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

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Experiencing More Life Alignment Through Nature-Based Interventions

What might it look like if we embrace nature interventions more in our organisational development work? This glimpse is an example of a leadership journey out in nature. It is meant to be an invitation to OD colleagues to work more in and with nature in our stewardship towards more life alignment.

Through deep experience, deep questing and deep commitment emerges.

Arne Naess

What a precious week it was! Everyone – the participants and we as facilitators – have given ourselves fully to this leadership journey. We noticed remarkable shifts in the self-confidence and stance of the leaders in what they value. This glimpse shows how nature-based interventions enabled the conditions for this group of leaders to flourish.

A couple of years back, this organisation had the courage to experiment with an overnight solo experience in nature as part of their senior leadership development. Since then, more nature-based interventions have been woven into developmental programs. As this week was to be held in wintery conditions in Austria, I chose to facilitate a hike to help ground participants on the day of arrival, with an intentional nature walk on the following day.

And here we are, late Monday afternoon. After a check-in round and framing of the week, we go outside. We warm up by walking uphill through the snow. It's immediately clear that this group has differing ideas about how they want this hike to go. Some participants are literally running uphill! Most are taking it easy; some are really taking their time. Their pace is not only related to their physical condition. I notice that some feel the urge to release tension by moving

in a more sportive way while others slow down to process the intensity of their lives.

It's getting dark. The snow in the forest is lit by our head torches. We are almost at the top of the mountain. I invite the group to go for a fast walk on this last stretch. And just as we approach the top, the full moon rises. The excitement felt towards the magic of this moment is expressed by running towards the moon, wolf howls, screams of "yahoo", then the scene is sealed with a collective silence.

Rising moon with participants in leadership programme

All photos courtesy of the author



The next morning, we start in the seminar room, where I paint a picture of how humans have evolved through intimate contact with the natural world for centuries. Going outside, and in particular solo experience in the wilderness, has its roots in ancient traditions and indigenous cultures. Thai forest monks, for example, walk as a form of meditation; Aboriginals have their walkabout, and there are pilgrimages and vision quests in some of the Native American traditions.

Shifting into silence

Today the participants are invited to follow those ancient history lines, but in a modern-day version. I call it "an intentional nature walk". To support them in formulating a clear intention, they are accompanied by a learning partner for the first part of the walk. Crossing the "threshold place", the participants mark the moment of shifting into silence and silently state their intentions to

themselves. And while we are in nature in the following hours, they hold their intention and see how nature and this experience speak to them.

From a bird's-eye view, the group walks in sync. For example, when we enter an open field and one participant lies down, others follow. And suddenly here we are, all relaxing our bodies in the snow, taking in the warmth of the sun.

Relaxation in the snow during an intentional nature walk



Sharing the essence of the experience

The stories shared are so authentic, truly from the heart.

Later that day, after a silent, shared lunch back at the venue, the participants are invited to pick up the “talking stick” when they are ready to share the essence of their experience. An example: one of the leaders became aware of anger he was experiencing, surprising himself by allowing himself to feel it. And while he was sharing his story, we could all see the self-confidence growing in the stance that he was going to take for what he really values.

After each sharing, we offer a resonance back as a group by mirroring “I heard the story of a man/woman who ...” The stories shared are so authentic, truly from the heart. It reminds me of how Ilarion Merculieff, the Unangan (Aleut) elder from Alaska, speaks:

The heart refers to a deeper portal of profound interconnectedness and awareness that exists between humans and all living things.

This leadership journey is an example of how nature-based interventions can enrich our practice in supporting organisations. Cooperrider & Godwin (2022)

People will be more supportive of the big changes needed if they are more connected to nature and feel that nature matters to them.

state that the future of Organisational Development (OD) will have a larger scope. It's up to us as OD practitioners to enable a better world of full-spectrum flourishing together.

Grounding and mirroring

Being in nature provides a sense of grounding and helps individuals connect with their authentic selves by mirroring, free of judgement, what is important for them. It provides a sense of connection with other participants and the larger ecosystem. As demonstrated in Richardson's (2020) research, connectedness to nature is a factor in improved mental wellbeing and increased pro-environmental behaviours. People will be more supportive of the big changes needed if they are more connected to nature and feel that nature matters to them.

My dream is that more colleagues will embrace nature interventions in their practice as stewardship in supporting organisations in becoming a force for good.

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