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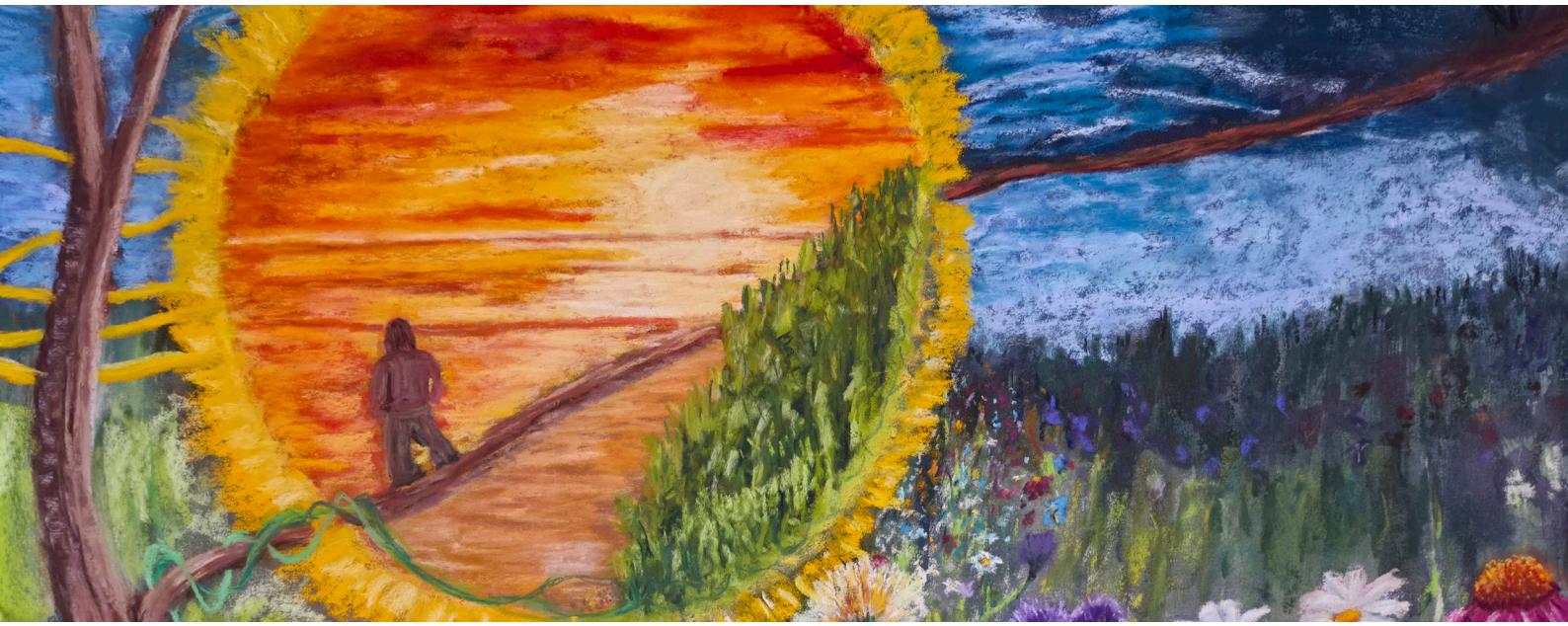

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AI Practitioner

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Expanding the Frame

Quantum Appreciation

Exploring the Parallels, Potentials and Synchronicities Between Appreciative Inquiry and Quantum Physics

Why were we drawn to explore the intersections of Quantum Physics and Appreciative Inquiry? Perhaps it is because we sense, more keenly than ever, that the world is in flux – faster, more unpredictable, and more fluid than we have known. In times like these, we reach for new ways of understanding to anchor ourselves. The ground beneath us may be shifting, but that shift is not necessarily a threat; it can also open space for possibility, creativity, and transformation.

In 1992, in her book *Leadership. And the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, Margaret Wheatley[1] drew the attention of the Organisational Development community to the idea that we can learn from the new realities of leading-edge science in shaping the organisations of the future. She employed the revelations of science in terms of images, metaphors, and ways of thinking to help us develop powerful new ways of seeing and acting in the world.

Quantum science in particular reshapes our understanding of the universe, suggesting we are all part of an intricately connected dynamic whole. The physicist David Bohm writes that the "inseparable quantum interconnectedness of the whole universe is the fundamental reality," and proposes that this includes consciousness.[2] However, as we know from history, radical shifts in thinking take time to percolate into everyday thought and action, and further still into the structures and organisations we create.

1 Wheatley, M. J. (2006) *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World,* 3rd ed. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

2 Bohm, D. & Hiley, B. J. (1975) On the Intuitive Understanding of Nonlocality as Implied by Quantum Theory. In *Foundations of Physics*, 5(1), 93–109. DOI: https://doi.org/ 10.1007/BF01100319

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Along with others,[3] we have noticed that the fundamentally different perspective that Appreciative Inquiry brings to organisational development resonates strongly with insights from quantum thinking. While we are not physicists and do not claim a detailed scientific understanding of quantum physics, this article explores the parallels between these two domains – particularly in relation to key Appreciative Inquiry principles such as Constructionism.

We also consider how cultivating a science-informed "quantum mindset" might further empower Appreciative Inquiry practitioners in their efforts to inspire and shape the organisations of the future.

The weird world of subatomic particles

The Double Slit Experiment: In a dimly lit laboratory, a beam of light or a stream of tiny particles is directed toward a barrier pierced by two narrow slits. Beyond it, a screen quietly records what arrives. Intuition suggests two bright bands should form, each aligned with a slit. Instead, a delicate pattern of alternating light and dark fringes emerges, as if waves are overlapping and interfering. Strangely, even when particles are sent one at a time, the same pattern gradually appears, hinting that each particle somehow passes through both slits at once and interferes with itself. Yet, the moment someone tries to observe which slit it goes through, the pattern vanishes, collapsing into two simple bands. The experiment lingers as a haunting reminder that at the smallest scales, reality behaves in ways that challenge our deepest assumptions about how the world works.

While we have referred to this as a "new" science, the original double-slit experiments date back to the early nineteenth century. The results of these investigations stand among the most profound and conceptually unsettling in modern science, and in their later developments helped to shape the emergence of quantum physics as a branch of science in the early twentieth century.

Originally designed to study the nature of light, and later extended to electrons and other particles, the double-slit experiments reveal a reality that defies classical intuition. They challenge the familiar Newtonian "machine metaphor" of a predictable, deterministic universe composed of separate parts governed by fixed laws. The implications reach far beyond physics, raising profound questions about observation, the limits of knowledge, and even the possible role of consciousness in shaping reality.

Excellent descriptions of these simple but foundational experiments, repeated many thousands of times, are readily accessible online. Here we focus instead on several key outcomes, most notably the observer effect, which heralds a quiet but radical shift in how we understand reality itself.

Before the double-slit experiments, it was taken for granted that the world and its components have definite properties, positions, paths, and states, whether or not anyone is watching them. Observation might reveal those properties, perhaps imperfectly, but it didn't create them. The outcomes of the double-slit experiments suggest that certain properties do not exist in a definite form until

3 Watkins, J. M., Mohr, B. J. & Kelly, R. (2011) Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the speed of imagination, 2nd ed. Pfeiffer; Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney, D. & Stavros, J. M. (2008) The Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For leaders of change, 2nd ed. Berrett Koehler; Kelm, J. B. (2005) Appreciative Living: The principles of Appreciative Inquiry in daily life. Venet Publishers.

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an observation or "measurement" occurs – measurement being any form of observational interaction with a quantum system, human or otherwise.[4]

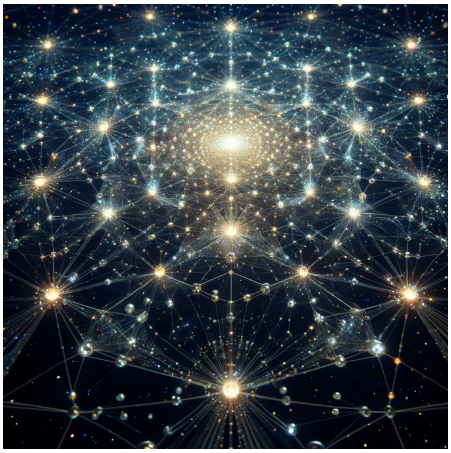
Superposition

What exists prior to observation is a range of possibilities; a structured set of potential outcomes referred to as a "superposition". This range of possibilities is not a random jumble; the possibilities exist in a delicate quantum coherence, a kind of hidden harmony where all potential states are interconnected and aligned, allowing patterns and outcomes to emerge as a whole.

When a measurement happens, the coherent superposition, i.e. the hidden harmony of all possible states, "collapses" into a single, definite outcome. In other words, the multiple possibilities that were simultaneously aligned and interconnected reduce to one observed reality. The act of measurement transforms the system from a state of potential and relational connection into a specific, actualised state, revealing one possibility, with the others disappearing.

Philosophically, this raises profound questions about the organisation of the universe, suggesting it may be a deeply interconnected, web-like network; it even opens the prospect that consciousness itself could influence the collapse of potentialities into actuality.

'Spooky action at a distance'



As part of efforts to locate these findings within the paradigm of classical physics, researchers discovered that when two or more particles interact, they can become permanently linked, so that the state of one instantly affects the state of the other, no matter how far apart they are – even if they are on opposite sides of the universe. Einstein famously referred to this as "spooky action at a distance".[5]

This "entanglement" calls into question the idea that objects exist independently and are only influenced by their immediate surroundings. It implies a deeper, non-local, more instantaneous interaction transcending space and time. Again, this raises profound questions about the nature of information, identity, and causation, and even invites speculation on whether space and time

4 Feynman, R. P., Leighton, R. B. & Sands, M. (1965) *The Feynman Lectures on Physics, Vol. 3: Quantum Mechanics*. Addison-Wesley.

5 Einstein, A. (1947) Letter to Max Born, 3 March 1947. In Born, M. (ed.), (1971) *The Born–Einstein Letters: Correspondence between Albert Einstein and Max and Hedwig Born from 1916 to 1955*. Macmillan, pp. 158–159.

ISBN 978-1-907549-68-7

are emergent properties rather than fundamental structures. In other words, could consciousness be the cause of the existence of the material universe?[6]

The strange phenomena of the subatomic particle world are now being harnessed in a practical sense in the emerging field of quantum computing – but how does any of this relate to the macro world of human relationships?

Implications of the quantum metaphor

Human experiences and social interactions are fundamentally relational.

The connection lies in the underlying patterns of interconnectedness, uncertainty, and relationality. Human experiences and social interactions are fundamentally relational: our identities, choices, and perceptions are shaped through our connections with others; isolation is an illusion. We are simultaneously observer and observed, possessing the power to collapse possibilities into reality for ourselves and for others. In parallel, we exist in a kind of superposition, awaiting observation to help shape the unfolding of the future. We exist as an intrinsic element of an interconnected whole where observation, participation, and relationships are integral to the emergence of phenomena, whether quantum or social.

In practical terms, the quantum metaphor implies that our empathy, attention, and presence matter: the observation we provide to others can shape their experience and the outcomes of interactions. Superposition – the idea of multiple possibilities existing simultaneously – encourages us to see relationships and situations as dynamic, not fixed, with every thought, conversation, or choice having the potential to open up a spectrum of possible new futures.

Entanglement reminds us that human relationships are deeply interconnected in ways that are not always visible.

Entanglement reminds us that human relationships are deeply interconnected in ways that are not always visible. Our thoughts, words, and actions can affect others in subtle or profound ways, perhaps even instantaneously. How we engage with someone can influence not only the individual but the wider web of connections they inhabit. In short, entanglement calls our attention to the fact that human experience is co-created, that connection is fundamental, and that nurturing awareness of these invisible threads can lead to more meaningful, creative, and responsible relationships.

Where we are now – the Newtonian metaphor

While the language of the quantum realm offers a compelling metaphor for human relationships, it does not reflect the prevailing lived reality, at least

6 Levy, P., (2018) *The Quantum Revelation: A radical synthesis of science and spirituality.* SelectBooks.

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in the Western world. That reality is often marked by polarisation, anxiety, and disconnection, rooted in the deeply ingrained belief that we are discrete, self-contained entities interacting through forces that push and pull on other separate selves.

These ideas are grounded in the 17th century Newtonian "machine" metaphor; a way of seeing the word that assumes predictability, linear cause-and-effect, controllability, and the idea of the world as machine. So deeply ingrained is this perspective that our human systems, social structures, and institutions have naturally developed in its image. We see it in rigid hierarchies, standardised procedures, and the assumption that systems can be controlled, optimised, and "fixed" by breaking them into parts.

Organisations are often managed like clockwork mechanisms, where efficiency, stability, and top-down control are prioritised, and people are treated as interchangeable components. This mindset reinforces the belief that outcomes can be engineered through precise planning and measurement, leaving less room for emergence, relationships, or the creative potential that more dynamic, relational (or "quantum-like") perspectives would emphasise.

Yet, while the Newtonian mechanical worldview continues to shape organisational thought, decades of constructionist theory have been driving a shift toward more dynamic and relational perspectives. In parallel, physics has begun to move beyond the rigid determinism traditionally associated with Newtonian mechanics. Change, it seems, is on the horizon.

How does the world of Quantum Physics relate to Appreciative Inquiry?

Both see the world as dynamic, co-created, and emergent.

Appreciative Inquiry and quantum physics share striking conceptual parallels, despite emerging from vastly different domains. At their core, both challenge Newtonian mechanistic, reductionist worldviews and invite a relational, participatory understanding of reality. Both see the world as dynamic, co-created, and emergent.

In short, Appreciative Inquiry can be seen as a human-system application of quantum thinking as Magruder Watkins et al. (2011) describe:

> *Appreciative Inquiry is rooted in the values of the emerging paradigm. In this mode, organisations create and move toward their vision of the desired future in harmony with a world view that sees the interconnection of all parts of the system; that accepts the complexity and subjectivity of the world; that knows planning to be a continuous and iterative process; that embraces the concept of*

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many truths and multiple ways to reach a goal; that understands the relational nature of the world; that believes information to be a primal creative force; and that knows language to be the creator of "reality".[7]

The act of observation plays a role in shaping what becomes real, rather than merely revealing a fixed state.

This alignment becomes clearer through a closer examination of how the principles of Appreciative Inquiry reflect the quantum metaphor:

The Constructionist principle holds that reality is not simply discovered, but created through our interactions, especially through language, captured in the phrase "words make worlds". This resonates strongly with quantum metaphors, where the act of observation plays a role in shaping what becomes real, rather than merely revealing a fixed state. In both perspectives, meaning and form emerge through participation: just as measurement influences the state of a quantum system, the questions we ask and the conversations we hold influence the realities we bring into being. From this view, language is not neutral but generative, actively shaping perceptions, relationships, and possibilities – and therefore the future that unfolds.

The Simultaneity principle suggests that inquiry and change are not separate moments but occur together; the act of asking questions begins to shape the system. This aligns with quantum metaphors such as entanglement, where elements of a system are interconnected in such a way that a change in one immediately influences the whole. In both views, there is no neutral observation: engagement itself is an intervention. Just as entangled particles respond in relation to one another, the questions we introduce into a human system ripple through relationships, shifting attention, meaning, and behaviour simultaneously. From this perspective, inquiry is inherently relational and dynamic, with immediate and distributed effects across the system.

Multiple possibilities exist at once.

The Anticipatory principle holds that the images we hold of the future shape present action, as people and systems move in the direction of what they collectively imagine. This aligns with quantum metaphors such as "superposition", where multiple possibilities exist at once and the system's unfolding is shaped by the range of potential outcomes. From both perspectives, the future is not a distant endpoint but an active force in the present: envisioned outcomes act like attractors, guiding choices, energy, and behaviour. Thus, positive and compelling images of the future do not merely inspire – they help bring that future into being by shaping what is noticed, valued, and enacted.

7 Watkins, J. M., Mohr, B. J. & Kelly, R. (2011) Appreciative inquiry: Change at the speed of imagination, 2nd ed. Pfeiffer.

ISBN 978-1-907549-68-7

The narratives we tell are not merely descriptive, they actively influence what comes into being.

The Poetic principle emphasises that organisations, like living stories, are continuously being co-authored, and that the narratives we choose to use shape what the system becomes. Again, this resonates with the idea of superposition, where multiple possibilities exist simultaneously until observation or interaction brings one into being. Just as a quantum system holds many potential states, the stories, metaphors, and language within a human system create a field of potential realities, with the ones we focus on gaining energy and form. In this way, both the poetic principle and the quantum perspective highlight the generative power of our attention and the meanings we create: the narratives we tell are not merely descriptive, they actively influence what comes into being.

The Positive principle asserts that focusing on strengths, successes, and what gives life to a system amplifies energy, engagement, and possibilities. This resonates with the quantum idea of coherence and resonance, where aligned energy patterns reinforce each other and increase the likelihood of emergent outcomes. Just as entangled or coherent quantum states influence each other across a system, emphasising positivity creates ripple effects that propagate through relationships, culture, and collective attention, shaping what manifests in the organisation. In both cases, energy and focus are generative forces: by consciously attending to the positive, systems become more vibrant, resilient, and capable of creating desired realities.

Parts of a system are deeply linked, and changes in one area can affect the entire system.

Finally, **the Wholeness principle** highlights that individuals, teams, and organisations operate as interconnected, living systems, where the health of the whole arises from the relationships among the parts. This resonates with quantum ideas like entanglement, showing that parts of a system are deeply linked, and changes in one area can affect the entire system. Just as a quantum system cannot be understood by isolating individual particles, human systems cannot be understood or transformed by focusing on separate components alone. Attention, energy, and dialogue ripple through relationships, creating coherence and new possibilities across the whole, showing that connection and wholeness are both essential and generative.

Why does a connection between Appreciative Inquiry and Quantum Physics matter?

Entrenched patterns of linear thinking coexist with aspirations for human connection, empathy, and belonging.

As Appreciative Inquiry practitioners, we are often invited to work our magic in environments that seem, on the surface, to embrace a positive, valuing culture, yet at their core, a Newtonian mindset hums along: predictable, linear, and resistant to change. Such underlying dynamics tend to reveal themselves most clearly in conditions of economic strain. This apparent duality is hardly surprising; it mirrors the world we live in, where entrenched patterns of linear thinking coexist with aspirations for human connection, empathy, and belonging.

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In such conditions, effecting sustainable change is no small task. Rather than resisting the tension, we work within it, helping people glimpse the possibilities of a different mindset and experience the transformative energy and creativity that materialise when the burden of command and control begins to lift.

The emerging quantum paradigm situates our work within a far larger frame.

We need not be discouraged, however; it is clear that the emerging quantum paradigm situates our work within a far larger frame. We are labouring at the leading edge of this shift in thinking – helping it take root in the world, seeding ideas that will, in time, find fertile ground and come into their own – and the science has our back.

We can also afford to be patient: the rise of the pervasive Newtonian paradigm was not immediate; it unfolded gradually over centuries, reshaping the way societies organised work, authority, knowledge, and more. In much the same way, the emerging quantum paradigm, emphasising relationship, uncertainty, and participation, is unlikely to replace the Newtonian worldview overnight. Its influence will take time to permeate structures and practices at scale, yet we can be confident we are part of a quiet sea change, steadily transforming how we understand and engage with human systems.

What does this mean for Appreciative Inquiry practice?

For many of us, Appreciative Inquiry has already aligned our actions in the field with the principles of the quantum realm. Yet to fully embody this mindset, we must also turn our attention inward, becoming aware of our own underlying beliefs, noticing how they shape the way we perceive and act.

We become part of the systems we engage in.

In this sense, as in the quantum world, we become part of the systems we engage in. The personal presence and energy we bring subtly influences how things unfold. We are not neutral observers, but active participants in the realities we help to create.

In a quantum system, observation influences, out of a range of possibilities, what becomes actual. Similarly, when we ask intentionally appreciative questions, we direct attention, and shape what comes into focus. By choosing generative questions that explore strengths, successes, and possibilities, we are in effect selecting and amplifying certain potentials over others, helping them to take form in the shared reality of the group.

It is also helpful to recognise the role of co-creation, noticing how outcomes rarely exist in isolation but take shape through the interactions between facilitators and participants. Just as the quantum paradigm moves beyond the Newtonian, Appreciative Inquiry invites us to move away from objective

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diagnoses and towards co-created futures. When space is opened for collaborative exploration, where collective dreaming and shared meaning-making are valued, the system itself begins to contribute to how the process unfolds. From this perspective, reality is not something fixed "out there", but something that takes shape through what we attend to, engage with, and ultimately choose together.

Honouring multiple perspectives is central to this work.

Honouring multiple perspectives is central to this work. Just as quantum states can exist in superposition, multiple realities can coexist simultaneously within an organisation. By seeking and holding diverse viewpoints without rushing to collapse them into a single narrative, we allow complexity, ambiguity, and relational dynamics to surface, enriching the collective understanding.

Creating space for emergence is another essential practice. Rather than imposing fixed solutions, we focus on building conditions where possibilities can unfold organically. By fostering environments in which innovation, creativity, and new ways of seeing are nurtured rather than forced, we allow generative ideas to take root and grow.

Iteration and reflection are equally vital.

Iteration and reflection are equally vital. Change is rarely linear; it is iterative and emergent. Each conversation, reflection, or question subtly shifts the system's trajectory, and through continuous learning and adaptation, we refine our practice as we engage with the evolving dynamics of the group.

There is something to be noticed about presence and resonance in this work. From a quantum-informed perspective, the quality of our attention, energy, and intention can be seen as part of the relational field itself, subtly influencing what comes into coherence within a group. Openness, curiosity, and relational awareness, when present, tend to resonate through the system, deepening engagement and allowing shared focus and new possibilities to take shape.

Conclusions

We are living in a time of rapid flux, where the world often feels unpredictable and unstable. Headlines grab our attention, yet, as the historian Arnold Toynbee observed, the deeper forces of change work quietly beneath the surface:

> *The things that make good headlines attract our attention because they are on the surface of the stream of life, and they distract our attention from the slower, impalpable, imponderable movements that work below the surface and penetrate to the depths. But, of course, it is really these deeper, slower*

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It is really these deeper, slower movements that, in the end, make history.
Arnold Toynbee

movements that, in the end, make history...[8]

In much the same way, the emerging quantum paradigm is quietly reshaping the currents of reality, organisations, and human systems. It is less about dramatic, visible shifts and more about the subtle, relational, and interconnected movements that gradually transform how we live, work, and lead. Change is unfolding not through force, but through attention, interaction, and co-creation, like waves slowly shaping a shoreline.

Appreciative Inquiry, far from being a passing trend, has been at the forefront of this shift since its inception in the 1980s by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva. By focusing on strengths, possibilities, and relationships, it invites us to move away from deficit-focused models and toward futures we can co-create together. In this sense, Appreciative Inquiry is a quantum participatory epistemology: a way of knowing in which reality is not simply observed, but enacted through our attention, energy, and engagement.

We are participants in a quiet revolution.

When we practice in this spirit, we become part of the deeper currents that Toynbee described: subtle, enduring, transformative. We are participants in a quiet revolution, accessing the power of deliberate positive intention, helping to shape human systems in ways that nurture connection, creativity, and possibility, sowing the seeds of a world not yet fully imagined but already coming into being.

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8 Toynbee, A. J., n.d. Quoted in: Toynbee, P. (1976) *Arnold Toynbee: A Life.* Oxford University Press.

Back to Table of Contents