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Strengthening Community with Appreciative Inquiry: Stories From a Learning Network

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Image courtesy of Griet Brouwen

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Appreciative Presence

A Hidden Ingredient in the Appreciative Inquiry Magic

Appreciative Presence, an essential yet often overlooked dimension of Appreciative Inquiry, is hard to put into words. To explore its depth, Niels Heetvelt joined a two-day masterclass alongside eleven other participants. Through this immersive experience – and in a candid interview – he discovered, with guidance from experts Hanneke Laarakker and David Shaked, that the magic of Appreciative Presence cannot be scripted or engineered. What you can do, however, is to open all the doors to let it in.

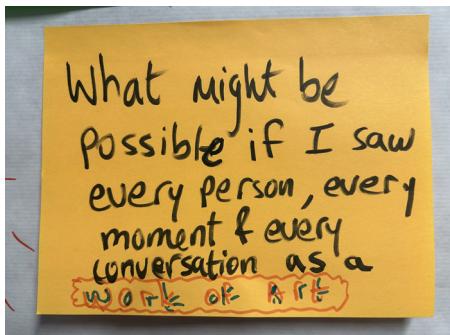
When I first read the invitation for a masterclass on Appreciative Presence, I considered it something mysterious and intangible. However, being a learning Appreciative Inquiry (AI) practitioner, something inside me immediately understood that it was exactly this element that had sparked my fascination since my first encounter with this strengths-based approach. On an early Monday morning in October, 2025, I was welcomed by Hanneke Laarakker and David Shaked in a carefully decorated room on an estate in the middle of a woodland. I found eleven equally curious AI practitioners willing to immerse themselves in a two-day exploration of Appreciative Presence.

Appreciative Presence in ourselves and others

Facilitating such a masterclass "is what we've been dreaming about since we first met in 2019 at the World Appreciative Inquiry Conference in Nice, France", Hanneke and David said during our round of introductions. Both have placed Appreciative Inquiry at the heart of their daily work, which is immediately clear in how they transform the atmosphere of the so-called masterclass into a "collective intelligence brainstorm session".

"We will discover Appreciative Presence not by explaining our notion of it, but by co-imagining, co-amplifying, and freeing-up everyone's unique Appreciative Presence." In the room we found a giant Wall of Wonder, where we collected our experiences throughout the programme. We were invited to form pairs and

exchange stories about a moment when we experienced our own Appreciative Presence, and when we experienced someone else's Appreciative Presence.



I paired with another participant to share a story about coaching a team in a school that came to mind. Shortly after I had first met the teachers, the school was confronted with a series of shocking events. Immediately after that week, I returned to the school for a team meeting. You could really feel the tension in the room. At the same time, the team was doing its best to keep things going, trying to find ways to move forward. It made sense; they were looking to regain some control over their work. But the effect was that one important question hadn't been asked yet: "How are you, really, in the midst of everything that's going on?"

I decided that, for each team member to feel completely comfortable in answering this question, we should divide into pairs. I asked each team member to think of an impactful moment – positive or negative – they had experienced in their team, write it down, and read it to their partner. The stories that followed included stories that the teachers had not talked about with anyone in the school before. It was only after I had finished all these conversations that I realised these stories would never have been told without my invitation to write them down. Nor, perhaps, without my presence.

'Appreciative being'

Her presence made her connect with what I knew, which made me believe that I belonged.

David

For both Hanneke and David, this question resonated with their own story of becoming dedicated AI practitioners. In David's case, this "appreciative being" was his inspirational influence and mentor Jane Watkins. When he first got in touch with Jane, David's work was centred around a data-driven project management approach called Lean Six Sigma. "My dream became to combine this with AI, but on a conference about organisational development I felt like a complete outsider. When I asked Jane for advice, she simply responded: 'I haven't seen anyone combining them, but I think you could do it'. Her presence made her connect with what I knew, which made me believe that I belonged. Now I try to show this presence to all the people I work with."

Hanneke, in turn, discovered the power of Appreciative Presence in the relationship with her son, who was diagnosed with autism at a young age. "Once my husband and I started approaching him as the intelligent, skilful individual he is, something shifted. We became genuinely curious about his inner world. We began to explore, with care, what helped him flourish in our interactions, and to meet him where his strengths already were. Suddenly, he felt trusted instead of judged. He started to look at his own life the way we

approached him, and together we started discovering the endless variety of talents, perspectives, and passions he now applies to his everyday life.”

Creating an inclusive and generative space

An inclusive and generative space is about seeing what we can include around us as a possibility. It is about noticing all of what is out there and then creating the possibility for it to become something else.

With these stories and experiences in the backs of our minds, David introduced the first ingredient of Appreciative Presence – creating an inclusive and generative space – through a simple exercise. He invited us to walk through the room and notice carefully what – and who – we saw around us. After a while, he invited us to slow down our pace a bit more and notice how it affected our perception of what we saw. Then he invited us to move even slower, at the speed of a snail, and again notice what we perceived.

“An inclusive and generative space,” they said, “is about seeing what we can include around us as a possibility. It is about noticing all of what is out there and then creating the possibility for it to become something else”.

David illustrated this with the example of a team with a visually impaired member.

As their team coach, I prepared a team meeting with him to find out what he needed to participate properly. We discussed how I could adapt my slides and other practical needs. After a while, I realised we only focused on what he could not do compared to his team members. ‘Is there something you can do, that nobody else can?’, I asked. He became silent. ‘Nobody ever asked me that question’. He took a moment to think and responded: ‘I remember every word anyone says, and I can notice if they are telling the truth or that they are lying’. After our team session I checked with him, and he confirmed that all his colleagues had been honest with me and with each other.

Appreciative sensing with curiosity

The second ingredient of Appreciative Presence – appreciative sensing with curiosity.

To continue our experience, Hanneke and David took us outside. Each of us was invited to “sense” the beauty of the nature around us in silence for a few minutes, to notice every sensation of smell and sound with curiosity. While we reflected together on this peaceful immersion in nature, we were interrupted by the sound of two cars that had lost their way in the forest. At the same time, the sound of an airplane captured our attention. Our facial expressions clearly revealed frustration. Hanneke and David seized this incident to clarify the second ingredient of Appreciative Presence – appreciative sensing with curiosity.



Neils sitting with David and Hanneke

Sensing can bring up judgements. Appreciative sensing is about using all our senses in the here and now to reframe all that appears to us into a piece of art. Once we take time to think about what is unfolding in front of us and resist our temptation to jump in we permit ourselves to think of, for example, the human carefulness, collaboration, and love that was invested in the manufacture of this car or this airplane. Once we stay in inquiry mode and sense where the energy is, we will be able to discover the resources, strengths, or hope in every situation.

From Hanneke and David's presentation

What would you like instead?

Back inside we divided in groups of three, and appointed a listener, a sharer, and an observer. The listener's job was to sense the moment when the sharer had completed their story of a current work or life challenge, and respond with just one question: "What would you like instead of this challenging situation?" When in the role of the listener, none of us could resist the temptation to jump in and follow up this seemingly straightforward task. We ended up losing track of the sharer's story through the overwhelming storm of questions that popped into our heads. Our questions revealed some curiosity, but mainly judgement.

Hanneke relieved our slightly disappointing experience by highlighting the idea that sensing does not imply pushing away any judgemental thoughts or feelings. She introduced the example of a team where a growing number of people stopped showing up at meetings.

Each meeting, the ones who couldn't make it told me their reasons. I considered them legitimate until, after a while, I sensed that they were holding something back, and I was curious about what that might be. So, I decided to share with them: "I'm starting to feel that I don't believe your reasons to be absent." For a moment, the room fell completely silent. You could feel the tension, but also a quiet relief that something real had finally been named. Then the team leader said that something had indeed been bothering them. What followed was an honest and touching conversation, where people began to speak from the heart. Together, we were able to face the obstacles that had stood between us. In the end, it became the warmest and most connected team I have ever worked with. Sensing is about connecting with your gut feeling, and discovering whether disclosing that feeling could benefit the situation at hand.

Something I can clearly sense is Hanneke and David's deep-held belief that Appreciative Presence draws on our unique human capacity. David even



Hanneke and David beside the Wall of Wonder

described it as “possibly one of the very few things we’d be left with that cannot be delivered by artificial intelligence”. For Hanneke, David’s statement can be explained by our capacity for appreciative sensing. “I recently saw a news item about a depressed adolescent who was – automatically – redirected to a suicide-prevention support line by artificial intelligence. ChatGPT is programmed to do so, but cannot clearly sense the unique, individual need of this adolescent in the moment. Our ability to sense enables us to feel, or ‘smell’ unease; to see someone’s face turn red, to hear one’s tone of voice, and to connect with what our gut feeling tells us to do. As human beings we can even have a dispute and be appreciative.”

David nods in agreement. “Machines are nowadays programmed to amplify the positive. That works; people use it, but it is not just the words that are important to fully understand our human needs. For that we need human presence, Appreciative Presence, so to speak.”

Your presence reveals the path before your words can.

Appreciative steering through emergence

When I stepped into our classroom the next morning, my eyes were immediately drawn to the Wall of Wonder. In between each exercise, we took a couple of minutes to reflect in front of this wall. What images emerge? What lessons have we learned? Now, with our second day still ahead of us, the wall was colourfully decorated with drawings of people interacting, pictures of beautiful landscapes, and inspiring quotes, one of which read: “your presence reveals the path before your words can”. The wall had become an Appreciative Presence in itself; an artwork that steered our reflection. That appreciative steering through emergence – the third and last ingredient of Appreciative Presence – was the central theme of this second day.

On the one hand, steering is a deliberate practice: it is aimed at something you want to amplify in your interaction with the individual – or the living thing – at hand. It is about actively discovering the sparks and energy in someone’s story by tapping into resources – a facial expression, a minor sound, a sparkling word, or a spot-on question. On the other hand, steering can hardly be organised or planned just by following an intention. “It is about welcoming, inviting whatever emerges in a conversation”, explained David, “including everything that interferes with your plans and expectations.”

He likes to compare steering with driving a car or any other vehicle – which is where the word’s origin lies. “You can turn right or left, you can also choose to do nothing and keep going straight, but in the middle of the road something unexpected might happen. You deal with its emergence by welcoming it and steering it appreciatively.”

Opening doors for the unnoticeable

A continuous interplay between introducing and welcoming; between noticing and intervening; between action and reflection. If I try to describe my perception of Appreciative Presence, this is the closest I can get. Because as essential as it might seem to everything we interact with, Appreciative Presence is often something that goes unnoticed. Something we uncover only after the moment has passed.

David experienced this when someone he was close to became terminally ill.

Appreciative Presence is something you cannot necessarily engineer (or design) in advance, but you can open all the doors to let it in.

While others around him noticed how his sickness became worse; how he did not respond or wasn't able to move his arm, I also saw him nodding, and once in a while I discovered a little smile on his face. And I tried to make others aware of it too: 'Did you see that?' Two weeks before his death, I received a call from his carer telling me that he started singing. I came by and we started singing a song I thought I had forgotten. But in that moment, all the lyrics came back to me. If his carer hadn't considered this information worth mentioning, I would have missed all of that. Appreciative Presence is something you cannot necessarily engineer (or design) in advance, but you can open all the doors to let it in – and watch magic happen.

About this event

Two-day Masterclass in Appreciative Presence

Facilitated by Hanneke Laarakker and David Shaked

Hotel Landgoed Zonheuvel, Doorn, The Netherlands, 6th and 7th of October 2025

12 participants from various Dutch organizations

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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