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# AI Practitioner

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## Appreciative Inquiry for Life: Working With Nature in a Time of Ecological Crisis

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Photo by Din van Helden

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# He Licked My Mittens!

## Living and Working with Appreciative Inquiry

**A story of how using several Appreciative Inquiry principles can enhance relationships among and between people and one of Mother Nature's finest creatures: horses.**

*Why were the horses welcoming to my grandson, but not my clients?*

Learning about nature from a three-year-old is a very humbling experience. My grandson wanted to see our miniature horses, so we led him to the stable and opened the gate. He walked right in and a horse immediately walked up to him and began licking his mitten.

In the moment, it was just a little boy and a horse greeting one another. Other than being cute, nothing stood out, nothing seemed out of the ordinary – until over a year later when another incident while I was working with clients made me realize the significance of that experience (Synchronicity principle: seeing the connection). It took me on a new learning journey that encompassed several Appreciative Inquiry (AI) principles.

The clients walked into a paddock to greet the horses. Initially, the horses stared at them and didn't budge. As my clients attempted to get closer, the horses walked, and then trotted away. I thought to myself, why were the horses so welcoming to my grandson, but not wanting anything to do with my clients? (Simultaneity principle: inquiry creates change.)

### Common understanding

Since we cannot communicate with horses through a common language, having a common understanding with them requires using other forms of communication (Constructionist principle: words create worlds). We are used to some forms of them, such as gestures, tone of voice and emotions, but may be unaware of others, such as our biorhythms and presence. What exchange were



*There appeared to be an immediate high level of trust between my grandson and the horses.*

my grandson and the horses having that created an outcome different to that of my clients?

Perhaps it had to do with culture. My clients entered the herd's culture – they invaded their space. The horses sensed something was awry about this group and retreated to safety. This could be because neither group spent time welcoming the other into their own culture. How often do we do expect to be welcomed and liked without first developing some level of trust?

My grandson is of the same culture as my clients – humans. So why was he welcomed immediately? Perhaps because he didn't represent a threat to the horses and my clients did? There appeared to be an immediate high level of trust between my grandson and the horses. Where did that come from? My grandson's past experiences of the horses or lack thereof?

He licked my mittens! A little boy and a horse greeting one another.

Photo courtesy of the author and with permission



### Prey or predator?

*Centuries of domestication of horses bear witness to how our relationships have developed into partnerships.*

As I focused on the different outcomes of these similar interactions, I came to realize it could have been culture and approach and role – prey versus predator (Poetic principle: choosing what we study). Horses are prey animals and humans are predators; therefore, horses have an innate sense to fight or flee from humans. However, centuries of domestication of horses bear witness to how our relationships have developed into partnerships. Over the years,

I've developed a partnership with my horses, but my grandson and clients had not. Going back to the basic premise of prey and predator, which situation demonstrated which roles?

### Images inspire actions

Being welcomed into a herd is demonstrated by forms of stimulus and response. To be welcomed and eventually trusted by a horse, a person must demonstrate prey behaviors. If a person displays predatory behaviors, the horse will either fight or flee. However, if a person displays prey behaviors, the horse will most likely mirror those behaviors. (Anticipatory principle: images inspire action.)

*When they weren't successful at getting a horse to do what they wanted, it was never about the horse – it was always about them!*

When things didn't go as planned for my clients, they were asked positive and neutral questions (Positive principle: positive questions lead to positive change), such as "What was the horse doing?" and "What were you doing?". At the end of the session, my clients learned a quick lesson in diversity, how to welcome others and how to be welcomed by others. They also learned that when they weren't successful at getting a horse to do what they wanted, it was never about the horse – it was always about them!

Every encounter with horses is an experiment. I still don't know why my grandson was able to walk up and be greeted by one of the horses. I also don't know why he was fearless of the horse. Whatever the reasons, I'm grateful it happened and I was able to witness it. Horses can be some of our greatest companions on the planet, but only once we're welcomed into their herd. My grandson was welcomed immediately; my clients weren't.

Making connections between these two very different experiences helped expand my knowledge and intuition about what gives life to systems. It wasn't just a child and a group of people interacting with a horse. It was a series of individual moments that combined and coalesced into a system of relationships that included horses and humans. The humans' divergent attempts to relate to the horses led to my application of several AI principles.

### Living and working with Appreciative Inquiry

*Exploring different perspectives leads to new experiences, further reflections and deeper learning.*

Living and working with AI on my farm broadens and deepens my experiences with nature. More connections are possible. A single question generates more questions. Exploring different perspectives leads to new experiences, further reflections and deeper learning. Applying AI principles perpetuates Mother Nature's teachings, causing me to sense, learn and question today what will give life and energy to tomorrow.

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