

History in the Making

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First Parish in Brookline

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will *never forget* how you made them feel.” I’ve always loved this quote attributed to Maya Angelo. Maybe some of you have, too. Isn’t it so true?

Think about it. We worry, or I know that I do, about getting things just right. Saying the perfect words. People often ask me what to say when they have a close friend who is going through a time of loss. Yet, is it our words that matter most, or is how they make people feel? I think it is both. Words are incredibly powerful. But it is how they are perceived or received that makes them life changing. For good and bad.

Think about it in terms of your own life. Think of a time when you were experiencing intense emotion. Maybe grief at the death of a loved one, fear at the news of medical diagnosis, or even joy in some good news. Think of the person or people who helped you the most. What did they say? More importantly, how did they make you feel?

Personally, I find that when I am the most vulnerable what matters the most is love. Someone’s presence, holding my hand, looking into my eyes, not flinching, but staying with me. These are the people to whom I turn.

In addition to our ability to be with another, there are two other things that are essential if we are to have genuine conversation, or connection. First, we must remember that *perception is reality* and that perception is highly individual. The second thing is to be able to listen. Truly listen.

[Pick up the bowl] I think of this bowl as a sacred container. The container is the relationship. The sides of the bowl are dialogue, or conversation; listening; and understanding of each other’s perspective.

Relationship—whether between two, thirty, or thousands of people—is held and created by an interconnected experience of conversation, listening, and deep understanding.

As you’ve heard, we are starting the creation this morning of a history wall here at First Parish. You might be wondering why we are doing this. I assure that it is not because we have nothing else to do. It is not because we are neglecting justice or only concerned with ourselves.

No.

We are creating this history wall as a means to creating that intentional container of relationship—in this case, congregational engagement during this transition of interim ministry. The container which the history wall represents will be beautifully created as a result of our willingness to engage in meaningful conversation and dialogue. To listen to one another and to understand each other’s perspectives.

As always in church life we are learning together, here, valuable life skills and lessons that we can carry into every area of our lives. Conversation, dialogue, listening skills, and a commitment to remembering that perception is reality and perception is uniquely individual. I want to spend some time this morning exploring each of these concepts.

Let’s start with conversation—dialogue. The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation of which Barbara spoke, has 3,000 resources on their website related to doing this effectively.¹ We are using a technique called Appreciative Inquiry as the inroad for conversation around the history wall. Appreciative Inquiry was developed in the field of organizational development during the 1980s by David Cooperrider from Case Western University.

In summary, Appreciative Inquiry is the process of asking questions that call forth the best in a group and then using those strongest and brightest parts as the basis to envision and create a vibrant future.

A correlate to Appreciative Inquiry is positive psychology. Developed by Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania, positive psychology is defined as “the study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals, communities and organizations to thrive.”² Psychology Today calls it “the scientific study of what makes life most worth living.”³ My grandmother used to call this “looking on the bright side.”

Whatever we call it, this approach to dialogue works. It is the opposite of a mechanical approach which seeks to identify problems and then develop a work plan to solve them.

Before delving further I need to pause and say clearly that Appreciative Inquiry is not about burying secrets, or denying injury, pain, or incidents that need resolution. On the contrary, it helps to create the space for us as individuals, couples, and communities to do those things safely.

This approach to dialogue is a deceptively simple process that involves engaging as many people as possible, asking questions that focus on the positive, and creating from those shared positive experiences a vision of what the future can be.

This process has been successfully employed by The Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions and hundreds of businesses and organizations. According to BJ Seminars, a firm that specializes in this work, one of the underlying principles of Appreciative Inquiry is that we have within us all the information and resources we need to renew our workplaces, our communities, and ourselves. Working this way builds on this and affirms that we do have a choice about how we see the world and act upon it.⁴

¹ <http://ncdd.org/>

² Positive Psychology Institute www.postivepsychologyinstitute.com.au

³ Psychology Today, May 16, 2008

⁴ <http://bjseminars.com.au/our-approach/appreciative-inquiry/what-is-appreciative-inquiry/>

I’ll admit that I was a bit of a skeptic myself about this approach, but I’ve witnessed and experienced this work in profound and positive ways. I’ll share one example:

It is a minister’s retreat...two days away at Rowe Camp Conference Center. My colleague, Craig, and I are leading worship. Ministers are sitting around in a circle on old couches, chairs, and the floor. Craig asked everyone to answer one simple question, “Think back and remember why you first followed your call to ministry.” In a matter of moments people were transformed and transfixed as we bore witness to the call in one another’s hearts. Tears and laughter, years of pain falling away. “Thank you!” they said. “This was so incredibly powerful. I had forgotten....”

This simple question gave people renewal that our words could never have given them. It is the miracle that Barb described in her testimony this morning: “the God in the Network that happens when we connect our authentic selves in constructive conversation—miracles happen!”⁵

The other two essential elements [pick up bowl again] in this sacred container of relationship are the ability to listen and to truly understand another’s perspective.

I was first taught the concept that perception is reality when I was a parent educator many years ago. It was one of the core teachings in effective parenting. It actually created the foundation for the techniques that followed.

Effective parenting, including things like reflective listening and the use of natural and logical consequences, is impossible without a deep appreciation of the fact that our children, as do all people, have their own unique perspectives. We can share our values, our experiences, our love, but how each person responds to those things is based on their perspective. Literal experience may be shared, but meaning and impact is unique to each person. Thus we learn that truth is relative to each person and that it changes.

Have you ever remembered a specific time with family members or friends, only to be brought up short when they have a completely different memory? Of the same exact experience?

What one of sees as beautiful—a snow fallen lawn—another perceives as devastating. A reminder of times gone by. You love walking into a room, a party full of music and people. It is exhilarating. I cannot wait to get out of the deafening, chaotic, and life-draining experience. Same situation, each of us with our own perspective.

This sounds so simple but I think we all fall short of remembering this. We all operate too often, I know that I do, assuming that others see things, hear things, and remember things the same way that I do.

Our history wall is one way, if we are willing to witness and listen to each other’s memories that we will begin to appreciate the magnificent and diverse perspectives among us.

The most important thing to do when it comes to understanding another’s perspective is to listen. Listening is a gift and a skill that is priceless. It communicates deep appreciation for the inherent worth of another person.

⁵ From testimony spoken by First Parish member, Barbara Simonetti, February, 21, 2016.

Yet what do most of do? We’re busy. We’re not present. We’re uncomfortable with another person’s pain or with unresolved issues. We have a need to be right, or to be heard.

Rather than listen, we wait; planning in our mind—while the person speaks—what we will say when it is our turn. Instead of listening, and just holding the space, we respond after a person finishes to share our story, or jump to alleviate their pain, or correct their misunderstandings. The damage can run deep.

Nine years ago, I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. The trip was transformative. I returned a different person than I was when I left. My joy and excitement was overflowing. At coffee hour one Sunday morning, I was sharing my stories of the trip and my excitement with a friend.

As I was talking fast and excitedly, he interrupted me and said, “Country.” “I’m sorry?” I asked looking at him inquisitively. “Country,” he responded. “Tanzania is a country, not a continent. You called it a continent.” He didn’t mean to break my joy, or my self-confidence. I don’t think he had any idea how his response affected me.

Listen. It is one of the biggest gifts that we can give another person. There is no right and wrong perception; there is a human’s perception.

As we read and learn and listen to other’s memories that they are putting on the wall, listen. Realize that we are offering one another a wonderful opportunity to understand one another’s perspective. We can do this with respect.

This is why I was moved by David Brooks’ column that Nancy read this morning. Brooks wrote, “Now, obviously I disagree with a lot of Obama’s policy decisions. I’ve been disappointed by aspects of his presidency.”⁶ He goes on to cite the President’s humanity, integrity and respect for the dignity of others. That touches me deeply. Seeing connections and dialogue that rise above differences. Respecting the goodness of another even if we do not agree with their actions.

As you approach adding your piece or pieces to the History Wall, the question is simple: “Share one positive memory that you have at First Parish.” When you do this, try to be as specific as possible. Go back to the moment. It may be this morning if you’re here for the first time or it may be 40 years ago. Go there, remember who was around, what you saw, how you felt before, during, or after the experience. Share this. We want to hear it. Do this as a gift for yourself and all of us.

Before closing, I must share the story of this beautiful bowl that I have been using as my prop. It is a natural demonstration of Appreciative Inquiry at work.

Our Parish Chair, Ann Dinsmoor, is not only an able leader, but she is also a gifted woodworker. Part of my joy in working with her is experiencing the joy that her craft brings to her. Ann made this beautiful walnut bowl. She was so delighted telling me about it on the phone one day recently that I was intrigued.

⁶ David Brooks, “I Miss Barak Obama” *The New York Times*, February 9, 2016.

It started by me asked Ann a simple question. Something like, “What did I catch you doing?” “Well,” she answered. (I could feel her smile across the phone line.) “You won’t believe it. I had an old log in my shop. I wasn’t exactly sure what type of wood it was. I thought that it might be cherry. I decided to just see, and so I cut it up, put it on a lathe and turned it to make a bowl. To my delight I discovered this beautiful walnut!! It was just waiting to be found.”

Therein lies the beautiful and transformative possibility that lives in that place where we take what has been and are open to what may be. Bringing the past and the future into a beautiful container for life.

Sarah Whitman, who created one of our beautiful stained glass windows, said this: “The true pilgrim prays at all the shrines...asks a gift from every heart that ever loved...labors mightily, and some day there comes...a little new product, born to endure.”⁷ May we be pilgrims, seeing the gifts that every heart offers, knowing that together something beautiful will be born, again and again.

Amen and Blessed Be.

⁷ As taken from the archives of First Parish and shared with me by First Parish member, Frank Hutchins