

# Appreciative Inquiry and Diversity: The Path to Relational Eloquence<sup>1</sup>

**Ilene C. Wasserman**

[iwasserman@icwconsulting.com](mailto:iwasserman@icwconsulting.com)

*This article describes practices that foster new ways of engaging deeply embedded historical differences such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation and faith affiliation that acknowledge each other and create new forms of relating. The principles of Appreciative Inquiry along with the theoretical framework and practical tools of the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), were used to guide reflective conversations with groups exploring such differences in dialogue to identify these practices. The inquiry and reflection itself had a heliotropic or generative impact.*

The only thing certain is the future as the past continues to redefine itself.  
Carlos Torres (2003)

An attorney is waiting to meet a client in the lobby of an exclusive hotel. Someone approaches him and asks him to call him a cab. The attorney, an African American in his thirties is mistaken for the bellman.

The facilitator of a planning retreat for a municipality encounters participants who appear to be reticent. One is Jewish and the other is Jordanian of Palestinian descent. They slowly approach each other over the course of the session only to discover that each anticipated the other's negative sentiments.

New computers were ordered for each department chair of a major medical facility. All but one received a new computer. She, the only woman who happened to be Caribbean, received a refurbished one because "there were none left".

In each of these encounters people are experiencing a discrepancy between the story they have of themselves and one that another has of them; they make a different interpretation of the encounter or "episode". Given the complexity of our social environment and the diversity of our encounters, these discrepancies are understandable, almost predictable. We create a story of the other, of relationships and of episodes that are informed by echoes of the past: some we have lived ourselves, some that we have inherited. Sometimes we are in tune with how these stories influence our encounters, sometimes not. Engaging diversity requires us to sharpen our skills in relational eloquence: the capacity to be with another's story along with our own.

Our stories of ourselves and each other are also greatly impacted by the cultural trope – the dominant discourse. Pick up any newspaper on any day and you can find stories of people from one group blaming, marginalizing, even seeking the annihilation of people from

another group. While each might resonate with a different audience, they all share a common meta-story. That story is one of inter-group opposition and conflict which perpetuates a familiar pattern reinforcing the commitment to “my” story over “yours”. People do things that violate their own moral and aesthetic codes, “because we ‘have to’; because of who ‘they’ are”.

Yet, stories exist in history and in our current lives that exemplify the ways in which we can engage seemingly irreconcilable differences and formerly intractable conflicts; stories that may seem to contradict each other in ways that expand what we imagine to be possible.

As a practitioner working with organizations to foster cultures that value diversity and inclusion, I noticed an habituated pattern to the public discourse. The pattern of the narrative was a story of “missing the mark in addressing structural inequalities and oppression” meeting the story of “haven’t we dealt with this already?” These polarities were often disconnected from one another, with one emphasizing the past and the other impatient to move on. I found that when people were able to learn about the different historical narratives, significant, often transformative changes resulted in how people engaged with one another and the value they were able to bring to their work together. When people felt fully acknowledged for their version of the past they were more motivated to create new, shared narratives of the future.

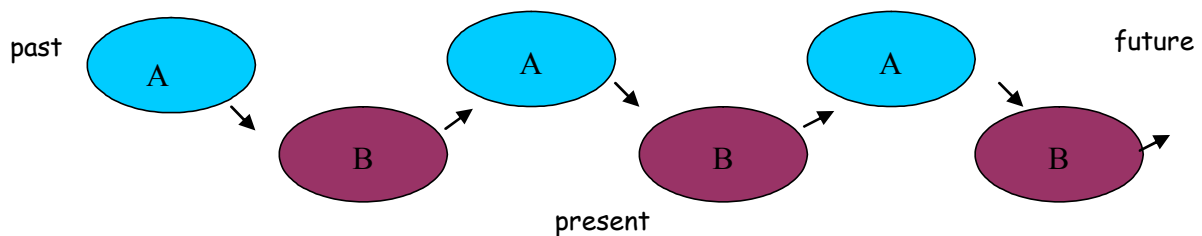
My research, first for my doctoral dissertation, and since with various client groups, explores which ways of engaging ignite and encourage people to be curious about each other’s perspectives, and to value and consider those perspectives. I designed an appreciative collaborative inquiry which wove together aspects of action inquiry research methodologies such as participatory action research (Park, 1999, 2000), cooperative inquiry (Baldwin, 2001; Kasl & Yorks, 2002; Reason & Bradbury, 2002), action inquiry (Torbert, 1991), and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivastva, 1995; Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 1999). My collaborators in my original research were two different groups. Each had been meeting voluntarily for the purpose of exploring identity group differences (specifically race, gender and faith group affiliation). Together, we explored defining moments in the life of the groups’ experiences when members came to understand their social group story with new meaning in relationship with other’s stories. These relationships were enriched not just by new information, but also by new forms of relating.

The process we used consisted of members first sharing stories based on what they considered to be their shared, defining transformative dialogic moments. Then we reflected on how their individual and collective meaning emerged in their process of relating. In so doing, new layers of meaning were construed!

We used reflective tools from the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Cronen, Pearce, & Lannamann, 1982; Pearce, 2001, 2004) to guide the group reflective process. CMM is both a theoretical framework based on a social constructionist approach to communication and a set of practical tools that help explore and unpack how people in relationships coordinate meaning. Meaning is continuously being construed in the back and forth processes in conversations, in our social encounters and other kinds of communication events. Rather than communication being the transmission of meaning, communicating is *doing something*; making meaning. The key concepts of CMM are coordination, coherence

and mystery. The concept of *coordination* highlights that we are continuously making meaning in how we respond to and elicit responses. Coordination may be smooth or dissonant, intentionally or unintentionally. Coherence and mystery address what we do to manage meaning. We create *coherence* by the way we frame our narratives which in turn are influenced by the limited frame of our own experiences and perspectives. The concept of *mystery* reminds us that given the complexity of our world, we can only know a piece of the story. There is always more to know and people to learn from. Our stories of ourselves and of others are always incomplete and biased, limited by our own perspective, history and purposes. Stories that differ from our own are full of rich possibilities of expanding how we make meaning.

Among the tools within CMM there are four particular models that help reflective people amplify different aspects of our encounters.



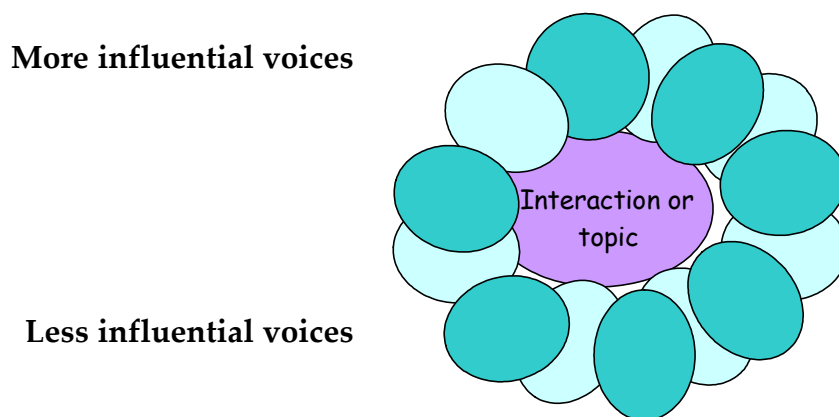
The Serpentine Model helps us identify how we are making sense in the flow of our interactions, in the context of the past, present and future. One person says or does something and the other person responds. The first person then responds to the initial response and so on, until you have a flow of conversation. There is a before, an after and a sequence. Meaning is created by the process – the movement from A to B to A – as well as where boundaries are drawn between past and future. In other words, which histories inform and what futures are imagined.

The Serpentine Model also illuminates the choices we have at each turn to create the future we want to live. We choose how we interpret the intention of the past and the motivations for the future.

I used the Serpentine Model recently with a client to amplify the different meanings people were making of an episode. The precipitating event was an email exchange at work. An African American woman perceived the message sent as racist; the sender intended it as a joke. For the woman who received the e-mail, the message was part of an historic pattern of frequent and intense derogatory communication acts.

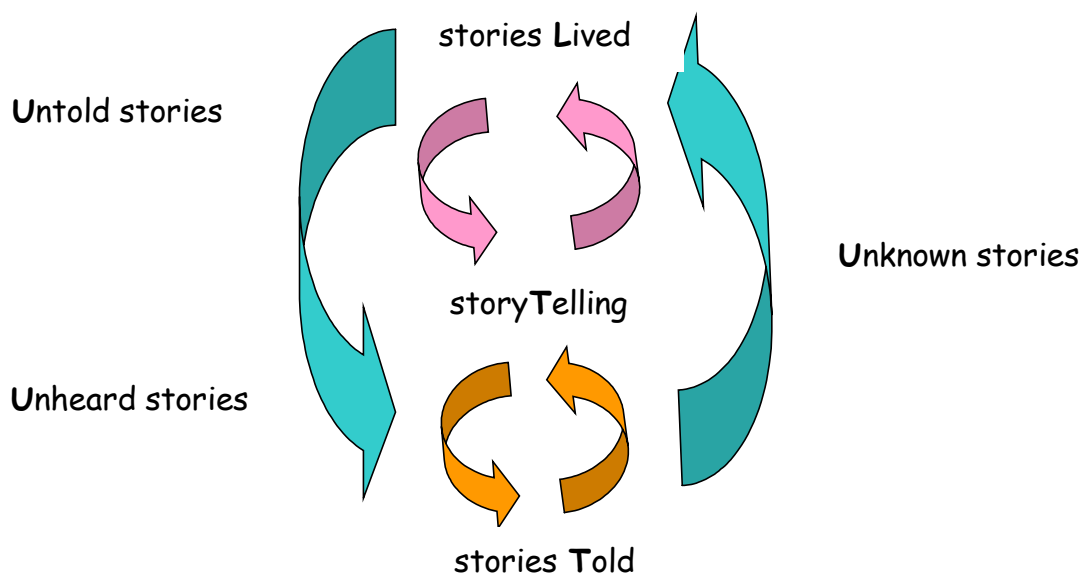
The Daisy Model (next page) depicts the multiple conversations that provide context or reference as the focus of interpretation. The center of the daisy is the interaction or topic we are addressing. The petals around the daisy are the different voices that influence how we the meaning we make and how we respond in relationship with the focus in the center. The petals on the top depict those stories that we give more influence. These petals can change places. Making our petals explicit enhances coordination and coherence.

When I have used the Daisy Model, I usually begin by identifying the different petals that influence how I am approaching the interaction or topic at hand. Together, you and I might talk about the different voices that populate our petals. We might even identify what other



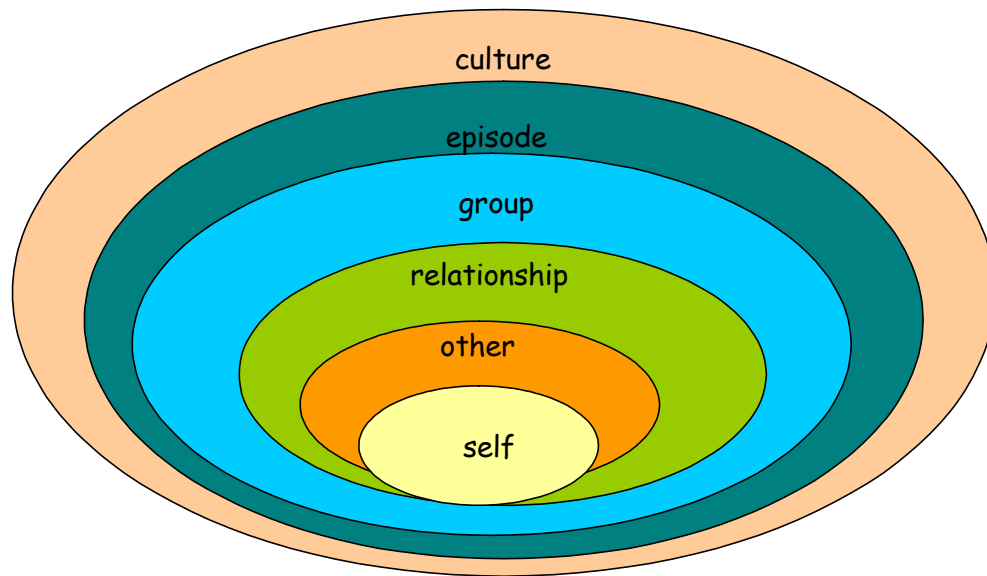
perspectives and voices would be consequential to add to how we construe meaning. Using the model brings us together to create shared meaning.

The LUUUTT or storytelling model is an acronym that stands for stories Lived, stories Untold, stories Unheard, stories Unknown, stories Told and storyTelling. The LUUUTT model invites us to explore the different forms that narratives take by guiding us to identify how we know what we know, what we don't know and what else we may need to find out. Sharing stories and exploring what might be unheard, unknown, or even unallowed or unavailable, opens places previously obscured by mystery and enhances coherence and



coordination. We are then in a better place to explore alternative narratives and new patterns of engaging.

The Hierarchy Model describes the layers of contexts that we foreground or background in how we tell our story and make our interpretations. Meaning is shaped by the order or nesting of the contexts (e.g., individual, group, cultural, relational) we use to construe meaning in a particular episode. The particular layers and their relative position may change in relationship to the situation. Coordinating meaning between and among people is affected by how we contextualize meaning.



Using the Hierarchy Model in our conversations creates opportunities to explore how different contexts confer different meaning. Applying the model to our conversations creates the opportunity to explore how we can create new meanings by playing with telling the story from a different context; and enhancing the coordination of meaning and coherence by weaving our different stories together.

A focus on communication processes, particularly from a social construction perspective, shifts the spotlight from the individualistic cognitive perspective (or what happens in my head) to the between or relational arena, or what we make together. Using these models as tools enables people to expand how they are making meaning to include and engage with the processes of others whose stories differ significantly from their own.

### How to Use the CMM Model to Foster Appreciating Differences

There are many ways to use these tools. One group I worked with began with the Serpentine model. One person started telling the story of the team's relationship. Another added background perspective that predated the experience of the first speaker. A third responded with the familiar, "Ohhhh, so that is why we have the policy that required us to..." The telling of an untold story deepened the meaning of the policy. At that point the group located a daisy at the juncture of the creation of the policy and elaborated on the various conversations, stories and perspectives that informed the interpretation of the policy. Further, the LUUUTT model was used to deepen the team's understanding of the policy by highlighting some implicit assumptions.

Coordination of meaning among groups is often influenced by different experiences of the same episode. Your experiences are likely to differ from my experiences and consequently your stories, your petals on the daisy, your boundaries on the serpentine will differ from mine. A common pattern of engagement is:

A: Haven't we finished that conversation?

B: Then why does the pattern continue to repeat itself?

We can step back from this pattern and look at the logic structure. One person's logic structure has talking about it being necessary for movement. The other's logic structure is to

just move on. This pattern was evident in one of the teams I worked with. Cindy, a white Christian woman, believed that not engaging in political conversations was important to preserving relationships.

*One of the fears I have is I don't want to have a political conversation. I don't want to hear they did this and we did that... I don't want to hear that anymore – then tell me why you don't like them and they don't like you. Let's move on from there. I do want to go deeper in our conversations but I don't want to go into a he said/she said.*

Her colleague Fatima cannot remove politics, the culture and group identity from interpersonal interactions. In her logic structure, these factors always influence what is happening between and among people in conversations.

*Well that is the difference between here and there. Out in the real world you can't get away from the politics of it. We give politics a bad name. But if you really look at it, it's an interaction among groups of people. So it is very difficult to isolate it on an intellectual level and leave it there. If we continue to walk away from it, we will continue to be dissatisfied with our conversations and wonder, 'did I really say what I wanted to say?'*

The opportunity to reflect enables us to take a third party perspective on how meaning is being made in the turns and processes of our interactions. Together we can identify what gives life to our engagements, the partnerships we want to create and how we can create interactions that move us in that direction. Communication, from a CMM perspective, is performative: meaning is made by what people do and by what they say, rather than what people are talking about. The shared reflection is an opportunity to create new forms of relating together in the doing itself.

### **What We Learned about Engaging Diversity from an AI Perspective**

Appreciative Inquiry helps us to transcend what we have previously known, and the way we have known it, by creating new meaning in relationship with others through storytelling. The focus of our storytelling is intentional: we talk about what we want to amplify and grow. We know from our experience that what we choose to talk about is consequential. In this case, the topic was transformative dialogic moments in the engagement of diverse social identities. Yet, it is important to be mindful that regardless of the topic, diversity is always present. In this inquiry, we highlighted how to foster diversity and appreciative engagement.

- People want to be known. We learned that when we engage fully with our deeply embedded identity stories, people want to, need to and appreciate being known. The past must be acknowledged before moving on to the future. Some of us are more aware of our stories than others. Typically, those whose stories have been marginalized or muffled by the dominant discourse that are more present to their defining narratives than those whose story is echoed in the norms of everyday life.

- People want to name themselves. We learned that each of us wants to define ourselves in relationship with others, rather than be defined by others. Often in the effort to understand others, we attribute all of what we know about that group to them, disregarding what they ascribe to themselves.

- Pausing for reflection is critical to noticing and transformative learning. Reflection is what Gergen would call the supplemental action that is essential to ignite the possibilities of

what might otherwise be fleeting moments. (1994) The reflection process itself creates new perspectives and meaning that are transformative, opportunities that might otherwise be lost in the turn of the next moment. This is particularly significant when the group focuses on moments that are confusing or troubling and consequently, avoided. When the groups engage these moments, the shared reflection is more likely to create transformative dialogic moments.

*In the process of group reflection with an appreciatively designed process, each person's story of self expands with the contextualizing frame of being in relationship with the story of an other. Together, we create an umbrella narrative that encompasses both. The capacity to engage with others in this way is relationship eloquence.*

### Summary

We come together with stories and narratives that influence what we create in the encounter, the situation, the relationship and each other. Picture the space of meeting as full of multiple voices, guided by multiple myths, anecdotes and narratives. All impact how we enact our rules for engagement and the consequences of our meeting. The capacity to engage with the story of another, one which is in historic conflict with our own, requires a level of coordination that is quite complex. We must suspend judgment, the need to be right in order to engage our wide-eyed curiosity and desire to learn. The desire and willingness to unpack and explore these multiple layers of sense-making tools, to reflect on what we are doing in relationship with one another, helps us to transcend long-standing stories of mistrust, even demonizing those whose stories are different from our own, and invites us to create new possibilities together.

Transformative dialogic moments are created in the process of telling each other our stories, in the engaging of our hearts. They are a bifurcation point – the meeting of meanings that creates new meanings and new, shared future narratives. While we may not be able to plan or predict those special moments when we are forever changed in the engagement with another, we can be intentional about fostering the favorable conditions to do so. Being present to you such that I acknowledge your humanity, your emotions and your experiences expands the perimeter of my story. Further, seeing my story through the reflection of your eyes affords me the opportunity to reflect on my deepest and most fundamental sense of what I know to be “true”. Feeling heard, I am open to consider alternatives. Focused, intentional reflection, using reflective tools that enable us to stand together on the boundaries of our shared encounters fosters transformative learning by reformulating what came before, reshaping our stories of what was and what is and, together, imagining the potential for what is possible.

### FOOTNOTE

<sup>1</sup>Christine Oliver coined the term systemic eloquence in her writings on the application of the CMM model. I was inspired by her use of eloquence use the term relational eloquence.

### REFERENCES

Baldwin, M. (2001). “Working together, learning together: Co-operative inquiry in the

development of complex practice by teams of social workers". In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of Action Research*. London, England: Sage Publications.

Bray, J. (2000). *Collaborative Inquiry in Practice: Action, Reflection, and Making Meaning*. Thousand Oaks, California.

Cooperrider, D., Frank Barrett and Suresh Srivastva. (1995). "Social Construction and Appreciative Inquiry: A Journey in Organizational Theory". In D.M. Hosking, P. Dachler, K. Gergen (Ed.), *Management and Organization: Relational Alternatives to Individualism*. Avebury Press.

Cronen, V. E., Pearce, W. B., & Lannamann, J. (Eds.). (1982). *The Coordinated Management of Meaning: A theory of communication*. New York: Harper and Row.

Gergen, K. (1994). *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Gergen, K. (1999). *An Invitation to Social Construction*. London, England: Sage Publications.

Mezirow, J. a. A. (2000). *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco. Ca: Jossey-Bass.

Oliver, C. (1996). *Systemic eloquence. Human Systems: The Journal of Systems Consultation and Management*, 7(4), 247-264

Pearce, W. B. (2001). *A brief introduction to the coordinated management of meaning (CMM)*. Unpublished manuscript.

Pearce, W. B. (2004). "The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)". In B.G. (Ed.), *Theorizing about communication and culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sampson, E. E. (1993). *Celebrating the other: A dialogic account of human nature*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational realities: The construction of life through language*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Torres, C. (2003.) *Panel presentation at International Transformative Learning Conference*, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.

Wasserman, I. (2004). *Discursive processes that foster dialogic moments: Transformation in the engagement of social identity group differences in dialogue*. (UMI number or Fielding Graduate University.)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a few people whose influence and collegueship have been consequential to this article and key "voice petals" on my daisy. I want to acknowledge Barnett Pearce, who along with his colleague, Vernon Cronen developed the Coordinated Management of Meaning. Barnett's influence is apparent in this article and he continues to be a generous and important conversation partner as we expand the applications of CMM in organizations and communities. Beth Fisher Yoshida is a key partner in exploring how we can help people make sense and thus make magic with the CMM model in practical, accessible ways. Finally, Ken Gergen, who continues to inspire me to write more about CMM for the AI community.

# Beyond Conflict to healing, forgiveness and growth

(re-printed from AI Practitioner, August 2002)

**Anne Radford**

[editor@aipractitioner.com](mailto:editor@aipractitioner.com)

Healing and growth can seem elusive when conflict has been going on for a long time; forgiveness and growth unlikely when attitudes have hardened or memories of traumas are still very real. Yet where people have been able to have different conversations they have gone beyond conflict.

The first part is about journeys where there has been much at stake or where individuals only had a faint hope for some kind of positive outcome. Some stories have been told publicly while others have been discussed off the record.

The second part looks at the patterns in these examples. It also looks at the crucial role of the person who works with people in conflict: the therapist, consultant or ombudsperson. The people I spoke with about their work brought together a number of disciplines, including the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, to help their clients go beyond conflict.

## **Personal Journeys – Public and Private**

### **The Falkands war**

Simon Weston was severely injured in the Falklands War. (His progress has been documented in TV programmes and written interviews.) However, several years later, after many operations for his injuries and assistance to deal with his rehabilitation, he decided he needed to meet the Argentine pilot who bombed the ship he was in. "I had to face up to this spectre", he said. "I had stopped healing and I needed to move on."

### **Bomb explosion**

Jo Tufnell<sup>1</sup>, whose father was killed when a bomb exploded at the Conservative Party Conference in 1984, met up with the person who planted the bomb, Patrick Magee. (They agreed to be filmed by the BBC). They made contact after Patrick had been released from jail as part of the Good Friday agreement. "I decided some peace can come from this [the death of her father]" said Jo. "I needed to be confronted with this pain [of someone affected by his actions] so that I can stay human," said Patrick.

In South Africa and Israel, there have been similar improbable pairs meeting up. Through conversation and personal contact there was the hope of healing.

### **Experiences with torture**

Colleagues say that people who have experienced torture in Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe are being helped to heal their experiences in innovative ways. Instead of concentrating on the pain, they are addressing that pain through treatment programmes using affirmative approaches and honouring the person's religious and cultural background.