

Seven Learnings from more than 50 Years of Taking Dreams Seriously

These stories overlap with an article I wrote some years ago about coaching people using Appreciative Inquiry. The life-designing process that the Castle Process builds upon appeared before Appreciative Inquiry did—and it also contributed to the creation of Appreciative Inquiry. So these are stories about learning and coaching from both perspectives.

These seven learnings emerge from more than fifty years of working with campers, with students, and then with individual clients and with groups of workshop participants.

I first wrote about these seven learnings in response to a request from two colleagues to explain how I use the Appreciative Inquiry model as I coach people in Life Designing.

I began work on the original article by asking clients and participants to respond to three questions:

*What do you remember?
What did we do well?
What difference did it make?*

Some of these people worked with me in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, while others have worked with me more recently. Some have worked with me once; some have worked with me several times; some work with me every few years when they are at a new crossroads. Their roles ranged from student to CEO. One

became a CEO; two were already CEOs.

Some of these clients have agreed that I may quote them and name them. These kind people are **Shelagh Aitken, Frank Barrett, Dianne Draper, Biff Folberth, Jasenka Gojsic, George Levvy, Mark Nixon, Ilya Sloutsky, and Robin Stidworthy**. Their contributions are in italics. I am deeply grateful to each of them.

1. Learn with Partners

My work with the process that I now call the Castle Process began in 1975 when my friend Nancy Fox introduced me to two books: **What Color Is Your Parachute?** and **Where Do I Go From Here With My Life?**

The authors—Dick Bolles and John Crystal—became my first two mentors in this field. Before I met them, I began working my way through their books.

When I found it difficult to keep going on my own, I gathered a group of Learning Partners so we could go through the process together. We took turns at presenting the next chapter of **Where Do I Go From Here With My Life?** at our weekly meetings. We encouraged and coached each other. Chet, Cindy, Don, and I made it all the way through the process—even though others did not.

Although I still believe that Learning Partners help most people through this process, I do know that some people do this process on their own—using the Guide as their Partner.

A great example of this is the man who contacted me via my website to ask for an updated guide to share with his children.

His was one of the occasional requests that convinced me to start the long process of creating this 40th Anniversary Edition.

Mark: I did what I'll call "the Castle exercise" in the late 1980's. I was 26 years old.... At the time I was becoming comfortable working at a large public corporation. The Castle exercise illuminated a dormant preference—my true desire was to run a business in the electronics industry.

Mark took the risk, and his invention was successful. The company is still going well.

Mark: Needless to say, I personally judge the Castle exercise was worthwhile as viewed over a quarter of a century later.

Mark's focus also helped him get through the Castle process:

Mark: The user has to take it seriously and focus on it exclusively when doing the exercise. This is necessary to enable them to draw out their feelings.

2. Start with Success

With that first group in 1975, I learned to Start with Success. We were all struggling with how to change our lives, so it was tempting to begin our evenings with shared complaints. But that just made us feel worse. So we shifted to sharing first what was going well. Then we could deal with the other stuff more effectively.

We continued the focus on success by telling Success Stories—stories of times when you are doing what you enjoy most and what you do best. From

these stories we gathered skills, traits, and values.

Dianne: The story-telling aspect of the process was interesting . . . drawing out the essence and patterns in a seemingly non-specific stream of consciousness. The end result of the story was another set of sticky notes up on the wall, revealing the positive elements of the story, reflecting the qualities I could draw upon for the times to come.

Years later, when I first met the Appreciative Inquiry approach, I found both a familiar theory and a familiar practice. I now start with success by asking for what my friend Sushma Sharma calls a High Dream.

What is the best that can happen as we—the learner and the coach work together? What are we working toward?

We need to clarify that the learner can coach me in how best to offer support—or challenge. And sometimes I can notice the learner facing a question in a new way that I can learn from—and use again with someone else.

We begin with the High Dream as a guide toward the result of the Serious Dream. And then we share the Success Stories.

3. Every Negative Assumes a Positive—Choose the Positive

About 70 years ago, I was walking to school with my friend Biff. He was describing some things that had gone wrong before he left home that day. And then, as we passed the third house up the street from my house (I remember the spot clearly) Biff said this:

I figure if a day starts this bad, it can only get better.

Although we start with success, I have learned that ignoring the negative does not work. That's one of the key points about Appreciative Inquiry: we appreciate the whole range from bad to good, just as we do when we appreciate art or music or theatre.

That kind of appreciating involves appreciating the whole range of experiences—and then **choosing the positive** ones. Just as Biff did that day on the way to school. The memory of Biff's choice has helped me through many bad-start mornings since then.

So, I start with success and I work with the whole range of the person's experience. I encourage the person to create a positive out of the negative. I have learned that whenever you describe something in negative terms you can also describe it in positive terms. Every negative assumes—and creates—a positive.

Shelagh: I was listened to, my assumptions and beliefs (mostly set in a negative framework) taken seriously enough to be discussed and challenged.... I may not always follow 'best practice' but I know what it is, and, having experienced it, I know I can find it again.

4. Ask Simple Questions

Although I have created dozens of different exercises and questions over the past fifty years, I have learned that the simplest questions are the most powerful ones—especially when, in Appreciative Inquiry terms, the question brings out the life-giving

energy of the person. Here are seven of my favourite questions:

1. What is the best that can happen?
2. What makes your heart sing?
3. When do you dance?
4. Why not?
5. What are you doing for the world?
6. And what else?
7. What is your passionate purpose?

Jasenska: I became aware of my passionate purpose. It became my reference point and criteria for selection of opportunities.

In the expanded **Castle Guide**, I'm adding more good questions awaiting your answers.

5. You Have the Answer

Frank: That workshop with you and Herb Shepard in 1979 was good for me; I still have the collage I created then.

Herb Shepard was my other mentor in this field. Herb defined life planning as planning life-worth-living. His question was simple: *What makes your life worth living?*

Herb believed that people knew the answer to that question—and that if we as workshop trainers or coaches just keep quiet long enough, you will say your answer.

I remember the moment in my own life-designing process when I chose to live in Cleveland (having spent most of my life there already). *Hey, if I LIVED in Cleveland, I would join the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus.* So, I did. And a few months later I was in New York with the Chorus, singing Beethoven's Ninth in Carnegie Hall.

I am occasionally tempted—and even more often invited—to give advice, to give **my** answer. I have learned (from some experiences of giving in to those temptations and invitations) that it is my responsibility to encourage **your** answers.

You already have the answers within you. I often encourage clients to use a journal to find those answers.

Jasenka: Journaling is so powerful a mechanism for reflection and for building a repository of thoughts, ideas, dreams, visions, problems, concepts. Journaling helps me take myself more seriously!

My task is to encourage my clients to appreciate the past, the present, and the future by asking themselves: *What do I do well? What do I enjoy doing? What is working well? Who do I enjoy being with? What needs doing in the world? What is my purpose? What is my passion?*

George: The whole way of thinking; the experience of re-examining my life and finding it far better than I had thought; and then the experience of being able to take hold of my life and change it. These things so reshaped my view of things that I now operate very differently in my life.

6. Life Designing is a Lifetime Process

In the late 80s, a client came to see me about moving on from his career as a psychiatrist. After several months of coaching, he began a marketing job for a small business. Within two years he was back to prepare for his next step: marketing for a national charity. Several years later, he

moved on to head a major charity. Now he is a consultant to charities and other organisations. At each transition, we have had a conversation as he designs the next phase of his life.

George: We reinforced the bits of me that were rather new in my life: that saw myself more positively and that felt I could shape my life in future. And somehow, we answered the question that mattered most of all: what was my long-term goal? It still seems miraculous to me that I then realised it in less than seven years.

In late 1978 I worked with my friend Biff and his wife Liz for a long afternoon.

Biff: I remember your being helpful in documenting how Liz and I spent our week-- made me understand how I spent my days, the family time, the professional time, etc

A couple years later I sent out a request for feedback from my recent clients.

Biff: Talk to Walt. Conclusion—stay at DW.... Tremendously right decision.... Result—1982 income is seven times what I was earning when I talked to Walt.... I won't give you full credit Walt—only part credit.

And just a couple months ago, Biff was in touch again, asking about how to share this process with a group of friends who are considering what to do in the so-called *retired* stage of life when the questions often shift from *What do I want for myself* and *How do I get it?* to questions like *What do I want for others?* and *How do I give it?*

7. Take Dreams Seriously

In 1980, I created the poster-based approach to life designing that I published in 1982 as **How High is Your Castle?** and then in 1986 as **A Goal Is A Dream Taken Seriously**.

I developed that wonderful statement in the late 70s and **taking dreams seriously** has become my life's work. My work is to listen to the client's stories and to help the client listen to those stories: the past successes, the future dreams, and the present possibilities.

Ilya: I remember that it was a very motivating part of that session in Edinburgh in 2014. Thanks for that. A great part. This was the idea I cited many times after I had learned it from you. Thanks for that! A great gift!

Ilya came back to Scotland in early 2020 for another amazing two days clarifying his next Serious Dream. During which he coached me on how to avoid the upcoming onslaught of Covid.

Robin: I also remember your coming to our house and your memorable line to one of my friends, "But Robin wants to do this in Spain, not in the UK!" You were doing a better job of holding on to my dream than I was.

My clients do not always believe—at first—that they do have the answers within them and the dreams within them. In Appreciative Inquiry, we say that we will see it when we believe it. When my client expresses a tentative possibility, my gift to the client is to believe in that possibility. When my client risks toward the good, my gift is to believe in that risk. When my

client shares a dream, my gift is to take the dream seriously.

Frank: In a sense you're taking the Pygmalion principle to another level. The Pygmalion principle says that the other performs to my expectation of what they're capable of (based probably on impressions from previous experience). Here you're saying that I can shape someone's performance by listening to their ideal futures, that listening and asking them might help them articulate an ideal they never knew existed. In a sense you are helping the client become his or her own Pygmalion by changing self-expectation.

Taking dreams seriously requires sensitivity. Early in my career, I twice believed in a client's dream so strongly that she thought the dream was mine not hers. Yeats is my guide now:

*I have spread my dreams under your feet
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

Dianne: The experience with you gave me three things back: my voice, the belief in myself to use that voice, and, surprisingly, running—something I'd willingly given away without calculating the cost.

When a client came to see me in the 70s, I remember listening to his description of his boring work in the county auditor's office and his exciting evenings playing jazz piano in a local restaurant. He called that moonlighting. After listening to his enthusiasm, I told him I thought he was *sunlighting* at the auditor's office and his real life was playing jazz.

He was attracted by the jazz life, and he had an invitation to join the Tommy Dorsey band. He told me he was worried that if he spent his life in the jazz world he might succumb to drugs or alcohol. I asked him, *Who says you have to do it forever?*

He didn't show up for several months after that and then suddenly there was a postcard: *I'm on the road with the Tommy Dorsey band!* That was a great success for him and when he had enjoyed it for eight months, he moved on to other things.

Now Frank is a thought leader in the field of Appreciative Inquiry.

Frank: It made a huge difference. You helped me see that I could take a risk, quit my job, and go on the road. It helped to have you listen to me and take it seriously. If I hadn't tried it, how much of my life I might have spent regretting it.

I took him seriously and I believed in his dream. Now he carries on the tradition and believes in other people's dreams.

Frank: I really like the message about believing in the other's dreams. I think that's about as good a description of love as we're likely to get.

That is the joy of taking people seriously and believing in their dreams. Imagine a world in which we each give that loving gift to each other.

Onward,

Walt

