



An AI example

This story comes from *Locating the Change*, by Charles Elliott – one of the best early books on AI – and is included by kind permission of the author.

Rosemary Willson is a successful New York publisher. Her marriage broke up three years ago and she has custody of her 11-year-old son, Joel. Despite Rosemary's determination to provide him with every material and emotional advantage, Joel is clearly having a hard time growing up as a lone child of a single parent. He has long had behavioural problems at school, has become truant and is truculent when challenged about this at home. He has never shown much affection for his caregiver, Joanne, though she is highly trained and does everything she can to win the boy's trust and regard.

Rosemary has decided the situation is now so serious that she must tackle it more systematically. She tells Joanne to keep a list of Joel's misdemeanors and to make sure to ask his teacher each day how he has behaved when she picks him up from school.

unacceptable

'He has to learn,' says Rosemary. 'I will go through the list with him every evening – quietly, methodically, thoroughly, explaining why what he has done is wrong or unacceptable. We will soon see a big improvement. He's a bright enough youngster; he just needs to have things pointed out to him in a consistent way. Once he sees that we are on to him, he'll change...'

Joel's behaviour has gotten no better; in some respects, it has become worse since this list-and-tell regime was begun.

Two thousand miles to the southwest, the Lakota people in New Mexico also have a delinquent youngster. He has been seen damaging people's cars and trucks in the car lot outside the store. When challenged, he has been rude and dismissive of the authority of the elders.

The whole clan is called together one evening and forms a large circle. The young man's father walks with him into the middle of the circle and then joins the other adults on the perimeter. The father begins to speak first. 'You are our first born, our most precious one. Your mother and I rejoiced the first time we felt you kick in her stomach. We ran from house to house, telling all these people that you were alive and well and strong. And so you were. You were born crying with a shout so loud they heard it three hundred yards away above the radio. How proud we were! How happy! You have always made us happy. Your first few steps - oh, how you fell over into a puddle. The look on your face! How we laughed...'

memories

On and on, the father recounts, sharing the happiest memories of his son's life. No word of criticism is uttered. The father's task is to remind the young man of all that he means to the family, the clan, the people; of all the joy and happiness he has brought; of the delight his wider family have in him.

When he is finished, it is the uncle's turn. The two grandfathers follow him. The sky is darkening, the stars plainly visible. It will be long past midnight before they have finished. After the men, the women speak, in gentler tones, in softer cadence – for it is on them that much of the work, from first labour pains to saving enough for schoolbooks, has fallen.

Finally, the clan chief speaks. He summarises all that has been said. He speaks slowly, with long pauses, as though searching for the deepest ways of saying what has to be said. His theme, from which he never deviates, is the same: the pride and pleasure this young man has brought to all the Lakota people; the living, the departed and those not yet born. Like all the earlier speakers, he never mentions the vandalism and the malicious damage, the shame, the anger, the futility, the mindlessness. All that is left unsaid, unhinted. The sole refrain is that this young man is a beautiful gift to the whole people, one of inexpressible value.

transformation

When the old man has finished speaking, he makes a small sign. The ring of people stands still, almost at attention, looking ahead of them at the young man in the centre of the circle. Then they melt wordlessly into the night.

Which youngster has the better chance of transformational change: the one whose faults are catalogued and reviewed each day? Or the one who has been ritually assured of his place in the hearts of all his people?

For more information about Appreciative Inquiry, and how you can use it to facilitate strength-based change, contact us now by emailing suzanne@appreciatingpeople.co.uk or tim@appreciatingpeople.co.uk.