

## Who Are You, When You're At Your Best?

"Who are you, when you're at your BEST?" is a hard-core appreciative question; it goes to the very heart of living and working appreciatively, and to our shared human aspiration. There was an expression going around the school when I was an MBA student at Wharton in the early 80's: "He who has the most toys when he dies, wins." Scary, isn't it? Even scarier: I thought it was funny at the time. More than the desire to accumulate "stuff" in this lifetime, we humans share an aspiration to make the very most of the endowment and experience we are given. Mother Teresa captured this sentiment when she instructed her nuns to "Let them use you up."

"Who are you, when you're at your BEST?" is a great question to use in our workplaces, in our personal relationships, and in our own private reflective moments:

Employers and managers could regularly ask themselves who they are, when they're at their best, and they could ask the same question of the members of their organizations. A work group or team could ask itself, "When are we at our very best, as a team? What are we *doing*, at those times? How are we *communicating*? How are we *treating each other*, and treating others outside our circle, when we're at our best?" And when they have their answers, they can pose the logical follow-on appreciative question: "How can we be those ways, and do those things, more of the time? What would it take?" If you use these questions with your associates, you'll find that you'll open up your collective minds, your communications, your self-concept as a collective (and as individuals), and you'll broaden your conceptions of how to become the BEST organization you can be: such a deal!

You can also ask this question of a client, say someone you're working with in a coaching, counseling or financial planning relationship. It makes an excellent lead-in to the process of co-creating a vision of your client's life fully-lived, en route to developing a plan of action based on that vision. I can pretty much guarantee that if you ask your client "*Who are you, when you're at your very best?*" it will be the first time anyone's ever asked them. (Unless, of course, they're also on the distribution list for this column. Even if they are, they'll still profit from your asking.)

By the way: if the person isn't able to answer that question straight away, you can help them by getting more specific: "Tell me a story of a time when you felt as though you were doing *exactly what you were meant to be doing*, or *being the person you always wanted to be*. Tell me about the situation, what you were doing, how it felt." And follow up with this question: "How can we arrange conditions so that you can do those things, and be those ways, more of the time?" Asking these questions, and listening really attentively, provides the gift of enrichment to the person; it will also enrich you, and it will get the two of you moving towards the shared goal of envisioning their most fulfilling life.

I've used this question and its follow-ups any number of times, always with important results. However, my special fondness for it dates from the very first time I used it. It was the centerpiece of a session I gave at the end of a "Weekend of Possibilities" that my friend, Roger Breisch, created in late March, 2000 at a retreat center in Crystal Lake,

Illinois. Roger had invited friends to gather for an unstructured weekend of connection, conversation, and hilarity. Little did I know that his invitation would change the course of my life, rather dramatically and definitively. Almost all twenty of the weekend's attendees came to my impromptu session, which was held during the last Sunday morning time slot before the getaway lunch that brought the weekend to a raucous and pleasing close.

What gives the memory of the session its burnished glow is not the appreciative question itself. Here's the whole story: I was fairly sure, and very hopeful, that the session would attract one particularly good-looking, highly intelligent, very authentic, and tall, curly-haired woman whom I'd taken a shine to, and whom I'd specifically invited to the two early morning meditation sessions I'd conducted earlier in the weekend -- both of which she had steadfastly (and inexplicably) boycotted. I figured that this Jody person would attend this final session along with her friend, Marilyn, and she would at last see me strut my stuff. Well, I was only partly successful: The two of them did attend the session, and they appeared to get a great deal from it; however, I later (much later; after we were engaged) caught serious flack from Jody for having revealed so little of myself during my facilitation: *SHEESH!!!*

However, I'm happy to report that I had the last laugh. I reserved an adjacent seat for her at lunch, and doggedly engineered her sitting next to me. ("Sorry, Jody's sitting here," I said, quite matter-of-factly, to a procession of people looking for a seat.) She and I made inconsequential small talk during the meal, but at the farewell Hug-A-Thon, I hugged her good; it was one of my Ten Second Specials. She revealed (much later) that this first hug Did The Trick; I had her from Good-bye! Six weeks afterwards I proposed to her and she accepted, approximately 3.15 seconds after I had popped The Ultimate Appreciative Question. The rest, as they say, is history ... or destiny. The moral of the story is simply this: It's good to use appreciative questions! (I sometimes think there's a second moral: If you want to get a woman to pay attention to you, you may have to marry her. It seems to have worked, for me.)

So: that's a story about using "*Who are you, when you're at your BEST?*" between friends. What about using the question, or its variants, with someone you're even closer to: someone who, no matter how you try, you can't escape from? That's right: Yourself. How about testing it right here, right now? If you're game, I invite you to ponder this question:

*Who am I, when I am at my very best?* (You may want to close your eyes and let the question work you.)

After a while, you can open your eyes and ask yourself these follow-on questions:

- How would I describe myself, and what I'm doing, when I'm *really* the person I was meant to be?
- How would others describe me, at such times?
- How do I like this "me?"
- What would it take for me to be that person, more of the time? And, finally,

- What would it give me, to be that person more often? What would it give to others? To the world?

What did you come up with, when you reflected on it? If you found that it's too "big" a topic to do justice to right now, why not make an appointment with yourself, for later this week, to ponder it? As the poet Rilke said, "*Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.*" Let the questions, and the process of inquiry, work you, and see where they take you.

It's a pretty straightforward process: asking a compelling appreciative question and then listening raptly to the answers that arise. I trust the process of asking and listening, and I trust our innate wisdom and experience to provide useful and insightful answers. We don't have to do the laborious and often debilitating work of analyzing and dismantling the negative conditions that keep us from being at our best; we don't have to affix blame, criticize, find fault, or play "gotcha," with ourselves or someone else. What we *really* need to do is to (a) focus on our "highest and best moments," and then (b) create conditions (both inner and outer) that support us in our quest to have more of those moments. I think you'll find this usually means focusing on your own strengths and those of others: not on shoring up your weaknesses or theirs.

That's what I did. I asked myself, "*Who am I, at my very best?*" My answer was instantaneous, straightforward, and clear: "Marry the woman!" It worked, for me.

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