of pension funds, mutual funds, and stock exchanges such as Goldman Sachs, and Brazil’s stock exchange Bovespa—came together to issue an impressive financial report documenting the importance of managing the triple

bottom line; it was titled “Who Cares Wins” and it was loudly applauded by NGOs, government leaders, and business executives alike.

The power of this narrative rich, large-group community of inquiry was said by many to be consciousness shifting, perhaps in much the way astronauts experienced a shift when they stepped out into space and could see the majestically spinning globe we live on. Appreciative Inquiry is like this: it can take us, collectively, to the edge of the unknown and beyond. Inquiry all about openness, curiosity, creative questioning and its spirit involves what Whitehead once called “the adventure of ideas.” And it’s not about putting a superficial sense of hope on a troubled time. Indeed hearing the stories from other cultures of the “impossible becoming possible” creates its own dislodgement of treasured certainties. Co-inquiry in the presence of such massive diversity almost always discloses views not quite like our own. So when we enter appreciative inquiry’s theatre we are often, almost always, surprised with the ending. But then we are gifted, not with solid certainty but with something even better: the vertigo of new vision.

The power of the emerging innovations and next practices defied simple categorization into such familiar domains as business ethics, corporate philanthropy or other non-strategic corporate social responsibility initiative. Each positive innovation and breakthrough pointed to a pattern for the future that erases the false dichotomy embedded in “the great tradeoff illusion”—the belief that good business must sacrifice outstanding performance if they choose to address society’s well being. It became clear that what the world is searching for is an understanding of that mutual sweet spot, whereby from a business perspective every global issue can be seen as a business opportunity, where doing good and doing well are so naturally intertwined that there is no longer any talk of things such a corporate responsibility, as if it were an appendage. And this is where, right in front of our eyes, the cross-cultural nature of the inquiry began to create a new world-centric mosaic. A leader from Brazil said we need a new language: “the word *responsibility* for the whole” is paternalistic and misleading he remarked “in our Brazilian view it is not so much *responsibility* for the whole but *intimacy* with the whole; this sense of intimacy changes everything.” Another leader added to this mosaic saying: “every culture in history has established markets and businesses intended to make exchanges of mutual benefit and so in Sweden we have a wonderful word for business. The Swedish word for business-- “Narigsliv”-- translates literally as “*the nourishment of life.*”

### **We Live in Worlds Our Inquiries Create:**

#### **Why Not an Indra’s Net for Business as an Agent of World Benefit**

One of the most exciting visions shared at a subsequent follow on event with 1000 people—The Global Forum on Business as an Agent of World Benefit-- was an idea for a Nobel-like Prize to catalyze a **World Inquiry** where each year there would be an ongoing and vast global search for those business and society breakthroughs that are generating the largest positive impacts during this, the great transition moment Willis Harman said would certainly take us into “rough and uncharted waters.” The search, in the spirit of building a more secure scaffolding between epic eras, would be to lift up millions of stories that elevate-and-extend from the most positive ethnocentric contributions to the new world-centric forms of awakening to the gifts of the whole. The inquiry’s focus: a search for *extraordinary business and society innovations, helping to revolutionize the way the world eradicates poverty, restores the biosphere, and creates global understanding and peace.* And speaking directly to the language of business, the aim

of the world inquiry would be to demonstrate the integral hypothesis of a connected, correlated, and coherent universe and therefore how every global issue of our day is truly a business opportunity providing new sources of top line innovation as well as new magnitudes of purpose, meaning, and value. Sustainable value creation is not just good for the world; it also represents the business opportunity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The architecture of this World Inquiry, under the leadership of Ron Fry and Nadya Zhexembayeva, has just been through its prototyping and pilot testing phases completed from the search mechanisms to the digital stories which, with a click of the button can be instantly be shared everywhere ([www.worldinquiry.org](http://www.worldinquiry.org)) . Catalyzed by Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management and a growing open-source network of partners worldwide, the World Inquiry offers new ways for people to share stories of exceptional business and social practices; connect and conference with one another; experience each others talents; and articulate anew—from the local to the global—a 21<sup>st</sup> century vision of business as an agent of world benefit. In a simple process, people download powerful appreciative inquiry questions, adapt and co-create new ones, and interview for astonishing innovations. The method's objective is to tap the positive potential of Appreciative Inquiry as a way of mobilizing millions and millions of face-to-face conversations with business leaders, visionaries, students, scholars, social entrepreneurs, thought leaders, and wisdom companions including children, wise elders, spiritual teachers and to link these to the original potential of the internet as a medium that inspires world-centric creativity, connection and coherence, and worldwide education as a whole.

*Suddenly the image we have been asking for—for the world inquiry into business as an agent of world benefit-- is right here. The metaphor for the kind of global learning we need flashes across the minds eye: it is the image of Indra's Net. It's about the ancient Buddhist story of the universe describing the cosmic web of inter-relatedness extending infinitely in all directions. Every tiny intersection of the vast intertwining net is set with a glistening jewel, in which all parts of the whole are brilliantly reflected. And in our image it also involves a "learning" dynamic, spontaneous and instantly local and whole, compelling each jewel to transform in and through a reverberating amplification of "strengths upon strengths" of all the other jewels...supraliminal (faster than the speed of light) there is a remarkable mirroring and merging, a connected and coherent whole, sparkling and glistening—and it encircles our blue planet with the purest appreciative intelligence we are capable of extending.*

It is an image of a World Inquiry that is coming alive right now.

David Cooperrider PhD is Professor and Chair of the Department of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University. He is a fellow of the World Business Academy is the faculty director for the Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit. David has served as researcher and advisor in the arena of sustainable development to a wide variety of organizations including, for example, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, McCann-Erickson, Nutrimental Foods, Parker Hannifin, World Vision, Cleveland Clinic, American Red Cross, and United Way of America. Most of the projects are inspired by the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology for which Professor Cooperrider is best known. His founding work in this area is creating a positive revolution in the leadership of change; it is helping companies all over the world discover the power of the strength-based approaches to planning and multi-stakeholder cooperation. Among his highest honors David was invited to design a series of dialogues among 25 of the world's top religious leaders, started by His Holiness the Dalai Lama who said, "If only the world's religious leaders could just know each other, the world will be a better place." David has published 13 books and authored over 60 articles and chapters. Cooperrider's volumes include the best selling *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* Berrett-Kohler (with Diana Whitney); *The Organization Dimensions of Global Change* (with Jane Dutton) *Organizational Courage and Executive Wisdom* and *Appreciative Leadership and Management* (both with Suresh Srivastva). David is editor of a new academic book series *Advances in Appreciative Inquiry* (with Michel Avital) published by Elsevier Science. Three websites of interest include: <http://worldbenefit.case.edu/>; [www.worldinquiry.org](http://www.worldinquiry.org); and the Appreciative Inquiry Commons at <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>. For those interested in helping to build the "Indras Net" worldwide architecture—human and technical—of the World Inquiry please contact David.Cooperrider@Case.edu.