

Loving the Present

While Working for Political Transformation

What stories might help us love the world we live in, right here and now, and still contribute actively to its development? Is it possible, and is it all right to feel good while there is still so much suffering in the world? If we do not need to be desperate to be committed, what may the other paths look like, and how can we walk them? Here are some examples of stories and metaphors that might help, general considerations and practical suggestions.

1.1. Discovering good aspects of the present

There always are some things that work. In any organisation, and probably also in any society, some aspects are okay, functional, or even good, delightful and enjoyable. Looking for them, and at them, may sometimes be a good way of getting into an appreciative mode. We sometimes take things for granted, especially if they work. I turn the light switch and there is light. Amazing! I turn on my computer and it works. Having spent quite some time recently watching someone else fix and improve my computer, I am now much more in awe of the fact that it does work, and of all the skill and energy that has made it so.

Starting by looking what is already here may be an approach that is relatively easy to start with; it gives us good and well-known handles to hold on to while we are exploring possible futures. Critiques usually start that way too, and it may be one reason why they sometimes seem to come easier to us than visions. However, there is no reason why we could not use that same route to let us be led towards appreciation, imagination and vision. Appreciative Inquiry, for instance, is an approach to organisational development suggesting to start not with identification of the problem, but with “Discovery”, that is, the discovery of things going right at the moment.¹

Bill Bryson starts “A Short History of Nearly Everything” by saying:

“Welcome. And congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it. Getting here wasn’t easy, I know. In fact, I suspect it was a little tougher than you realize.

To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and intriguingly obliging manner to create you. It’s an arrangement so specialized and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once. For the next many years (we hope) these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of deft, cooperative efforts necessary to keep you intact and let you experience the supremely agreeable but generally underappreciated state known as existence.”²

Depending on how much we take for granted, and how much we allow ourselves to be awed by, we may find quite a lot to appreciate in the present.

It could begin with the fact of our existence, or the existence of anything, really: space, matter, energy. The earth and the myriads of beings around us. From the miracle of clouds in the sky to the miracle of a sewage system running in interconnected underground tunnels underneath a whole city (!), we are surrounded by a world that is also truly amazing.

We may not always be in the mood to see it that way. Sometimes, the only authentic thing to do may be to feel, express and acknowledge pain, or fear, or aggression.

Gervase Bushe asks a similar question with respect to organisational development and Appreciative Inquiry. Is Appreciative Inquiry always the right approach to use? Or does it depend on the situation and the people in question, including their current emotional state?

“From a purely practical standpoint I believe researchers and practitioners will find that systems full of deeply held and unexpressed resentments will not tolerate an appreciative inquiry until there has been some expression and forgiving of those resentments. From a theoretical perspective there is the question of what happens to negative images and affect if they are ‘repressed’ from collective discussion by a zealous focus on the ‘positive’. Experience from psychoanalysis, sociology and medicine suggest repression usually results in some nasty side effects.”³

There needs to be authenticity and the concomitant ease in any act of appreciation; if we try to force it (in ourselves or in others) our attempts may simply backfire.

On the other hand, if the context is such that it allows for at least moderate forms of appreciation to be felt and expressed, such positive attention to what’s right with the present may indeed be helpful to ease the process of change. Within organisations and within societies, people may feel attracted to projects that begin by noticing and valuing what they have done and been so far. People have been putting a lot of energy into their work and lives to the present day. If that is not explicitly mentioned and valued, it may seem as if the judgement was that all of that was nothing, or good for nothing, and only problems and potentials remain. It may therefore help to point out that we do not start from zero. That a lot of work has been done already, and much has shown results. Celebrating what has been achieved is sometimes a phase recommended at the end of a project cycle.⁴ Perhaps it is also a good idea at the beginning of a project cycle. It recalls that we were not born yesterday, that we have already come a long way and learned and done much and done it well. From this (perhaps very satisfactory) point of our journey, we continue onward, and we are looking forward to figuring out whereto and how.

Appreciation of past and present efforts and doings may get people on board a process who may otherwise have been resentful. If people feel that their past work (and identity, maybe) are recognised and valued, that their skills, efforts and achievements are seen and appreciated, they naturally may be much more inclined to contribute their resources to the process that follows. In that sense, an appreciation of all the positive aspects of the past and the present may be an important factor facilitating change (rather than freezing us all in complacent immobility, which we sometimes seem to fear it might do).

I personally do not always find it easy to identify the aspects of the present I could honestly feel grateful for, the ones I truly find good, helpful and desirable. My attention often gets caught by the aspects I am dissatisfied with. However, very often the mere existence of the system I wish to improve entails such reasons for gratitude and appreciation. If I stop taking them for granted, I may begin to see the treasures as such.

To me, a good example in this respect is the school system. I am personally rather dissatisfied with a number of aspects of that system and would like to see it change. I can give a rather long list of all the bad I think the current system is doing to children and, in consequence, to society as a whole. However, I rarely pause to appreciate the fact that there is a school system. As soon as I do, I find it easy to honour the intentions people had when introducing schooling for all children, first rich, then poor, first boys, then girls. So much has been achieved, gradually, over time. The school system is evolving, with people always doing the best that is possible for them at the time. The school system is changing, and over the last 200 years it has indeed moved very far, and very much in the direction in which I would like it to go. And it is still moving. As a society, we have come a long way, and currently we are here. And here is where I can contribute, valuing the past that has brought us here, valuing all that has already been achieved and that is great about the present, and having a clear sense of direction, and all the joy and patience needed to move ahead.

1.2. Power of the present

The present, our daily experience and environment have a strong power, including a power that can be used to strengthen our visions. One good way of filling vision with power may be the creation of small real-life experiences. Living one's vision in small, but bodily ways can, in my experience, be an extremely powerful form of strengthening the vision. Nothing impresses us more than our own actions. The physical surroundings in which we find ourselves, and even more those we create for ourselves, have a deep impact on how we see the world. Thus planting beans on my balcony has profoundly affected my relation to food and to agriculture. It has added practically nothing to my knowledge: I did of course know that plants grow in the soil, that seeds do sprout, then blossom, and form fruit. Yet seeing that happen before my own eyes, those empty pots of brown earth, and then the tiny green leaves, and how big they grow, how quickly - I could almost watch them grow. They flowered all summer, and when the beans were there in autumn I almost could not eat them. Not so much because I knew them all personally and they had become so dear to me, but because that is not where food comes from, in my experience. Food comes from the kitchen, and before that, from the supermarket. Decades of experience had told me that. The rest was theoretical knowledge that had no relation to the life I led. Once I walked through rural Austria with a friend, and he plucked a leaf off a tree and ate it. I was shocked. You can not eat trees. You don't eat the landscape. That is not how it works; that is not food. Yet, of course, one can. It was a birch leaf, so it was bitter, but edible. It is little experiences like that birch leaf or the beans on my balcony that made me aware that in my daily experience, food was not something that grew anywhere. It is something that comes from shops and in packages. Small changes in my actual experiences opened a path for the theoretical knowledge I had to make a link with my actual life.

I find the beans on my balcony and my daily experience of cycling around town incredibly valuable (in many ways, but also) in their effect of adding power to my vision, in this case, to my vision of what a modern city can look like, and what kind of life we can lead in it.

It is of course possible to create bigger examples, to try to purposefully create an environment where larger parts of our visions may be implemented to a higher degree. Many initiatives of the *economía solidaria* could be referred to here, as well as ecovillages and other intentional communities. I will come back to the opportunities this entails in the chapter on creation of own spaces.

1.3. What about suffering in the present?

So creating positive experiences in the present may be encouraging and a workable way of filling our visions with power. But what about all the negative experiences I am still having in the present? What about oppression and suffering as they currently exist? Are we just to say that they are not there, and hope they'll disappear? Are we to focus on pleasant visions in order to escape from an unpleasant reality? Does a focus on vision not entail a danger of denial and cynicism?

If I understand social reality as being largely constructed through discourses, I will start asking what kind of stories we are telling ourselves and what kind of stories could be told. The stories we tell ourselves about the world, in the sense of discourse creation, have to be strong enough for us to live in. They need to feel real, plausible, in accordance with what I believe to be true about the world.

For me, it wouldn't work to tell myself that currently no babies are starving. I believe that they are, daily, and in great numbers. I also believe that that is suffering, great suffering. What I am looking for are stories about the world that allow me to feel good in the world as it is, *and* that allow me to contribute actively to the prosperity of life and the alleviation of suffering.

But how can I possibly feel good about the world as it is when thousands of babies are needlessly starving each day? And when there is war, and people are killing and battering each other, and trampling on the needs of plants and animals? The list of disasters continuously under way on earth in its present phase is very long indeed. So, how could we possibly feel good about the world as it is?

One thing that helps me here, again, is a longer time horizon. Perhaps together with a generally trusting, hopeful attitude towards the future. But that in itself would not be enough to develop a truly positive feeling about the present. It will, to my mind, need an additional turn, a particular story, to reconcile me with the imperfections I perceive in the present.

1.4. A two-year old child

One such story, or analogy, I would like to suggest is that of a human child. Children at the age of two, say, are both rather clumsy and inexperienced, and amazingly capable and clever. And incredibly curious. They want to see and touch and taste everything about the world, not too rarely hurting themselves in the process. Sometimes they hurt the world too, not so much from maliciousness as from lack of understanding or skill.

This is very much like humanity's current approach to the planet, one might say. Like a small child, we are very intelligent, very inexperienced, infinitely curious and incredibly alive. We are forever crawling and groping and learning, sometimes posing a danger to ourselves and to others. We are incredibly clever at finding things out and making them work, yet at the same time incredibly clumsy, unseeing, and maladroit. We keep hurting ourselves, and we keep hurting the planet. And then we may cry for a while, and then we carry on. And we are learning a lot, and at an incredible speed.

Speed, or time, is another interesting aspect in this analogy. Human children take quite a long time to grow up; yet at the same time to anyone living with them it can seem incredibly quick. It depends on our expectations and on the time horizon we choose. So it is with our view of humanity. Humanity, after all, hasn't been around for very long, compared to the existence of life on earth. In fact, for an analogy with a human child, picking a two-year old is already aiming very high. In terms of earth history, we've barely been born yet. We may feel impatient with humanity; why haven't we figured out how to live well on this earth yet? It's not that difficult, is it? How can we be so slow to pick it up? Yet looked at from another perspective, looking at a human race that's barely been born yet, we already know so much is amazing. My impatience evaporates. Humanity is changing fast, and all things take exactly the time they take.

Choosing the analogy of a small human child has another advantage: two-year old children, for example, are perfect as they are. "As they are" includes that they are growing, for that is part of what it means to be a child. But even though a two-year old can not walk and talk as well as, say, an eight-year old, there is no fault in the younger ones. New born babies are perfect, too, even though they can not walk or talk at all. They are miraculous. That they will grow and learn is part of their nature. Yet they are perfect on the very first day, before all the growing and learning is done, and they will still be perfect later on, at any given stage.

Perhaps that can serve as an analogy for humanity's present state. The two-year old walks, and stumbles, and falls, and gets hurt; and so does humanity. And while we are trying to learn, and to walk better and better, and to hurt ourselves less and less, it is all right if at the moment we still do fall over every now and then. Like the child, we are wonderful already.

The image of the child conveys both the patience, or even the glory of the present (including all the lack of skill), and the unerring certainty that we will move on, that growth is part of who we are, and that our activity is aimed in that direction—however aimless and clumsy it may seem at individual instances.

Humanity has been around for a few thousand years and has already learned and changed so much. Give us another few millennia. We'll grow and develop further, perhaps beyond imagination. Meanwhile, relish the present. We are incredible, with all our stumbling, our hurting and healing, our trying and erring; we are as miraculous as a small child.

1.5. Feeling good and doing good

So the suggestion is to try to create stories about the present that will help us feel good.

Is that really a good suggestion? Is it legitimate, or recommendable, to direct one's energies towards feeling good, just personally, in a world where lots of (other) people are suffering, and where violence is rife? Shouldn't we rather turn our energies towards that suffering in the world and try to do something about it?

I believe that this is what gives the attempt to feel good on a personal level such a bad reputation: the explicit or implicit assumption that we have to choose between feeling good and doing something useful; that there is a trade-off between the two. It suggests that as soon as I feel comfortable enough personally, I do not get active to help heal the world. However, if I do feel wounded, or angry, or afraid, or outraged, I will become active in the world, and through that action make it a better place. My action will try to remove, or at least lessen, the sources of my anger or anguish, whereas the feel-good approach essentially amounts to just looking away.

I believe that this kind of feel-good approach does indeed exist. It is possible to try to feel good, if I personally happen to be sitting in a relatively comfortable place, by just trying to pretend all other suffering does not exist and is certainly nothing to do with me. With such an approach I may not only fail to alleviate suffering where I could have, I may indeed be actively reproducing it, for instance through the consequences of my lifestyle. Clearly, this is not the approach I am trying to recommend here.

What I am aiming for is the kind of approach where the fact that I feel good on a personal level is precisely what makes me able to engage in the world in a helpful way. Ideally, it will give me the strength, the energy to move at all; the motivation, the friendliness and openness and interest in the world; the insight, the perception of what could possibly be done to help; and the ability to do it.

Thich Nhat Hanh, in a chapter entitled "Suffering is not enough"⁵ says:

"Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, any time. If we are not happy, if we are not peaceful, we cannot share peace and happiness with others."

It may be possible to get the energy for helpful action from other emotional states as well, such as anger or fear. Personally, I have decided to turn my attention to the possibility of helpful involvement out of joy. I feel that if there is a chance that it is equally efficient as action out of anger or fear, it is infinitely preferable.

It may be possible to improve the world through blood, sweat and tears. It is certainly possible to make it worse that way. The risk, to me, seems high. In any case, I feel that if it may be possible to improve the world through love and light, we'd be fools not to try (and to opt for blood, sweat and tears instead).

I don't know, of course, in what areas and to what extent it is indeed possible to improve the world through love and light. We do not know where this path may lead us, and how far. But we may find out by walking. I am pretty sure that an affirmative, open and friendly approach to political agency has more

potential than we have explored so far. I do not need to know if all problems of the world can be solved that way, or only some, or to some extent. As long as I can see one little area where it is possible to go further in that direction than we have done so far, I will direct my energy there. Having walked one step further along the path, I may gain another perspective and be able to see yet another step that can be taken. Or I may not; then I may turn to another approach. But while I can still see a next step ahead, I will move along the path that is most joyful, most welcoming, and most humane.

1.6. Gaia's cells

I would like to give one more example of a story I have found helpful, a story about the present phase of the world and the role of human beings within it. It has helped me to be reconciled emotionally, to have a positive feeling about where we might be going, to form visions of what that might look like and what I could do today to move in that direction.

Of course, all examples I give here are examples that were helpful for me. Other people might have others. Whether or not the particular examples I have chosen work for you as a reader, I hope it has become clear that the general procedure can also work with other stories, and other contents.

The next story or image I would like to share is drawing on the works of Peter Russell⁶. That story begins by recalling that many living beings, such as mammals, for example, have organs within their body, each with a specific form and function, that co-exist and complement each other, thus keeping the organism as a whole alive.

We may choose to look at the earth as one big living organism, Gaia. From that perspective, we might ask where the analogy for the organs would lie, and which organ humanity could represent in this larger being. Looking at the way organs develop in a human embryo, one may notice that there is a phase, fairly early on, where nerve cells, especially brain cells, start multiplying enormously. It is indeed beginning to seem quite out of proportion and a little worrying; however, they soon enough stop multiplying, and what they do from then on is create connections. They do this before birth, and continue afterwards, and at some point the whole nervous system reaches a stage of emergence, when the true function becomes apparent and the organ operational.

Here is the proposed analogy for humanity on earth: we have been multiplying to a somewhat worrying degree. Perhaps we will soon stop multiplying, and go on building connections – which is what we have already started doing. However, humanity is, in this analogy, still at the stage of the embryo, the organs not yet fully developed and not really fulfilling their function yet. We could see humanity as moving towards that point of emergence, where our true function becomes apparent and we begin to fulfil it. In analogy to the nerves and brain of a mammal, human beings would be spread around the globe, being connected not only to each other, but to all living beings and their needs. They would be aware of a multitude of particular situations, sensing what is called for in each, and communicating and reorganising all this information in a huge busy network like impulses between nerves and brain cells. As a result, all input and feedback is included, and appropriate, life-enhancing steps can be taken as needed.

1.7. Stories of emergence or emergency?

Stories such as the one by Peter Russell I have just rendered can be considered stories of emergence: stories telling us of substantive positive change lying ahead, of a change that is not just big, but that is a

change in quality. It is an entry into a new form of order, the apparition of functionalities that were not inherent in the previously existing individual parts, nor in the way they had interacted up to that point.

A number of stories of emergence are around at the moment, coming from different corners. These are hopeful stories. They do not prophesy the end of the world, but much rather a beginning of a world, a new, better world. The coming of the Age of Aquarius is one well-known from the 1960s. There are currently similar stories in circulation,⁷ often linked to the end of the Mayan calendar in 2012, when, so we are told, the world as a whole will move to a higher level of vibration, with the effect that people will become much wiser, more loving and more relaxed; which in turn has the understandable consequence of making a number of current problems (from wars to domestic quarrels to mistreatment of our living habitat) much easier to solve.

Other stories do not rely on astrological or metaphysical explanations, but also speak of the imminence of significant change or the beginning of another age. "The Great Turning" is the title of a book by David Korten, and also a term employed by Joanna Macy to refer to the next few decades, in which - so she hopes - human society will change radically in order to avoid the collapse it is otherwise doomed to.

This is where I would like to make the link from stories of emergence to stories of emergency. By that latter term I mean stories implying that we are in terrible danger, that there is little time left, and that urgent action is of utmost importance. Sometimes, stories of emergence and of emergency are combined and render a sort of make-or-break situation: either the world will soon be saved and glorious, or it will all go terribly wrong and we are all doomed. Now-or-never, all-or-nothing, good or evil, and we are the ones to tilt the balance. The burden of humanity's fate is on our shoulders, and this is the most decisive moment in all of world's history.

It seems to me that this setting bears a certain resemblance to that familiar from many Western cinema productions. The Lord of the Rings trilogy comes to my mind here, or Harry Potter's struggle against Voldemort and the Death Eaters. In many such movies, the world is threatened by terrible evil, and it seems almost hopeless to go against such huge and horrible forces; yet a few chosen ones take up the struggle, and with enormous effort and sacrifice are able to defeat evil - which immediately brings about good. The world is saved; against all odds.

I wonder how many similar mythological components we are using in our understanding of the world and in our approach to political agency.

The website dedicated to the ideas of David Korten's "The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community" speaks of an "epic passage"⁸, referring to the period ahead of us. What kind of mythology are we using here? The website continues to describe the ways of the Empire, and they appear to be all wrong, whereas those of Earth community appear to embody everything good. Furthermore the situation is presented as a decisive turning point in human history. And perhaps there are a few "chosen ones" who, through their foresight, courage and action navigate⁹ the world towards salvation.

I don't mean to say that mythological elements must be wrong or bad if they also appear in mainstream cinema. I just wish to remind myself that there always are several ways to frame a situation, and that we have a choice. We can choose between different versions, between different frames and narratives, between different mythological elements we wish to include. Which are the ones I find most helpful?

I personally am not very happy with stories of urgency and emergency. While emergency settings may bring forth unprecedented amounts of energy for a short amount of time, they can also make us less open to listening to various different perspectives, and perhaps even prone to authoritarian measures. I do not feel that I personally am most productive when I am in a hurry and under pressure. My creativity and my ability for discernment suffer. It is not the most enjoyable state, either.

Therefore I would like to find ways to frame our global and political situation in terms that will help me both to feel good and to be effective, a frame that is likely to inspire me and let the best qualities in me bloom. Stories of process, of unfolding, in my view, are likely to do that. Too much drama can easily get me stressed, or caught up in notions of my own importance. Some of that can also happen with positive

stories of emergence. For instance, Barbara Marx Hubbard is bubbling with enthusiasm in "Conscious Evolution", and adds quite some drama to our lives when she writes that as we are moving towards the next stages of our evolution

"... everything within us is magnified, our weaknesses as well as our strengths. The pressure on all social change agents is intense. (...) Many of us may fall by the wayside, at least for the moment. But those who persevere through the tension zone have a great reward in store for all us of."¹⁰

Reading that, I am quite busy trying to keep myself calm, cautious and relaxed. I do not wish to feel like a world-saving hero in a movie. I like movies, and I like dreams, including various mythological elements - but bringing them into my understanding of myself and my political agency this way would do more harm than good, I believe. Heroes and heroines in those movies have terribly unhelpful ways of behaving. They are very bad at talking to each other (not to mention anyone else), have a low capacity for discernment, and instead are given to storming off without explanation, flying in the faces of people and, unfortunately, being physically violent. They just aren't good role models, in my book. Which is one reason to be all the more cautious. If the mythology we are using to describe our world is similar to that of those movie-worlds - are we likely to import some of the same types of behaviour, forms of relating and acting?

Another point that I need to remind myself of while I am reading Barbara Marx Hubbard is to love myself as I am. Human beings, in my story, are wonderful and miraculous already, not only once we have overcome all our faults, saved the world and colonised other planets. I strongly assume Barbara Marx Hubbard would endorse that; nevertheless, stories of how great we soon will be to my mind always entail a certain danger that we feel as if we were not great as we are.

So, reading stories of emergence we may be well advised to keep an eye open for various underlying messages, and what other effects they might have on us.

As for stories of emergency, there is another aspect that struck me and that I would like to draw attention to. Again and again, I have asked myself with stories of emergency how clear we are on what the emergency or danger actually is, or how much that matters.

In a conversation with Erwin Laszlo and Stanislaw Grof on "Consciousness Revolution", Peter Russell asks:

"You talk of extinction, but what is it that is being threatened with extinction?"¹¹

He goes on to mention several possibilities: Life on earth? Humanity? The current form of Western civilisation? These are, after all, very different things.

"We have seen the fall of the Soviet system, but that did not spell the end of all the people there. It meant a lot changed, and hard times for many. But most of the people are still alive."¹²

It may be that even though the end of consumerism is not the end of the world, the word "end" may be enough to conjure up a particular form of reaction within us. Even the end of my job may feel like the end of my life.

Perhaps the reaction we have is fear; not fear of something, but unspecified fear. Just fear. Or perhaps that general fear is most closely connected to our fear of death - our personal, individual physical death. Overcoming that fear, and finding good ways of dying, may be liberating for my personal life, as several spiritual traditions assert. It may also change my approaches to political agency substantially.

Peter Russell says:

"Death is the only inevitability; yet most of us live our lives as if it were never going to happen. We avoid thinking about it. We live our life in denial of the one thing that cannot be denied. The same is true on a collective level. We fear the end of our world, the end of our civilization. But maybe that,

too, is inevitable. After all, no civilization in the past has lasted forever. Why should ours be any different? Both therapists and spiritual teachers tell us that accepting and embracing our own personal mortality is one of the healthiest and most liberating things we can do. Perhaps we should do the same collectively- accept and embrace the end of the world as we know it."¹³

Can we do that?

Johannes Heimrath suggested¹⁴ that we use cyclical images rather than one-directional arrows of progress to describe the world. One such image would be the young green grass growing underneath the high, old, withering brown grass. After winter, when the old grass has fallen to dust, the young green blades become clearly visible, and grow - and in time become high, brown, withering grass, with the fresh young grass beginning to grow underneath.

I have rarely heard stories of emergence continue on to the point where our newly evolved, cherished culture in turn grows old, and is replaced. Even organic metaphors tend to give more of a feeling of finality of the new glorious stage. For instance, a popular metaphor in the political sub-culture I have come to know is the one of a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly.¹⁵ We are invited to liken the pioneers of change¹⁶ in human society (including ourselves, perhaps), to the first imaginal cells inside the pupa, the first butterfly cells inside the caterpillar. These cells are identified as alien and fought by the caterpillar immune system. However, slowly, more and more imaginal cells appear, and in the end the whole caterpillar is transformed and emerges from the cocoon as a fully grown, beautiful butterfly. The story usually ends there, and leaves me with a pleasant, if not glorious feeling of "butterfly forever". I have never heard that story continued to the point where the butterfly form dies, and only the eggs survive, to turn into a new caterpillar when the time has come.

While I see the beauty of the butterfly story, I am asking myself whether I really want to tell stories that insinuate that the path I walk or propose is simply "the right one", the natural one, and effectively the inevitable one. I probably tend to be more comfortable with stories that present my path as one of many possibilities, as one we might prefer to choose, or as one that is there to complement others, but not to (eventually) win everyone over. Rather than assuming that what I/we believe has the power of a natural law behind it and is bound to become reality, I would like to tell a story where we have made an excellent contribution to make, but we have also forgotten something essential. We don't know what. But someone will notice. We don't know who. But that general assumption allows us to walk through the world in a state of curious anticipation. And when someone does turn up and say "That'll never work", we can say: "Oh, great. Maybe you are the one we've been looking for. Can you tell us what we have forgotten?". Assuming that we have great ideas but need to be complemented may lead to more inclusive, and also more productive, responses. Thinking we are right and the others just don't understand (yet) entails certain dangers.

Now, what about the aspect of transience? Do I wish to bring it into the stories I tell about the world, that form the background for my political agency?

I would like to give one example of an image or story that has helped me to reconcile happiness, gratefulness and the death of civilisation. It also draws on the repertoire of movies and novels, and for me encompasses a lot of the related positive emotions, thereby making it possible for me to marvel at our current civilisation, in spite, or perhaps even because of, its supposed finite nature.

There are many novels and movies where a team of dedicated researchers, or perhaps unsuspecting fishermen, stumble upon the remnants of an ancient culture. Be it overgrown temples hidden in the forest, or intergalactic artefacts found in the sand, curiosity and wonder are aroused, and slowly, slowly, they begin to find out more about the forgotten culture that has created such marvels. And the more vivid the images become, the more intense the dreams: what must it have been like to live in the cities of the Mayas, with thousands of people bustling in the streets; how wonderful it must have been to be in Atlantis, surrounded by miracles. It is this gaze of wonder and of yearning that I wish to take with me into the present. For I am in this unbelievably lucky situation: I have been able to travel back into the time when a hugely complex and sophisticated culture was in its prime: Europe in the early 21st century.

People are alive, trees are alive, technical artefacts everywhere; and I can witness it all. I am actually part of it. Rather than having to guess from left-over ruins, I can be right in the middle of it, I have time-travelled into it, and can walk and talk and touch and smell. Coming from a future where all this is past, I appreciate it all the more. Knowing this culture is going to end adds to the intensity of the appreciation of its existence, perhaps much in the way that realisation of my own mortality can add to the intensity with which I lead my life now.

I do of course, in my individual life, take care of my health and try to stay alive. But I do not dedicate my whole life to the purpose of avoiding death. Likewise, as a culture, we might take all the sensible steps suggesting themselves to ensure continuity - but we need not panic at the idea that our culture may also come to an end one day. Or that it may transform, change substantially.

One story about death that has touched me deeply was rendered by a participant at a symposium on integral politics in 2008¹⁷. She told us of a dream she had had at night: The situation was one of war, and a group of people were hiding in the basement, seeking shelter from air raids. Bombs and terror and blasts outside; then, a poison gas attack. There is only one gas mask in the basement. As the poison begins to seep into the basement, people are tearing the mask off each others face, the strongest ones fighting to get the mask for themselves, and people slowly beginning to stumble, to cough and to die from the poison.

She woke, and thought: oh no, that is not how I want it to be. That is not how I want to die. And she gave us a second version of that dream. The beginning is the same: War, bombs, people seeking shelter in the basement. Then the poison gas. And still only one gas mask. As one person gets the mask, all of them together begin to form a circle, and slowly dance together, arms around shoulders, and as they sing and dance they begin to get weak, and to stumble, to cough, and then die in each other's arms.

So the ending of the second story is not "happy". Still everyone dies. Except one person - which is probably more than could be said of the first version. At least one person survives. And all the others die as well as circumstances allow.

What was news to me is that we do not have to fight. Even when our own personal survival is threatened - we do not have to fight. Nor do we have to throw everything overboard that we have valued and desired all our lives - such as love, co-operation, community. We can accept to die, and experience and embody one last time that which is most important to us. Or at least not it's opposite.

I am not preaching sacrifice here; not at all. On the contrary, upholding these values is most likely to save us. In the second version of the story, at least one person survived. Had it been possible for more people to survive, a calm and co-operative mood in the group would have increased the likelihood of that option being discovered and implemented. "In case of emergency, please remain calm." Panic is likely to make it worse. Fighting is likely to make it worse. If that is so, we may be well advised to look for stories that help us remain calm and co-operative, also on the level of society. Reconciliation with our own, individual death may be a component that can help us with that endeavour.

1.8. Reinforcing positive aspects of the present

So understanding the present as a transitory phase, one that will pass or end, a part of an ever-changing whole, may help us to remain calm, and it may help us to cherish what is. Appreciation of the present - from whichever source - can, I believe, also be an starting point for political agency. In a mode of critique, we may identify what's wrong with the present and act against that. Likewise, in a mode of appreciation, we could identify what's good about the present and reinforce that.

Gervase Bushe says about the approach of appreciative inquiry:

“As a change technique, appreciative process involves tracking and fanning. Tracking is a state of mind where one is constantly looking for what one wants more of. It begins with the assumption that whatever one wants more of already exists, even if in small amounts. Fanning is any action that amplifies, encourages, and helps you to get more of whatever you are looking for.”¹⁸

We may try to identify aspects of our current lives that we value and appreciate, and that perhaps we would wish to see more of. “More of” in that context may mean different things: it could be that these aspects are to be seen more frequently, that they become the rule rather than the exception. It could mean extending them to a larger group of people. It could mean “more” in a qualitative sense: aspects that we have caught glimpses of so far could be integrated into our lives and into structures of society in a more profound way.

So we are proceeding in several steps already:

- identify aspects of the past and present that we appreciate and wish to see more of
- consider what “more of” might mean in that context
- see what factors might contribute to the occurrence, spreading or deepening of the desired aspects
- consider how these factors might be encouraged

In general, this approach is likely to lead to a very pleasant type of questions: what is good, what works well, what are helpful factors, who is able to contribute ... we go on discovering abundance and abilities.

If we are looking at problems, it may be natural to ask next what caused them, and then to be only a small step away from looking for culprits. If we are looking at potential, we may be more given to asking next who has the resources and abilities to help us fulfil it; the question of culprits does not even arise while we’re looking at strengths and potentials. That may lead to a way of seeing other people that is both pleasant and helpful: having the general habit of looking for the positive aspects in that person, the abilities, the strengths, the resources, the contributions; rather than faults or shortcomings. To my mind, such an approach to human encounters would move society a good deal in the direction of my political vision. In addition, it may be a great move towards an efficient office. If we are no longer busy at work trying to hide our mistakes and shortcomings, we can instead ask for help, and receive it, and thus make work not only much more agreeable, but also more productive. Perhaps noticing weak points is also important, and it is generally a question of balance. Personally, I have found that I was quite often in environments where we might all have benefited from a stronger focus on people’s positive sides.

One could also picture this as two different ways of moving an object (or a situation) in a desired direction: by pushing from behind, or by being ahead and pulling. Tom White, President of GTE Telephone Operations, seems to be expressing a similar idea when he is quoted on the use of Appreciative Inquiry:

“We can’t ignore problems. We just need to approach them from the other side.”¹⁹

Of course we still need to be careful in identifying what a desirable outcome or a positive aspect of the present is. If we slip into the internal logic of an organisation, we might easily forget to ask whether the organisation and its goals on the whole are useful for society and the well-being of the planet.²⁰

So I would suggest that when looking for positive aspects of the present, we keep both ends on the scale of magnitude open: we may marvel at minute details and also keep the very large picture in mind.

There is a strong link here to one of the strategies for political agency and communication I am going to suggest for political groups: being ourselves the positive examples others might wish to copy. This is essentially the same image, only with swapped roles: we can be inspired by existing positive examples, or we can be a positive example inspiring others. “Being the change we wish to see in the world” is one approach pointing in that direction, and initiatives such as eco-villages or projects in the economía solidaria may be considered in that light.

At this point it may also be worth remembering the enormous normative power the structures and surroundings we experience can have. Talking about things is one thing (and a powerful one in its own right), but seeing things happen on a material level, being able to touch them and walk around in them, and to physically take part in them is still yet quite another. Even if we experience that only for a moment or an odd day off, it may impress us in a profound and lasting way, and change our unconscious assumptions about the normal and the possible.

1.8.1. Thank-you letters

Once we have identified positive aspects of the present, how do we actually go about fanning and reinforcing them?

That will of course depend on the context and on what it actually is that we have identified. The concrete actions to be taken will probably vary as much as the circumstances we identify. Sometimes the very same old tools of political activism that have been employed a number of times before in a mode of critique will lend themselves to adaptation, allowing us to use them to reinforce aspects and tendencies seen as positive in the present.

For instance, writing protest letters is a common tool of political activism. We might now begin to write support letters, letters of encouragement and endorsement. For instance, I could identify politicians who are initiating or supporting legislative change that I deem desirable; or who are simply very agreeable and inspiring in the way they behave in the political arena. I can note things that have already been done that I approve of: a bike lane has been created in my street; access to kindergartens has been made easier for families of different nationalities; family laws accommodate for homosexuality; facilities have been made accessible for wheelchairs. Sometimes things happen which I do see as an improvement. Whatever they are, whether they are big or small: in any case there will have been people who have spoken and acted and made it possible for them to happen, perhaps investing quite a considerable amount of energy. Writing to these people, thanking them, appreciating what they have achieved, may give them the energy needed to go on. Even if I do not know who exactly stood behind these changes, I can still write a letter of thanks and appreciation to the political body likely to have been involved. This way perhaps my letter reaches someone within that body who has been opposed to these changes, and now sees that supporting such things also is a way to earn votes, or, generally speaking, feedback from satisfied members of the public. Perhaps it is even more effective in creating space for such changes for next time if the words of praise reach the ears and hands of those who had doubts and objections beforehand. Perhaps they will object a little less next time around, thus making things a lot easier for the ones trying to carry the project forward.

The method of writing support letters has already been adopted by civil society organisations, even by some as strongly rooted in protest and opposition as Greenpeace. For instance, in November 2008 Greenpeace called upon supporters to write personal picture postcards to those actors who were promising to take the environmentalists' stand in an important European Union meeting on genetically engineered crops: individual messages of support, thanks and encouragement. Greenpeace's website reports that thousands of messages had been sent, and also that the decisions taken at the EU meeting in December 2008 were by and large along the lines propagated by Greenpeace.²¹

Amnesty International, too, had internal debates about finding "positive" approaches to human rights work, as early as the 1990s, when I have been involved first on the board of the Austrian section, then in the EU office and the International Mandate Committee of Amnesty International.

Amnesty has traditionally worked in ways that were not easy to handle on an emotional level, even - or perhaps especially - for the active members and employees. Detailed reports of torture and ill-treatment really can be difficult to read. And a lot of Amnesty reports were like that: long lists of terrible things that had happened to actual people. Couldn't there also be a way, people within Amnesty were asking, where working for human rights does not carry a connotation of horror? Human rights, after all, are a

great, an inspiring thing, a big achievement of humanity, as well as one of its highest ideals. Surely it could be uplifting to talk about them, to work on them, to have one's thoughts and heart revolve around them?

So how does one work *for* human rights, other than working for them indirectly by working against their violation?

The general answer Amnesty found at the time was human rights education and the promotion of the ideas, values, and legal mechanisms relevant to human rights. That may be a good road to try. However, at least during the time I have followed this development closely, which was until the turn of the millennium, it was clear that the attention and energy flowing into this part of Amnesty's work was comparatively low. Not only the routine was bent to the traditional work of opposing concrete violations of human rights in particular countries, the intensity still peaked there as well. I do not remember anyone hitting on the idea of writing thank-you letters to politicians passing progressive legislation at the time. Even though Amnesty had been writing support letters almost from the beginning: but that was to prisoners of conscience, so that they would know someone outside is pushing for their release. Other letters were usually written to urge people to do something, not to thank them for what they are doing already.

However, I find it noteworthy that even in the 1990s within a campaigning organisation such as Amnesty International, the wish had arisen to find ways of working on the same issues, but on a more positive emotional basis, perhaps on inspiration and attraction rather than horror or outrage.

The general idea of thank-you letters has been around for some time. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote in the 1980s: "The peace movement can write very good protest letters, but they are not yet able to write a love letter. We need to learn to write a letter to the Congress or to the President of the United States that they will want to read, and not just throw away. The way you speak, the kind of understanding, the kind of language you use should not turn people off. The President is a person like any of us."²²

So what if everyone starts doing that?

If Greenpeace sends picture postcards of support to the European Union, that may have the enhanced effectiveness of the novel. Just as the individual picture postcards are different from the emails and petitions many organisations are using, so the positive, supportive, and thankful tone of the messages may contrast with the notes of protest so frequently received. So perhaps that works very well once, or twice. But what if it becomes commonplace, if all organisations are doing that all the time?

Imagine what a world it would be. What would it be like if a huge part of our communication about politics were to consist of endorsements, encouragements, expressions of gratitude, and good wishes for the continuation of particular projects. If projects die, not because they meet with an uproar of opposition, but simply because - unlike all other projects - they do not receive a lot of support. The political area might change almost beyond recognition. What kind of people would be attracted to become actors in such an environment, i.e. what kind of politicians would we breed or attract by creating such a type of political arena? Perhaps the massive spread of thank-you letters and similar means of political communication would be an excellent thing, sparking even additional positive side-effects the size of which can not yet be fathomed.

However, what if not everybody is adopting these methods? What if there is a torrent of loud messages screaming urgency, fear and anger, and we are the only nice and calm ones, saying "thank you" and "how wonderful" very often? Will our voice not be drowned by the general noise and excitement, and our effectiveness be very low?

Perhaps we will be as attractive as an oasis in the desert. If in the midst of battle there is one unexpected little corner of calm and balm, it may turn out to get a lot of attention from individual passers-by. Or, of course, it may be overlooked. Or it may work well for some situations but not for others. We may find out when we try.

- 1 Cooperrider/Whitney (2005), p.25
 - 2 Bryson (2003), p. 1
 - 3 Bushe, G. (2001), p.118
 - 4 For instance, Dragon Dreaming project management as presented by John Croft in Vienna on April 12th, 2010. www.dragondreaming.info/english/12-steps/
 - 5 Thich Nhat Hanh (1987), p. 11
 - 6 Russell (1990), p20-21
 - 7 for instance, the October 2010 issue of KGS - Körper Seele Geist / Berlin was entitled "2010 - Welt im Wandel: Das neue goldene Zeitalter, Wendezeit, Bewusstseinswandel", www.kgsberlin.de
 - 8 <http://thegreatturning.net/great-turning-epic-passage> [18 Sept. 2010]
 - 9 <http://thegreatturning.net/navigators> [18 Sept. 2010]
 - 10 Hubbard (1998), p.152
 - 11 Laszlo/Grof/Russell (2003), p.2
 - 12 Laszlo/Grof/Russell (2003), p.2
 - 13 Laszlo/Grof/Russell (2003), p.12-13
 - 14 Talk given on August 8th, 2010 at the Symposium "Integrale Politik", in the educational centre St.Arbogast in Götzis, Western Austria. www.integrale-politik.org
 - 15 for instance, Hubbard (1998), p.10
 - 16 "pioneers of change" is used as a general term here, but it is also the name of a learning community in Austria, a training course supporting young people initiating projects. That group had the hatching butterfly on the 2010 folder, the hatched butterfly is its general logo. The transformation of caterpillar to butterfly as analogy for our role in society was the lead theme of the opening talk given by Alfred Strigl at the pioneer project presentation at the Hub Vienna on October 22th, 2010. www.pioneersofchange.at
 - 17 Symposium "Integrale Politik", from 3-10 August 2010 in the educational centre St.Arbogast in Götzis, Western Austria. www.integrale-politik.org
 - 18 Bushe (2001), p.6
 - 19 Cooperrider/Whitney/Stavros (2008), p. XXI
and <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/practice/executive.cfm> [9 Feb 2010]
 - 20 This may be particularly relevant for organisational development work with commercial enterprises. However, NGOs and political groups also can become carried away by the need to raise funds, gather votes or signatures, or achieve a breakthrough on a single issue, losing sight of the question what the overall effect of their activity on society is.
- Appreciative Inquiry, it seems, has also been used with organisations that consider killing people an acceptable means of achieving their goals. Inspiring vocabulary can also hide gruesome facts. If the language of participation and empowerment is used in settings of violence, it can turn my stomach. For instance, there seems to be a large Appreciative Inquiry project with the US Navy, including titles such as "Forging an Empowered Culture of Excellence" [<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/practice/ppNavy.cfm>, Nov 3rd, 2010]. The first paragraph states that participants ranged "from seaman to Admiral, and represented all backgrounds in our Navy"; and that the aim was to "quickly get to decision points with input from all stakeholders". Using the word empowerment in a highly hierarchical chain-of-command setting already seems strange. But far more pressing is the question whether people (in Iraq or elsewhere) likely to get killed by Navy activities are not stakeholders. Is their input to be considered in any way? How would it change Navy structure and mission if it were?
- 21 www.greenpeace.org/international/campaigns/genetic-engineering/take-action, [22 Dec 2009]
 - 22 Thich Nhat Hanh (1987), p. 79-80