

A Coaching Journey from Resilience and Well-being to Flourishing

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In many regards, this article reflects on our path as Appreciative coaches and authors. In our own lives and with our clients, we have gradually broadened our view of what is possible in life. We have journeyed over the past 30 years from a limited perspective of life (satisfied with surviving and recovering from hardships and thwarted dreams) to a belief that we as humans intrinsically have the capacity to be not only resilient in life but also to thrive and flourish. We define flourishing as a state in which a person feels persistent positive emotions and experiences excellent physical, mental and interpersonal health.¹ We are happy to report that we now live in this state for the most part as do many of our clients.

Perhaps this capacity to flourish can be best understood in light of some very illuminating discoveries made in the field of Positive Psychology. First, one of the best ways to help people in need is to focus on positive aspects of life. Second, experiences that lead to positive emotion cause negative emotion to dissipate quickly. Third, a person's strengths and virtues act as buffers against the impact of misfortune or psychological disorders and are keys to building a person's resilience.² It appears that at the core of a person's sense of well-being is the presence of positive feelings.

The Appreciative Approach

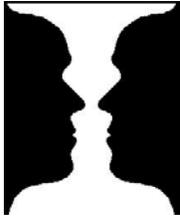
As we sought to expand our own consciousness and beliefs about what is possible in our lives and those of our clients, we were significantly aided by three profound shifts in our perceptions: a shift from problems to solutions, a shift from negative to positive, and a shift from what we don't want to what we do want. These shifts were precipitated by our research and practice of an Appreciative way of coaching our clients. This approach is based on a highly successful change strategy used with organizations worldwide called Appreciative Inquiry. At its very core is the philosophy that inquiry into and dialogue about an individual's (or organization's) strengths, successes, hopes and dreams is in itself a transformational process.

The first shift in perception we made was from looking at the world and ourselves through the dull and incomplete lens of problems and deficits (learned from our culture, societal institutions and families) to seeing the fullness of life through appreciative and positive eyes. Yes there are problems in life but that is only part of the story. There are also infinite possibilities for hope, joy and excitement in our present and future. We realized at a spiritual level that humans are not problems to be fixed nor are they deficient in some way. Rather we are mysteries to be appreciated. Our lives are made up of endless solutions, not problems.

¹ Pearsall, P. (2003). *The Beethoven Factor: The New Positive Psychology of Hardiness, Happiness, Healing and Hope*, p.xx. Charlottesville, PA: Hampton Roads Publ. Co., Inc.

² Seligman, M. E. P. (2003). Forward: The past and future of Positive Psychology. In Keyes, C. L. M., & Haidt, J. (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well Lived* (pp. xi-xx). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

The second shift in perception we underwent was to realize the power of focusing on the positive instead of the negative. As mentioned above, there is now abundant research on the benefits of incorporating positive beliefs and thoughts into one's daily life. Over the years, we've worked to steadily increase the amount of positive affect in our lives and in the lives of our clients. What we pay attention to grows and if we spend much of our time focused on the perceived negative in our lives, our level of energy, hope and belief in the future languishes. It is focus on the positive that creates great momentum for change as it brings us abundant energy to risk moving forward.



The final shift in perception we integrated into our thinking is closely related to the other two: a shift from what we don't want in our lives to what we do want. As humans, we are "hard wired" to only be able to see or think about one subject at a time. If you look at the figure, you will experience a shift in perception. You will either see two faces or a vase but not both at the same time. You must choose and direct your attention to one or the other. It is the same with our thoughts. If we are thinking about what we don't want, that is where our attention has gone. We can no longer think about what we want.

Our brain cannot hold both thoughts at the same time. So every time we think about what we don't want or about the problems we must fix or the deficiencies in our character, we eliminate the possibility of focusing on what we do want. We inadvertently move in the direction of languishing instead of flourishing.

Tools for the Journey

These powerful shifts of perception and energy came about for us through the steady application of five appreciative principles: the Constructionist, Simultaneity, Anticipatory, Poetic and Positive Principles. These principles form the foundation of a worldview that helps us understand and act in a manner that builds on what is right about us, our abilities and our circumstances. They are a philosophical base that with practice make us resilient and inspire us to be our best selves.

As we improved and expanded our understanding of what it means to have resilience and well being in our lives, we identified five tools we consistently used with our clients to help them take that next step toward building flourishing lives. These five tools stem from the five core principles that underlie the Appreciative approach to our work. The tools are Appreciative language (Constructionist Principle), art of the question (Simultaneity Principle), the power of vision (Anticipatory Principle), pivoting (Poetic Principle) and positive support (Positive Principle).

The Tools in Action

The Constructionist Principle, as the name implies, expresses the view that how we view the world constructs or creates our world. That is, what we pay attention to and are curious about forms the foundation for how we take action in creating our future. This means that how we communicate, interact, create symbols and make use of metaphors with one another creates our reality. While we may be able to define the physical world in objective terms, our social and psychic worlds are subjective; that is, we create meaning and reality

through human communication and language.³ This is a liberating view. When we understand that our language and metaphors actually create our reality, we can use this as a catalyst for personal and professional change

Because language is the medium in which we construct our reality, it is the primary tool that we can use to facilitate change. We can begin by paying attention to the way we describe our circumstances and our possibilities to note if we are using appreciative language or language that describes problems or deficits. We can then make changes to the use of more life enhancing language. This may sound like a simplistic endeavor, but we have found through personal experience that the language of problem solving and deficit is engrained through our cultural upbringing. While it can be challenging, it is possible to make a change through conscious practice.

Mary's⁴ story exemplifies the Constructionist Principle and her change to more positive language and a more positive perspective.

Mary was a professional who excelled in her work with clients, but who came to coaching because she and her mentor were not able to help her achieve the required monthly billable hours that were expected in a thriving business. In explaining her circumstances, Mary described how unproductive and poor she was at project management and how life circumstances prevented her from achieving the needed billable hours. She was frustrated and demoralized when she first met her coach. Both her language and, thus her attention, was on all the things she couldn't do or did wrong. Her coach began by asking Mary to describe the things she loved to do and events where she was successful. Her language gradually changed; it became more positive and more affirming of who she was and what she did right. Over time, Mary's demeanor also began to change; she was more spirited, she smiled and she reported feeling more alive.

The *Simultaneity Principle* underscores the power of the present in effecting change. Inquiry and change are not really separate moments in time but happen simultaneously. The questions we ask "laser" attention in a certain direction, intended or not, and sow the seeds of change. What we discover through our questions becomes the linguistic material for the stories we use to conceive, talk about and construct our future. Asking the "right" question can lead to an *aha* experience which can cause a shift in perspective, like a twist of a kaleidoscope, so that a new view appears, freeing us from the tyranny of our past or fear of the future.

As questions literally create the path of inquiry and change, developing the *art of asking questions* is a key tool or skill in the Appreciative approach. These are not just any questions, but questions that are carefully crafted to create a joyfully focused state of mind as we consider and answer them. These questions grab our attention because our motivation to explore them supersedes whatever is going on in the moment. See the insert for examples of these types of questions. Note that these questions are meant to engage and that they have the following characteristics:

³ Sociologists Berger and Luckmann initially introduced this view in their work *Social Construction of Reality* (1966) published by Doubleday.

⁴ We have changed the name of this client for confidentiality purposes.

- They express curiosity, not judgment.
- They are framed positively or are at least neutral.
- They are thought starters.
- They invite multiple answers rather than seeking the right answer.

Art of the Question

<u>Problem Solving Questions</u>	<u>Appreciative Questions</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's wrong with me? What's wrong with them? • Why can I never seem to learn? • Why do things never turn out the way I want? • What am I supposed to do now? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When have I been successful in the past? • What are my strengths & abilities? • What is my real desire or dream outcome for this situation? • What actions can I begin experimenting with?

Initially, Mary's attention was on what she was not able to do and was not achieving. Her coach helped her shift her attention by asking her questions about her abilities and preferences – questions like, "What do you love to do?" "When do you do your best work?" At first Mary was stumped by these questions. It had been a long time since her attention was on what was good in her life and work. But with the gentle persistence of her coach, Mary identified her successes and she was able to recall her love of her profession.

The *Anticipatory Principle* relates to our innate human capacity for anticipating the future. This ability to anticipate or imagine our future is one of the most important resources we have for individual change. Our images of the future guide our current behavior in the direction of that future. As Appreciative coaches, we want to redirect our clients from negative self-fulfilling prophecies ("Why bother? This always happens to me. I try but nothing changes. What choice do I have?") to positive expectations of what is to come ("I trust I can do this. I know what I want. I'm sowing seeds for the future. My intent is clear. It will come."). We can help identify a positive future by soliciting and listening for phrases that paint images of, and express longings for, a desired future. It is especially important to hold these positive expectations through times of doubt and mistrust, because we understand what a powerful creative force those images and expectations are in influencing what is to come.

The miracle question is a tool designed to help us describe a *vision* or picture of a preferred future. The question is carefully crafted to fire the imagination and is usually asked in this way: "Suppose that tonight, while you are sleeping, a miracle happens and the problem that has been troubling you sorts itself out overnight ... what would you see the next morning that would let you know the miracle has happened? What would you find yourself doing? What are others noticing?"⁵ Responses to the miracle question may not represent well-formed, realistic goals; rather they help point the way to a desired future.

⁵ The miracle question also comes from Solution Focused Brief Therapy. See Lethem, J. (2002). Brief Solution Focused Therapy. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 7(4), 189-192.

As Mary identified her skills, talents and successes, she began identifying elements of what was important to her and what she wanted in her future. Leaping forward to a future time, as in the miracle question, she was able to describe a job that used her talents in a way that brought her joy and allowed her to be successful. With that vision she was able to identify ways she was already living her desired future in her present work, and she identified other possibilities for work that existed in the company which she could discuss with her mentor. Over a short time, Mary was able to engage her mentor in assigning work that was better suited to her talents, and she was able to restructure her day so that she used prime time to do this work. Gradually, with this shift in focus to what she desired and her new actions based on her vision, her billable hours began to improve.

The *Poetic Principle* affirms that we are continually writing and re-writing the stories of our lives. Through the choices we make, we find that the experiences of our past, present and future are endless sources of learning and interpretation, just like reading a good poem. With the Poetic Principle, we find new realities can flow from a reinterpretation of our life story or circumstances. Therefore, when our life journey does not take a straight path and new situations arise to challenge us, we can apply this principle to help us shift our perspective and find new possibilities. This is especially important since the Constructionist Principle affirms that we create what we pay attention to. This occurs whether the object of our attention is positive or negative.

Pivoting is the conscious act of turning attention from what we do not want or what is wrong to what we do want or what is good. It is like a basketball player making a quick turn or pivot on the gymnasium floor to move past an obstacle towards a more favorable direction. Pivoting can help us turn our attention from what we do not like in a situation or what makes us uncomfortable in that situation to discovering what is already good there or what we want in place of the discomfort. Implicit in the negative statements is a desire for something better. When we find ourselves or others talking about the negative aspects of a situation, we can ask, "What you don't want is x, so what do you want instead?" or the question can take the form, "What you don't like is x, so what is good in the situation?" Identifying the positive counterbalances the feeling of lack or other negative emotions and empowers us to see possible alternatives.

Like the rest of us, Mary's story of her path to change had its difficult moments and challenges. Setbacks occurred where she doubted her abilities or her resolve to create her dream job. During the coaching engagement, Mary's mother, who lived in another state, became ill and Mary wanted to be with her. Her absence from work caused her billable time to drop below acceptable levels. At first Mary was overwhelmed and dismayed by these circumstances, but then she pivoted. She realized that time for family was a value that needed to be part of any job, and she resolved that this was her opportunity to truly find a dream job. She realized that she had been fitting herself to the job, and she now wanted a job that truly fit her. Mary gained the freedom and permission to see herself in a holistic way – one not limited by past actions, current stresses, or future fears.

The *Positive Principle* is an expression of all the concrete ways we can focus on the power of the positive. Research has shown that momentum for change requires large amounts of

positive affect and social bonding in order to succeed.⁶ Positive emotions are contagious; positive inquiry moves us towards what we most desire. When we are in a positive mode, we act more effectively. To gain and maintain this positive mode, people need lots of positive feeling and positive social bonding to make lasting changes in their lives. A person's positive core expands as it is affirmed and appreciated by others. This positive emotion not only affects how we are today but also influences our ability to change and move towards a new future.

The principal tool related to the Positive Principle is to surround ourselves with *positive support* — with people who encourage us to use our best abilities, stay focused and keep heart. Whether family, friends, colleagues, counselors or a combination thereof, such supporters provide great encouragement, remind us of our talents and applaud our successes. They represent the Positive Principle in action.

At the onset of coaching, Mary had been so focused on the problems she was dealing with that she had few supporters around her. She felt that she did not want to trouble her friends or colleagues, and as she became more disconnected, she became more despondent – the Positive Principle in reverse! Gradually, working with her coach, she reconnected with those who cared about her. With their support and encouragement, she became more secure in herself. And as she discovered her talents, remembered her successes, and identified her dream job, she became happier and bolder. She searched for a job that used all her talents and incorporated her values. In the end, she maintained the strong relationship with her mentor, and with his support, found her dream job.

Choosing to Flourish

Mary's story is not unlike the stories many of us have to tell. She could not see how circumstances could improve, nor could she believe that she had the resources and ability to change them. Mary was bewildered by how life seemed to have gotten out of control and she spent her time attempting to understand the problems in order to grasp how to fix them. With her coach, she shifted her perceptions. Just as we had learned to do in our own lives, Mary learned to view her life and work through an appreciative lens. She began paying attention to what was positive and steadily increased her energy and momentum for change. By directing her attention to what her heart desired, she was able to take action to create what she truly wanted in her life.

We and our clients are living examples that the journey from resilience and well-being to a life of flourishing is indeed possible. What is exciting to realize is that we as human beings now have the tools and knowledge to lead ourselves and others along this path.⁷ The willingness to change is the starting point and first step to take on the path of self-realization.

⁶ A basic principle and premise of Appreciative Inquiry.

⁷ We suggest our book, Orem, S. L., Binkert, J., & Clancy, A. L. (2007). *Appreciative Coaching: A Positive Process for Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, as a resource for facilitating positive personal and professional change.