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Feature Choice by Gervase Bushe
Foundations of Appreciative Inquiry: History, Criticism and Potential

ABSTRACT
Bushe traces the
development of AI from
Cooperrider's discovery of
the excitement of focusing
on what gives life to an
organization through to
the controversies and
potential for AI now.
Key moments include
the transition of AI from
a research approach
to change process,
development of the 4-D
model and three waves of
AI criticism. He concludes
with Cooperrider's
thoughts on the next
transformational moment
in AI.

I was recently asked to write an overview of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Bushe, 2012) and in the process of preparing that wanted to gain a clear view of its history as viewed by the main actors at the time. My conversations with them can help us to understand what AI is, and can be, and free us from being locked into the '4-D Model' and the tendency to polarize 'negative' and 'positive'. I will also review some of the history of AI criticism, and end this essay with what I think is the key controversy and potential AI faces at this moment in its history.

A brief history: the beginnings of AI
The origin of AI can be traced to the close relationship between the doctoral program in organizational behaviour (OB) at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio and the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, an esteemed health care organization with facilities only a few blocks apart from each other. The doctoral program in OB at Case is unique in America in stressing both rigorous grounding in theory and research methods, while also stressing application of theory and method to the issues of organizational leadership and change. Many AI theorists and researchers are graduates (e.g., Barrett, Bright, Bushe, Cooperrider, Johnson, Ludema, Powley, Sekerka, Stavros and Thatchenkery).

For over a decade, the Cleveland Clinic had served as a site for doctoral student research and consulting internships, and in 1979 a doctoral student named David Cooperrider was employed in one such internship as part of a research project on physician leadership.

As Cooperrider interviewed physician leaders throughout the organization he became more and more excited by the organizational processes and forms of governance that had evolved in what was a large and successful partnership of over 300 doctors. While the study collected data on problems and issues, Suresh Srivastva was impressed by the excitement in his young student. He encouraged him to put the problems aside and focus on what gave life and vitality to the organization.

[Cooperrider] thought organizational studies needed new metaphors that would be more generative.

Based on this study Cooperrider began to develop a theory of 'the egalitarian organization' (Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1986). Near the end of 1980 he was asked to present the emerging themes of that study to Cleveland Clinic's Board of Governors and put a footnote in the report that this was not focusing on problems but looking at what gave life to an extraordinary system and so was an 'appreciative analysis'. There was tremendous interest in that report and it created a stir throughout the organization.

At that point it dawned on Cooperrider that his interest was shifting from issues of organization design and functioning to the nature of inquiry. Powerfully affected by Ken Gergen's (1978) ideas on social research and influenced also by Morgan's (1980) work on the power of metaphor to shape organizational theorizing, he thought organizational studies needed new metaphors that would be more generative. He concluded that organization as a mystery and miracle could provide a continuously generative metaphor. While reading an anthology on the philosophy of art (Rader, 1979) he was struck by Rader's distinction between communities of interpretation (science) and communities of appreciation (art). Why should these be separate, he wondered? Why not bring them together? At his first presentation on the egalitarian organization at the Academy of Management in 1984, as an aside he showed a diagram contrasting problem solving with appreciative analysis and proposed that, instead of seeing organizations as problems to be solved, organizations been seen as mysteries to be appreciated. He was laughed at.

At that moment a 'light bulb' went off – the power of questions ... inquiry as the engine of change – and Appreciative Inquiry was born.

That year he and Frank Barrett, another student working under Srivastva, were engaged in an organization development (OD) project where the standard action research feedback process was being met with a high level of conflict and hostility. During a meeting amongst the three and Ron Fry (a professor), the emotional baggage from their experience led them to argue with each other. As that dynamic became more uncomfortable – and unusual – Srivastva said, 'I wonder if what is going on now is a consequence of the questions we are asking?'

At that moment a 'light bulb' went off – the power of questions, the deficit nature of most questions, questions beginning the change, inquiry as the engine of change – and Appreciative Inquiry was born. Cooperrider and Barrett went off and reconceptualised everything they were doing with that client. They engaged the managers in an inquiry into the best practices in another organization which completely changed the dynamics in the system and led to major improvements (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990). Concurrently, Cooperrider did a survey-based, empirical study on the impact of inquiry on social systems, which solidified his views and became his doctoral dissertation on Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 1986).

The first presentation of AI as a new change philosophy

Cooperrider's first presentation of AI to organization development (OD) scholars and practitioners at the 1985 OD Network Conference in San Francisco argued that problem-solving processes tended to exacerbate the problems they were attempting to solve, and that more change could be got from focusing members' attention on the 'life giving properties' of their social systems. It was my first exposure to AI and I remember how the majority of those in attendance were incredulous at the suggestion that they should stop focusing on problems. It seemed too one sided. Many thought the argument that diagnosis should be abandoned, as it simply recreated the mental models of those doing the diagnosis, was fanciful at best.

Appreciative Inquiry did not begin life as an organizational change technique – it began as a research method for making grounded theory-building more generative.

A small core of OD practitioners, however, disenchanted with how slow action research seemed and how little change seemed to come from conventional, participative change processes, were excited by the potential AI offered. This change practice grounded in social constructionism promised a much higher level of engagement by system members.

A few experiments utilizing this new philosophy (for at the time it was more a philosophy than a method) took place in the 1980s, the most significant of which was sponsored by John Carter of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. Carter's idea was to engage an organization with dozens of locations, in an organization-wide inquiry involving 600 interviews in a short time span. This led Carter to come up with the idea to train employees to interview other employees, an innovation that has become central to many AI interventions. (Carter and Johnson, 1999).

Research method or OD technique?
Yet, Appreciative Inquiry did not begin life as an organizational change technique; it began as a research method for making grounded theory-building more generative (Cooperrider, 1986; Cooperrider and Sekerka, 2006). The question was how to do research in a way that would generate new ideas? Cooperrider argued that new ideas are the most potent force for change, but his focus was on inquiry, not on change. AI comes from a constructive reimagining of postmodern philosophy.

Acknowledging that 'objective' research is not possible and that all social research is inherently biased by the positioning of the researcher, Cooperrider argued this was not a reason to give up on the pursuit of knowledge. On the contrary, his view was that it frees us to take the idea that organizations are made and imagined to its logical conclusion: that organizational inquiry is simultaneously the production of self-and-world. Therefore a wide field of creative, positive, possibility beckons us (Cooperrider, Barrett and Srivastva, 1995). Applying this insight led to the Social Innovations in Global Management (SIGMA) research study, which was the launching ground for the evolution and dissemination of AI.

SIGMA, social innovation and change management
SIGMA was seeded in the mid 1980s when Cooperrider met Jane Magruder Watkins, an OD consultant with a focus on community development and global experience, especially in Africa. She immediately embraced AI and invited Cooperrider to work with her in South Africa. That experience left a strong impression on him and created an interest in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Cooperrider had been influenced by William Whyte's (1982) proposal that studying social innovations might be more useful for solving human problems than problem-solving interventions. Having recently completed his Ph.D. and been hired onto the OB faculty at Case, Cooperrider and another faculty member, Bill Pasmore, developed an interest in studying non-governmental organizations as social innovations that might hold clues to new, improved forms of organizing and change management.

Responding to a challenge from the Dean of the Management School to identify the important managerial issues of the next century, they argued that the key task of executive leadership was the ability to bring people, ideas and resources together across difficult boundaries into new configurations in the

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pursuit of practical outcomes. They further argued that successful NGOs had the best track records at doing precisely that, and that studying them should result in new insights into executive processes. They proposed using AI as the research method for such a study. Scott Cowen, the Dean, was impressed with Cooperrider's vision and reasoning and helped acquire the initial $150,000 to study a few NGOs and organize the conference in 1989 that launched the SIGMA study.

Watkins had been instrumental in helping design that conference and a year later was involved, with Ada Jo Mann, in trying to convince USAID that capacity building in NGOs and private voluntary organizations (PVOs) was critical to ensuring that aid money was being used well. They suggested enlisting the OB department at Case to develop what became the Global Excellence in Management (GEM) initiative. This resulted in over seven million dollars in grants from USAID that, from 1990 to 1995, engaged more than 20 doctoral students and faculty members in working with over 150 PVOs and NGOs. This provided the ground for learning how to facilitate multi-stakeholder forms of inquiry and helped spread the AI philosophy and method around the world.

Engaging the whole system

During the early SIGMA projects a doctoral student, Tojo Thatchenkery, took the idea of building generative theory with a client system to an extreme. Up until then, Cooperrider and his colleagues were still analyzing data collected from Discovery as researchers, fairly independent of organizational members, and feeding back their findings. While studying the Intercultural Affairs Institute using AI, however, organizational members took over the data analysis process and became fully engaged in the theory building process that emerged. Thatchenkery argued that truly generative theory could only emerge from engaging the whole system in the theory building process itself (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996; Thatchenkery, 1994).

In 1992, Bliss Browne, a community development organizer in Chicago, began using AI to change that city. Browne and her team launched an early AI process that involved hundreds of thousands of appreciative interviews over many years in Chicago (Browne and Jain, 2002). Browne's image of doing a million interviews stimulated Cooperrider's imagination about what was possible and increased his appetite for engaging systems as a whole. The 'Imagine Chicago' experiment went on to be copied in hundreds of communities, further spreading AI theory and practice.

Foundation of the Taos Institute

In the early 90s another event that would have a significant impact on the evolution and dissemination of AI was a meeting between Diana Whitney and David Cooperrider. Whitney, a management consultant with a doctorate in communications and an interest in social constructionism, had invited a small group of scholars and practitioners to a meeting to discuss ways of applying the theory to practical issues.

One of the invitees was Ken Gergen, who had met Cooperrider and Srivastva, and, impressed by the things they were doing, invited them along. One result of this meeting was the birth of the Taos Institute, a collection of individuals committed to the exploration and evolution of social constructionist approaches to personal and organizational change. Another was a partnership between

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Whitney and Cooperrider that resulted in a series of significant consulting assignments where the methodology of AI as a change process coalesced into the form most associated with it today.

Filling the void: early books on AI

During the 1990s Cooperrider resisted mounting calls for him to write a book on the methodology of AI. His belief was that the philosophy of AI was paramount, and his preference was to encourage widespread experimentation and innovation in methods. His concern was that any book on an AI method would lead people to lose sight of the underlying issues he was most concerned with and stop experimentation and innovation.

The result was that others stepped in to fill the void. The first was the aptly named Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry (Hammond, 1996), perhaps the most widely read book on AI. Though well intentioned, the unfortunate effect was to take a profound philosophical perspective on organizations and change and turn it into a fairly simple set of steps focused on uncovering people's 'best of' stories and somehow using those to identify change objectives. The other two early books on the subject were by Charles Elliot (1999) and Watkins and Mohr (2001).

Elliot's book (he was introduced to AI by Jane Watkins while she was his doctoral student at Cambridge) was a fairly scholarly examination of his application of AI in community development organizations in Africa with some thoughtful exploration of the resulting change processes, primarily from a psychoanalytic perspective. Watkins' and Mohr's book was a 'how to' for consultants from the instructors of National Training Laboratory's (NTL) AI course. Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard Mohr's courses in AI at NTL were instrumental in spreading AI to the OD community and their book was widely read.

The unfortunate result of all these early books, however, was to promulgate an image of AI as action research with a positive question (instead of diagnosing problems, collect 'best of' stories and instead of problem solving, engage in 'design'). This image continues to plague textbook descriptions of AI, academic critiques and practitioner descriptions, and the very important distinctions between diagnostic and dialogic approaches to change have been ignored (Bushe and Marshak, 2009). A second consequence (and benefit) is that approaches to AI have proliferated, and it is inaccurate to describe AI practice in any single way.

Development of the 4-D model

In the late 1990s the '4-D model' of Appreciative Inquiry appeared and has come to be so strongly associated with AI that for many, it is AI. Prior to this, AI practitioners had relied on the initial set of 4 principles (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) which stated that inquiry into the social potential of a social system should begin with appreciation, be collaborative, provocative and applicable. The original method called for a collective discovery process using

1) grounded observation to identify the best of what is
2) vision and logic to identify ideals of what might be
3) collaborative dialogue and choice to achieve consent about what should be
4) collective experimentation to discover what can be.

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Most inquiries focused on what gave 'life' to the group or organization by asking participants to describe the time in their organizational experience they most felt alive, energized and excited in that organization. These stories were then used to create a platform for participants to identify their ideals and propose 'provocative propositions', statements about how the organization should be that were intended to be inspirational but not necessarily attainable.

As the idea of Appreciative Inquiry spread and was used by more consultants, many inquiries shifted from looking at the 'life giving properties' to focus on specific organizational concerns, like customer service or workplace safety. Provocative propositions morphed from the inspirational to more attainable Design Statements. It wasn't until 1997 that the 4 D model solidified. Cooperrider had used the terms affirmative topic and Discovery in his dissertation.

In 1995, during a course lecture, Srivastva described Discovery leading to group Dream and then group Destiny. Then in 1997, while Cooperrider was working with a group of consultants for Save the Children in Africa, an attempt to integrate AI with their consulting model led to the insertion of a Design phase and the final Delivery phase and the 4D model was born which persists to this day. A number of practitioner critiques pointed out that the 4D model omitted an important first step in the AI process of identifying the focus of the inquiry itself. The Clergy Leadership Institute in the U.S. suggested 'Define' as the first step and some AI models refer to a 5–D model. Cooperrider's dissertation called this the 'affirmative topic' and many models have retained that label.

The millennium: AI comes into its own
The turn of the millennium saw an explosion in the use of AI, and books and articles on the topic. Between 2001 and 2003, books by Cooperrider and his colleagues on the theory and practice of AI were finally published containing important theoretical and practical statements (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Yeager and Whitney, 2001; Fry, Barrett, Seiling and Whitney, 2002; Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffen, 2003; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003). An early participant, Anne Radford from the UK, decided in 1998 to organize a newsletter for those interested in this new form of organization development practice, which has developed into the quarterly publication you are reading now (AI Practitioner), a key source for disseminating ideas and experiences with AI. Thousands of managers and consultants attended Appreciative Inquiry courses and it moved into the corporate mainstream.

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) identified eight 'forms of engagement' used by AI practitioners. These ranged from interventions where a sole consultant or a small representative group of people do the AI on behalf of a larger group of people, to those where most or all of the whole system is engaged in the entire 4-D process. The majority of case studies of transformational change have been of the latter variety (Barrett and Fry, 2005; Barros and Cooperrider, 2000; Bushe and Kassam, 2005; Fry et. al., 2002; Ludema et. al., 2003; Ludema and Hinrichs, 2003; Powley, Fry, Barrett and Bright, 2004) leading to an increasing emphasis in the AI literature on widespread engagement as central to successful AI change efforts (Bushe, in press; Cheung-Judge and Powley, 2006; Cooperrider and Sekerka, 2006), particularly the Appreciative Inquiry Summit (Ludema et.al, 2003; Whitney and Cooperrider, 2000).

AI as a research method is not interested in discovering what is but in allowing a collective to uncover what could be.

There are some voices, however, that caution against seeing AI as an 'event', however large scale, and argue that it is more effective to think of AI as a long term process punctuated by events (Vanstone and Dalbiez, 2008; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003). They note that as much or more change comes from the interactions that take place in the work place as people appreciatively inquire, trade stories and are impacted by new conversations (Bushe, 2001) as it does from new ideas or plans.

Criticism of AI

Critiques of AI have become more sophisticated in recent years, overcoming earlier criticism which came from people not very conversant with the process or underlying theory. By and large they have questioned an exclusive focus on 'the positive' and have come in three waves. The first wave came from OD scholars who generally asserted that a balanced focus on what's working and what's dysfunctional was more likely to generate a valid diagnosis than just one or the other.

The most cogent of these came from Golembiewski (1998, 2000) who expressed concerns that AI advocates were anti-research. Golembiewski, operating out of a positivistic, modernist mindset, did not seem to understand the profound shift in worldview of social constructionism that underlies AI. Social constructionists argue that all research only makes sense within a community of discourse and, that social science research, in particular, constructs the world it studies. As a result, social constructionists do not believe that any theory or method is about 'the truth' (including social constructionism) but, rather, that every theory and method is a human construction that allows for some things to be seen and done and for other things to be overlooked or unavailable.

From this point of view, AI as a research method is not interested in discovering what is but in allowing a collective to uncover what could be. Similarly, it doesn't make sense to ask whether AI (or any OD method) generates valid information. Instead, AI advocates would ask of AI (and any OD method) whose interests does it serve and is it generative in the service of those interests?

The second wave of critiques

The next wave of critiques were, ironically, grounded in social constructionism but described a poorly informed and simplistic understanding of AI. (e.g., Fineman, 2006; Grant and Humphries, 2006). Fineman's (2006) otherwise well-reasoned and nuanced critique of positive organizational scholarship describes Appreciative Inquiry as 'asking positive questions' and based mainly on the force of 'positive emotions'. He doesn't seem to recognize that advocates of AI are just as suspicious as critical theorists '… about a research methodology that claims a monopoly on the truth and that sets the knower apart from the knowledge gleaned' (Fineman, 2006, p. 284).

He says nothing to address those AI advocates who are suspicious of a social theory that assumes human relations always function within a structure of oppressor and oppressed. Critical theory provides academics with lots of fodder for admonishing others on how they should and shouldn't see the world, often in a language that your average manager wouldn't understand (e.g., Boje, 2010). Show us examples of critical-theory-driven interventions changing any organization, or improving the world in any way, they would ask.

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What is positive for some may be negative for others.

The most recent wave

The third wave has come from scholar practitioners who seem sympathetic to AI but more aware of its limitations. A common concern is with the possibility that a focus on positive stories and experiences during the discovery phase will invalidate the negative organizational experiences of participants and repress potentially important and meaningful conversations that need to take place (Barge and Oliver, 2003; Egan and Lancaster, 2005; Fitzgerald, Oliver and Hoaxey, 2010; Miller, Fitzgerald, Murrell, Preston and Ambekar, 2005; Oliver, 2005a; Pratt, 2002; Reason, 2000). Pratt (2002) identified limitations in asking participants to inquire appreciatively in systems with unexpressed resentments. Her case study and reflections suggest that until unspoken resentments are surfaced and expressed, participants will find Appreciative Inquiry invalidating.

Oliver (2005b) takes this a step further and argues that if AI is used to stifle valid expressions of hurt, injustice and ill treatment, the opposite of what AI purports to do will in fact occur; distrust, disengagement and devaluation. There is little doubt that some managers and consultants have used the veneer of AI to enforce a conversation that only allows discussion of 'the positive' to avoid surfacing anxiety, incompetence or unethical issues (Bushe, 2007; Fitzgerald et.al. 2010). This overemphasis on 'the positive' and suggestions for how to ameliorate it in AI change processes have recently emerged by emphasizing generativity (Bright, Powley, Fry & Barrett, in press; Bushe 2007, in press; Miller et.al., 2005) and by a re-emphasis on AI as an inquiry into what gives life to social systems (Bright & Cameron, 2009; Copperrider & Avital, 2004).

Christine Oliver (Barge and Oliver, 2003; Fitzgerald et al, 2010; Oliver, 2005a; 2005b) has provided a series of cogent arguments for thinking of AI as more than just studying 'the best of' and bringing greater reflexivity to AI practice. Barge and Oliver argue that some AI advocates paint a picture of appreciation as manifested by managers expressing positive feedback and praise, focusing solely on moments of excellence, success stories and the like. They argue for a different image of appreciation in which managers make judgments about what will be life generating and position themselves in the conversation in ways that respect the complexity of the situation and keep conversations generative. That, for them, means exploring vulnerabilities, fears, distress and criticism, as well as moments of excellence.

Shadow: positive and negative

Oliver's (2005b) critique of AI's habit of talking about positive and negative as having intrinsic meaning, instead of acknowledging that what is positive for some may be negative for others, goes to the heart of the matter. Social constructionists argue that such meanings can't be pre-assigned by a third party; they only emerge in relationship and even then such meanings are multiple, partial and dynamic. It is hard to argue that such polarization doesn't show up with regularity in descriptions of AI, but is that really what is going on in successful AI practice? Is it even possible to inquire into images of a positive future without evoking the negative past or present?

Just as AI theorists argue that behind every negative image lies the positive (Bright et al, in press), social constructionists would argue that behind every positive image lies a negative one. Fitzgerald et.al. (2010) provide numerous examples to suggest that AI evokes 'shadow'. Early AI theory argued that

'The generative potential of AI is most likely to come from embracing the polarities of human existence.' Pam Johnson

conversations about the best of what is or was are necessary to create an emotional field of safety for organizational members to talk about the dreams that are really in their hearts (Bushe, 1995). This has been construed to mean that conversations about negative experiences should be avoided, and there are many, unfortunately simplistic, practitioner descriptions of AI that reinforce this image. In practice, however, the invitation to focus on the positive and the act of remembering high points in life can evoke sadness, anger and despair – perhaps that the current situation is not like that, perhaps that the high point story happened so long ago, or seems so infrequent, perhaps a deep yearning for something different from current experience is touched (Bushe, 2010).

While there is a large area of agreement between those coming out of the Case school of AI and Barge and Oliver's position, particularly with the recent addition of analogic modes of Appreciative Inquiry (Bright et.al. in press), the idea that inquiry into deficit experiences is rarely generative is foundational to the birth of AI. Does inquiry into distress create more distress, or is it just the way we inquire into distress that makes it so? Is it possible to inquire into distress in a way that elevates and activates positive action? The work of Pam Johnson (in press) suggests it is.

The creative tension of polarities
Johnson's exploration of the dilemmas faced in her AI practice is perhaps the most beautiful, and certainly the most personal, AI article I've read. Johnson explores the many ways casting an appreciative eye can generate 'negative' experiences and how, in turn, exploring those experiences appreciatively can result in 'positive', generative, outcomes. She acknowledges the dilemma at the heart of the Appreciative Inquiry project: 'AI could only be differentiated by using the language of deficit discourse to define the problem that AI would solve' (Johnson, in press). By polarizing AI and problem-solving, an either/or dynamic was set that continues to manifest in descriptions of AI. AI is described as a method of change that doesn't focus on problems, but research suggests transformational change will not occur from AI unless it addresses problems of real concern to organizational members (Bushe, 2010a). Rather than staying stuck in a dualistic, either/or discourse of positive or negative, Johnson argues that the generative potential of AI is most likely to come from embracing the polarities of human existence and that it is the tensions of those very forces that most give life and vitality to organizations.

Potential of AI
While Cooperrider would not disagree with Johnson's nuanced and sensitive exploration of light and shadow, he is suspicious of the nagging desire to bring deficit-based theories of change back into play:

'I think we are still on this quest for a full blown non-deficit theory of change. I'm not saying that the other isn't a way of change but I am saying that we are still in our infancy in understanding non-deficit, strength-based or life-centric approaches to change. William James called for it back in 1902, in Varieties of Religious Experience, when he said we know a lot about the kind of change that happens when people feel threatened, feel fear and violence is coming at them, but we don't know much about the kind of change that happens when, in his words, "everything is hot and alive within us and everything reconfigures itself around it". Whether someone would call the initiating experience "positive" or "negative", the transformational moment is a pro-fusion moment when

something so deeply good and loving is touched in us that everything is changed – that's the kind of change I'm talking about... I don't think we really understand the possibilities in that kind of change yet and we aren't going to understand them until we take this to the extremes' (personal correspondence, March 30, 2010).

Conclusion

Regrettably, this history is North American centric, as that is where I live and work, and I don't know about the ways in which AI has moved through the rest of the world. As well, this history does not consider all the innovations in leadership and organizational practices that have been sparked by Appreciative Inquiry. I hope it does serve, however, to remind us that AI is more a point of view than a method. Its power as a change method depends on avoiding dogmatism and adherence to any particular model and, instead, allowing for an ongoing generative conversation amongst practitioners and researchers. How do we find ways to talk about this 'transformational, pro-fusion moment' without polarization of negative versus positive and problem-solving versus appreciation? I believe that is the most generative conversation we can now have, and having it will ensure the history of AI is still being lived.

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