

## This Appreciative (Open Mic) Hour: 7-22-09 Recap ... and More

### Harvesting the Highlights:

Have you ever marveled at the power of a question to focus and expand your attention, energy, and curiosity? (Take, for example, the question I just posed.) In this week's Open Mic, one participant confided his *stuckness* about defining and pursuing his professional future. Rather than burdening him with advice in attempt to budge him from his stuck place (and perhaps to reduce the discomfort which arises within us when witnessing someone's turmoil), we called upon an time-honored Quaker practice, and constituted ourselves as a "clearing committee." We posed questions for him to take in and ponder, without asking him to respond; we invited him to just listen and absorb. Very different from attempting to "fix" him. To read about this week's centering practice, the clearing committee questions, my reflections on community, and a word about joining me on "The Path of Appreciation and Positivity," please read on.

### The Path of Appreciation and Positivity:

I might call this the Department of Shameless Self-Promotion. I have several spots left in the fourth Path of Appreciation and Positivity group that I offer, to begin in September. It's a small six-month tele-group, to explore the power and impact of appreciation, positive practices, listening with inquiry rather than judgment, and so much more, for one's life and work. The three prior groups have been wonderful learning and connecting experiences for all. In concrete terms, members come away with a portfolio of exercises, interview guides, and other concrete materials for use with clients, family members, and themselves ... as well a positive life vision, a clear view of their own strengths and positive core, and more. If you're interested, please email me and I'll provide details.

### Open Mic Re-cap:

**Centering Practice:** I invited participants to make themselves comfortable (feet on the floor, hand off the computer mouse, eyes closed), and do the following:

*"Take a series of slow, deep breaths; let the air go all the way into your belly. Feel the belly expand. Now, slowly exhale. Repeat this rhythm: slow deep belly-breaths, slow exhale.*

*As you continue this breathing rhythm, ask yourself what you need to put aside or let go of, in order to be fully present... to fully 'arrive' here, in this moment. Whatever comes up that needs to be put away, visualize putting it in a container... a folder ... a drawer...or other place for it to be while you are here.*

*Once you have done so, and continuing your belly-breathing, ask yourself, 'What kind of conversation do I have an appetite for, in this Open Mic hour?' "*

One participant noted the question which has arisen for him lately is “*Why do I do what I do, with clients?*” He hopes that, by entertaining this question, he will be led to a deeper conviction about, and in, his work. A second person noted that he is feeling frantic, in advance of leaving for a trip. He had the awareness, during the guided meditation, that “*Maybe it’s all right to be frantic, and not to freak out about it.*” This is a great point; trying to “not be frantic” could intensify the very feeling one’s attempting to abate. The act of pausing and focusing on *being frantic*, locating where in the body the frantic sensations reside, and noting what happens as you focus, is an effective way to slow down. Getting that momentary distance from “frantic” can paradoxically bring us back to center. A third person noted that he still has a hard time letting go, and finds himself easily distracted. I suppose that’s why I call these openers Centering Practices. The answer to *How can I get better at letting go?* is the same as the answer to the question of how to get to Carnegie Hall: *Practice! Practice!*

Before launching into possible topics and questions for the hour, one participant noted that the story of losing and finding one’s True North, told by a participant in last week’s Open Mic, really resonated for him. It reinforced for him the need to have – and follow – one’s personal convictions. He said, somewhat vividly, “Dogs smell fear. And clients do, too.” Point well taken, wouldn’t you say?

Then, one person noted that a burning question preoccupying him lately is the direction that his future work will take, and how to actively seek it. He noted that up to now, he has been passive in determining where and how he works; when life circumstances have presented opportunities, he has pursued them relentlessly and successfully. At this juncture, however, he finds himself at a cross-roads and feels impelled to actively identify and articulate the purpose and direction of his work. And in that pursuit, he finds himself simply stuck. Now, I should mention that I believe that “stuck” is a good place to be, if one honors it. It’s like Woody Allen said when asked by a reporter if sex is dirty. “Well, sure,” Woody replied, “if it’s done right.” Taking my cue from The Wisdom of Woody, *stuck* is an okay place – if it’s done right.

It seemed clear that pursuing conversation about “why,” “what are your interests?” etc., might not be efficient or helpful in the Open Mic setting. Instead, I described the Quaker practice of “a clearing committee,” which I had experienced at the recent Art of Hosting event. Fortunately, another Open Mic participant had also been in Gold Lake, and could corroborate the process and value. After explaining the process and purpose, I asked our “stuck” person if he would be willing to try it – which he was. I asked people to offer him questions that he might think about, while I would write them down. The questions we would offer would serve as gifts, rather than challenges. Here are the questions which resulted:

## “Clearing Committee” Questions

“What is the unmet need?”

“What is the risk if you actively pursue your next opportunity, rather than having it come to you (as has been your pattern)?”

“What would ‘being comfortable with yourself’ look like, and feel like?”

“Is there a future that is calling to you?”

“Or is it someone else’s future for you, rather than future that is self-driven?”

“What are your unique gifts and talents? Would it be wise for you to reflect on them, and base your thinking about your future on them?”

“What would success look like, for you?”

“Who can you talk with, about your ‘burning question’ about not being a passenger? Someone who is close enough to you, but who is differentiated enough to be able to listen?”

“Have you ever felt the way you would like to feel in (and about) your work? What is that like?”

“Building on that last question, how can you re-create that feeling in your life?”

“What would it feel like, to you, to let go of this pull, this voice, this urge?”

“What do *you want*?”

“And why do you want it?” (editorial reframing: “What would getting what you want do for you?”

“What would make life *fun*, and more enjoyable, for you?”

The three questions of George Kinder and Susan Galvan’s book, *Lighting the Torch*:

**Question 1:** *I want you to imagine that you are financially secure, that you have enough money to take care of your needs, now and in the future. The question is... how would you live your life? What would you do with the money? Would you change anything? Let yourself go. Don’t hold back your dreams.*

*Describe a life that is complete, that is richly yours.*

**Question 2:** *This time you visit your doctor who tells you that you have 5-10 years left to*

*live. The good part is that you won't ever feel sick. The bad news is that you will have no notice of the moment of your death. What will you do in the time you have remaining to live?*

*Will you change your life and how will you do it?*

**Question 3:** *This time your doctor shocks you with the news that you have only one day left to live. Notice what feelings arise as you confront your very real mortality. Ask yourself:*

*What dreams will be left unfulfilled? What do I wish I had finished or had been? What do I wish I had done? What did I miss?*

A clearing committee is a rare experience -- and rare gift: to be caringly offered questions to ponder – rather than reply to. The underlying assumption is that the individual has sufficient wisdom and heart so that, if s/he trusts the process of quiet reflection, the answers will arise. One element which I neglected to introduce at the end, which I emailed to the person privately, is the suggestion that he identify the three to five questions that have the most relevance and resonance for him, and focus his reflections (at least to begin with) on them.

We discussed participants' observations about the exercise, and people found it fascinating, revealing, inspiring and, in the case of one member who is also searching for his next calling, very relevant.

**Ed's Further Reflections: this business of "community"**