



# Appreciative witnessing **IN PRACTICE**

Be the sunshine that others need to blossom

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**PEOPLE SHOW UP IN RELATIONSHIPS WHEN THEY** feel invited by an interested, respectful and caring host. They recoil or withdraw from people who, by their communication styles, show the opposite of hosting which is controlling, dominating or exploiting. The way in which you listen and respond to others shows a fundamental choice.

That choice plays itself out in one of two ways, either in humanising or dehumanising practices. Humanising practices create wholeness in the person and Shalom in the world. Dehumanising practices create lacking in the individual and division amongst people. Humanising practices leave people feeling enlivened and enriched. They walk away with a keener sense of personal substance and value. The alternative is that they leave your presence feeling less human, drained, diminished and robbed of their substance or worth. The choice to adopt an appreciative approach to hosting relationships entails being committed to adopting humanising practices in speech and behaviour.

There is also nothing more validating and affirming of another than, for example, being invited in to share their inner thoughts, humour, inspirations, creative musings and wisdom. Appreciative encounter means inviting others to show up in your presence in ways that allow them to shine, feel embraced, heard, felt, understood, appreciated and admired. It facilitates, through an encounter with you, people discovering new richness and resourcefulness within themselves.

Appreciative interactions leave people feeling more supported, recognised and



valued. Every person wants and needs to be seen, felt, heard and understood. Every person wants to feel relevant, that what they have to offer the world counts, is noticed and valued. A wonderful practice to illustrate would be, for example, when introducing somebody, use the opportunity to enhance their reputation by adding something affirming about them.

## **SIMPLE ACTS**

Appreciative witnessing and humanising practices do not have to be complex or take much effort. Every act of courtesy, tact, consideration and manners constitutes a humanising practice. The most fundamental act of appreciative witnessing is simply noticing and non-verbally acknowledging or affirming the presence of the other through eye contact, nodding or, best of all, smiling. Greeting is a step higher. The

next level is a greeting with a smile that shows that you welcome the person and are gladdened by their presence. There is nothing more affirming for a person than to feel relished and enjoyed.

The bridge to the next level would be building rapport by being gracious and communicating warmth and openness. The next level would be reaching out to make welcoming, reverential or affectionate contact. By encouraging and showing interest in the other person's thoughts you stimulate creativity and innovation.

## **PROVIDING ALTERNATIVE EXPERIENCES**

Your life is dominated by the major themes that capture your attention or imagination and create biases or filters in your thinking. Your picture of the world and your picture of yourself may become, in a sense,

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hostage to those dominant themes. We see this in abuse. The person who is being abused or exploited is captured by themes of worthlessness, relationships being unsafe, being an object and constantly vulnerable to betrayal. They tend to filter out or ignore any messages to the contrary that might attest to them being lovable and special.

Appreciative interactions are those where you touch someone in a way that they've never been touched before. In so doing you offer them an experience of themselves, relationships and life, that challenges those dominant themes. In so doing you thus provide an alternative experience that contradicts the person's dominant knowledge about life, themselves and the world.

When someone has had an experience that left them feeling defective, diminished and convinced them that the world is an unsafe, hostile place, you can provide them with a sense of a relationship that is safe, holding and reliable. When you can touch someone in this way you can constructively shift their view of reality. There are many ways to do this. You can offer them feedback about their special qualities, talents or abilities. You can give them affirmation for what they bring to the relationship with you and how they add value to your world.

Most powerfully you can give the person tasks that challenge them to draw deeply into their own resources and ingenuity and, in so doing, to discover abilities and experience themselves in a new way. Showing pride and giving positive feedback in areas that are most meaningful to the other person is a way of inspiring them to further develop those qualities. Affirming someone's talents invites them to show those talents and empowers them to use those gifts.

When you are a senior or respected member in a family or community then you can leverage your symbolic value to enhance the power of your witnessing. If a compliment comes from someone in power it carries more weight than if it's made by someone that the receiver takes for granted.

Taking someone into your confidence and letting them into your world by sharing otherwise private intimacies, privileges them with your trust and invites them into your world in a way that gives them a sense of their unique value and contribution. In marriage physical intimacy needs to be the embodiment of emotional and spiritual intimacy. Intimacy is built by being curious about each other's needs, feelings and opinions. Embracing without judgment or passing an opinion of the other builds closeness and trust. It is strengthened through sharing inspiration and noble thoughts.

### PLANTING SEEDS

When you touch people in these ways it doesn't always have an immediate effect. When someone has been touched in a way that I'm describing it becomes part of them. And one never knows when that part is going to come back to life or just remain a beacon that they hold in their mind that they can later have access to when their maturity and life conditions are right.

Oftentimes when done with children, appreciative witnessing might mean simply planting a seed that may only sprout in adulthood. One day when the person remembers that magic moment of being fully heard, seen, felt and deeply appreciated that seed will sprout into a new vision of themselves. One moment of affirmation can create a contradiction in a person's mind that challenges them to rethink the negative messages from others and disempowering beliefs that they have held. For example the child who is failing at school, constantly criticised by his parents, but has a grandmother who unconditionally affirms the child's value and expresses unreserved confidence in the child's potential. That could be the person who sows the seed in childhood.

Whatever you pay attention to or value most is what you become. In focusing on select personal qualities and specialising only in those, you make an implicit choice to devalue or leave opposite qualities undeveloped. These choices are reinforced by cultural and family values and stereo-

types. Look at a child's dominant qualities. For example girls might be encouraged and rewarded for service and for making their own needs invisible. Boys might be applauded for steely determination and strength rather than for sensitivity or empathy towards themselves or others. Sometimes children even get criticised and shamed for showing qualities that go against culturally expected behavior. This limits the personal repertoire of responses and cuts them off from many ways of being that would enrich their experience of life and give them a greater capacity to relate to others in creative and meaningful ways.

Appreciative witnessing means giving people encouragement and affirmation for the positive qualities in which they excel. It means also giving them permission, encouragement and opportunities to experience the opposite qualities. A child, for example, who is very kind and yielding, needs to be encouraged and applauded for even small instances of making their needs known, setting boundaries and asserting limits. When a child who is very quiet and shy shares something personal it needs to be treated like a precious gift that you feel privileged to receive. If you find you are too open and transparent you can train yourself to keep things back and to witness your own experience in the same way you try to sub-contract others to do for you. In so doing you increase your own sense of personal power and inner mastery.

When you are trying to grow your own or the repertoire of someone that you mentor, you need to start with baby steps and celebrate each victory no matter how small. Every drop of light dispels a great deal of darkness. The light of a single flame has the power to enlighten the entire world, one candle at a time. You have unlimited power within your sphere of influence to enlighten and appreciate (in all senses of the word) the value and substance of others. With a deeply felt sense of personal substance you perceive the "light", the transcendent and inclusive reality of the world being a big ecology - this we call Shalom. ■