

Peggy Holman
Interviewed by Michael Dowd in the series,
The Future is Calling Us to Greatness

Michael: Hi Peggy. Good to have you with us.

Peggy: Hi Michael. It's great to be here.

Michael: So, I've been looking forward to this conversation. First of all, just so our viewers know, Peggy is just one of my dearest friends, we've been having monthly conversations with another friend of ours, Tom Atlee, actually two other friends, Susan Canon, for close to 10 years now. And so I just think the world of Peggy, but rather than me sort of effuse about you, Peggy, one of the things I'd love to do is just invite you—I've been doing this with all the participants in this series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*—to just share with any listeners or viewers that aren't familiar with you, or with your work, sort of give us the who is Peggy Holman and what do you bring to the world, and don't be bashful.

Peggy: Great. Thank you. So, who am I? I have worn a variety of hats through the years. I think the one that we connected over is the work that I've been doing with communities and organizations over the last 20-plus years that involves using conversational practices that enable very diverse groups of people to deal with complex issues in very creative ways. In that particular realm, I'm author of two books. One is actually an edited collection called *The Change Handbook*, that has sometimes been called the Bible of the field for this practice called "Whole System Change" that is widely used in organizations, and is used more and more in community settings. And these are basically practices that enable you to bring groups of any size—literally some of these have been used with thousands of people in a room, sometimes with very conflicted topics, in ways that bring about really creative and innovative outcomes. The second edition of that book came out in 2007, and we went from 18 practices in the first book to 61 in the second. And, given that kind of proliferation, it drove me nuts. The second book, is, you know, it's a great handbook. And I'm a person who likes to explore the deeper patterns and principles underneath something and it led to a book that I published in 2010, called, *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*. And it's actually around this notion of emergence that I think you and I first connected, um, Michael, when I got this invitation out of the blue from you and our mutual friend, Tom Atlee, about an evolutionary salon that was focussed on evolution and emergence. Anyway, this particular book looks at emergence from the point of view of how it shows up in our social systems and our organizations and communities. Um, and has been pretty central to my own exploration for the last 20-plus years of understanding how we live in an emergent world.

Michael: Yeah. That's great. In fact I just want to interject one thing here. If you, or if anybody watching this or listening to this works with groups of people of any size and/or you are curious about this whole field of emergence, definitely check out the process handbook—what's the actual title?

Peggy: *The Change Handbook*.

Michael: *The Change Handbook*, right, exactly. I mean it's a door stopper, but there are some absolutely stunningly effective ways of working with groups of people in that book, and then also Peggy's book on emergence.

Peggy: Which is, hopefully, gives you the set of principles that underlie all of the practices, and therefore provide some elbow room. I'll just mention on, with emergence as kind of the sandwich, the heart of what I do, ah, I come out of an information technologies background, and stumbled, really, into this kind of conversational work because, um, as is often the case, was working on a technology system for an organization that was in trouble. And it wasn't in trouble because of technological reasons; it was in trouble because of relational reasons—different parts of the company didn't talk to each other and were in fights over, you know, how the system should be implemented. And so these became my pathway into understanding better ways of working with groups. And I'm currently the executive director of an organization called Journalism that Matters, which is really, um, about 14 years ago I started working with journalism organizations and the notions of change and emergence, because of an insight that the kinds of practices—these kinds of conversational practices—are based in a belief that change doesn't happen because we get information that tells us that it would be a really good idea if we were to make these changes, because, as you well know, humans don't generally work entirely from just their rational selves, um, but that we change through the conversations that we have. And because the stories that we tell ourselves about who we are—essentially our cultural identity, the cultural narrative in which we live—uh, is so influenced by the stories journalists tell us, um, my own sense was that, if we want to create a better world, that working with journalism and becoming more conscious about their role in the shaping of our cultural narratives was pretty critical. And so I have been working in that realm for the last 14 years or so, and took a formal role in that with this non-profit I helped co-found with three career journalists.

Michael: Well, you know, I want to ask about process stuff, but I really want you to, sort of, continue following down this thread, because I think your work with journalists and this whole journalism that matters, and, you know, we're seeing a collapse of the publishing industry, the journalistic industry, and you know how stories are reported, and this sort of thing, and so your work there is really vital, in my

opinion. And the whole notion of emergence—you know, why is this work of helping human beings communicate to each other in ways that facilitate collective intelligence, in ways that facilitate new breakthroughs in understanding, in ways that facilitate helping us act on the information that we have from the world that science gives us—in terms of our relationship with the planet and where it's good and where it's dysfunctional, and things like that. But also, the role—as you were just saying—the role of journalists in this process. So go a little bit further down that path before we come back to some of the process stuff.

Peggy: Um, well, in a funny way, I actually want to talk about it from the frame of how I look at emergence, because it puts the role, um...

Michael: *(Interrupting.)* Well, for people who aren't familiar with the term emergence, or have a sort of vague sense, give just a little nutshell there first.

Peggy: Ok. So, um, a way of thinking about emergence, I think, that makes it pretty accessible and is close enough to accurate to be useful, which is the notion of order arising out of chaos, that emergence is the arising of novelty, the arising of something that never existed before coming out of what's fallen apart before it. So, um, there's a pattern of emergence that I find underpins everything from the way it shows up in biology to the way it shows up in human systems. And it's the notion that all change starts with a disturbance. So, it has pretty significant implications for us as individuals and as a culture, in that when we see disruptions around us, the relationship that we have with disruption often starts with resistance or anger or fear, and yet, if that's the doorway into change, developing a relationship in which we can be curious about disruption, see it as the larger system trying to get our attention, it sets us up for a very different kind of experience. Which, frankly, is part of the message to journalists, because one of the insights I've had about where this work on emergence and journalists intersect is the notion that in these times of upheaval in which we're currently living, one of the most important things that journalists can help us do is navigate our way through. And journalism, if you stop and think about it, has generally assumed that business as usual, that the status quo, is the way we want things to be, and therefore stories are generally told through that lens. And so just the awareness that there is another kind of lens to look through, a lens that helps us get curious about, to look at the openings, to ask questions of possibility at that place of disruption. Ah, it takes us down a very different path.

Michael: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Peggy: So, just to kind of complete the layers of that, if the doorway to change is through disruption, then asking a question of possibility becomes a way of creating a safe space for ourselves—creating a bubble, if you will—for getting curious about it,

for having a clarity of direction, because questions are incredibly powerful ways of setting a course of action. So, given climate change, what's possible? What can we do in this daunting challenge that we're facing. So rather than focus on the woe is me, and what we can't do anymore, by asking a question of possibility you set clear direction. Um, it contains an invitation, an implicit invitation, because, after all, when you're talking about something complex, it's not something you can do on your own. And it becomes an attractor, it draws those who may have an interest in. So, rather than disruption being a place where we want to box ourselves in or go hide in a cave, by asking a question of possibility, we create, in essence, you can think of it as a strange attractor, that allow those who are drawn to it to join us. And into that, then, we can step into a space of exploring the differences to discover the ones that can make a difference. So, for many that's chaotic territory. It can feel out of control, because it's an area of pioneering, of experimentation, of not knowing. And that in-between space of not knowing is a space that, for many who are used to knowing what's going on, having clear direction, an orderly life, to suddenly be invited into the territory of the unknown can be daunting.

Michael: Yeah, and scary.

Peggy: Yup. It's also, if you want innovation—by definition—you have to go through a space of unknown. Otherwise there is nothing new. And so we move from disruption into differentiation. And that, kind of, um, experimentation—creativity, the arts are wonderful in this—this is territory where we need to bring all of ourselves, our head, our heart, our body, our spirit. And through the interactions with the diversity of people who are effected by, who make up the system of, uh, whatever it is you're dealing with. And I do want to emphasize diversity is a really important element of that, because typically the disruption occurs because there's some sort of, um, some aspect of the system that we were ignoring. And it shows up by, you know, hitting us over the head; and, if we try and ignore it or push it away, it will ultimately come back, only louder and potentially more destructive, as we see—as the storms are getting worse with climate change—as we see the falling apart of, whether it's our educational system or system of journalism and communication, um, we see this dynamic in play in many areas. But, ultimately, through the interactions, through the—in many ways, the—random interactions, um, themes start coalescing. A few basic ideas begin to come together, and when we name them they begin to, uh, can begin to take hold, and we find a new coherence which has emerged from all of the differentiation. So that pattern of disruption, differentiation, and coherence is the basis of the work that I've done, um, in thinking about how social systems go through change.

Michael: Yeah, that's great. That was a good overview, too. One of the things that you, um...I've been, sort of a *possibilitarian*, I guess, for many, many years. But the particular way that I language, one of my favorite mantras, um, I actually got from

you, or you helped me word it this way, which is just basically: “Ok, this is what’s real, now what’s possible?” And to stand in that place of, ok, I can’t change what’s real, but I can focus on, “Oh, shit!” or I can focus on “Ok, what’s possible now?” What could emerge? What novelty might come into being? What opportunities, or sensitivities, or awareness, or whatever, what new relationships, can emerge out of this breakdown, chaos, destruction, whatever? And um, you know, as I often say, reality is my god; that is, reality, what’s real, is what I’m my biggest “Yes!” to, is my ultimate commitment. But that phrase, “Ok, here’s what’s real, now what’s possible?” is just one of the most useful tools in my entire toolbox, and I thank you for that wording.

Peggy: I think it’s one of the most profound questions you can ask yourself. And after going through the angst—because our emotional selves are certainly part of the change—and so, you know, when you’re hit by the unexpected or the disruptive, I am not saying, you know...don’t try and squash whatever feelings come up. I mean, they’re real.

Michael: Yes, exactly. It’s part of the equation.

Peggy: It’s just remembering to have in your hip pocket, that question, that once you take a deep breath, you can ask yourself, “Ok, given all that, what’s possible now?”

Michael: Yeah. I remember years ago, gosh, maybe more than a decade now, that one of the mantras that I was using at that time was...oh, gosh, where was I going? Huh, I’m blanking. It had to do with...huy, oh, well... see if it comes back to me....

So, Peggy, could you share a little bit more about why, at this time in history especially—the title of this whole series is *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*, and what I’m really hoping for, and have actually experienced now, and I think I’ve already recorded about a dozen of the interviews—is how to hold the scary stuff that we are now aware of, or are becoming ever-increasingly aware of—in terms of climate change, global warming, peak oil, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, species extinction, and, of course climate change exacerbates a lot of this, and the suffering that goes along—how to hold all of that in a way that allows us to not be paralyzed, to not fall victim to either the path of utter denial—like things are just going to keep getting better and better, there’s no problem here, what John Michael Greer calls, “the myth of perpetual progress”—or the corresponding place that many people go to, which is: we can’t do anything about it anyway, it’s going to hell in a handbasket, sort of the myth of the apocalypse. How do we stay in this place of moral integrity, this place in between—the way Kathleen Dean Moore talks about moral integrity—where we’re inspired to be in action, without denying our fears, without denying our anger, without denying whatever other feelings are there, because, as you said, that’s part of the equation.

So, how do you do that? How do you hold these big issues in ways that allow you to wake up every morning and play your part in this Great Work?

Peggy: It's such an important question Michael. Um, there's a phrase—a mantra—I got from Dee Hock, that, um, who is the person who created BESA and coined the term *chaordic*. I was at a lunch once and he asked this question that I've carried with me ever since, which is, or it was a statement. And what he said was, "Things are too bad to be pessimistic."

Michael: Yeah. I love that one.

Peggy: And I think that kind of captures it, you know? I have *a* life to live. I want to do something with meaning in it just because it makes life richer and more full. And I take that phrase and I put it side by side, um, a framework from Buddhism. I was exposed a number of years ago, through a workshop called the Nine Gates Mystery School—workshop is a bit of an understatement, it was two 10-day sessions six months apart, that delved deeply into seven different mystic traditions to explore life and self and the world. And we looked at death through a Buddhist lens. And it was profoundly powerful, because part of the insight is that once we accept the fact that we will die, there is a freeing associated with that, and I feel that. There is the possibility that our species will go extinct. I mean that is a reality as much as the fact that I will die. And, having embraced that, uh, it puts me in an extraordinarily free place to say, "Now what? What's possible now?" And my personal choice, in terms of how I spend my time, is I would much rather do it on something that holds meaning than to party till the apocalypse. And here's the other piece of it, and I guess this is the inspirational piece, my belief is: if our species does survive, it's because we have reached a different place in our consciousness. Because we're not gonna do it if we collapse into little factions that are all fighting each other. We will survive this because we have found that higher place within ourselves, that higher potential that I believe that we as humans, as a species are capable of, and we'll have made that emergent leap into a very, in a sense, a higher order complexity of social system that is more collaborative, that is more consciously self-organizing—it's always self-organizing, but that we will work more congruent with the patterns of self-organization. And, as such, you know, it certainly won't be a cake-walk by any stretch of the imagination. For one thing, I think that, from everything I've read, we've passed the point of no return in terms of change, such that we are clearly going to be facing some very hard times, and many won't make it.

Michael: Yeah. Well, I'm so glad you brought all that up, especially the piece about death, because, um, as you know, and I've actually mentioned in a few of these conversations, how central death and mortality—both individual and collective—is to me, and to Connie, and the work that we do. One of the reasons why I'm so

evangelistic about “Big History,” or “The Epic of Evolution,” or “The Universe Story,” (it’s called different things,) is because it’s a creation story—it’s a story that tells us who we are, where we are in time and space, where we came from, who we’re related to; and it also gives a clear sense of how vital and necessary destruction and breakdown and chaos have been throughout evolutionary history—but it also gives us a uniting narrative, where, rather than divisive creation stories or divisive narratives, this is the story that *includes* other stories, not in a colonizing way but in a way that helps us see that we’re all part of one human species, one human family, one body of life, and that, to the degree that we continue to act as we have for the last 500 years or so—as if nature were simply an object, a thing, something we can use for our benefit, rather than a subjective reality that we need to relate to in a responsible, honorable way—if we don’t make that shift, as you say, the shift in consciousness—but it has to do with feeling and thinking and how we, whether we relate in an honorable or a dishonorable way—with reality, with nature, with time. And I just think your work with helping human beings as parts of groups, as part of multi-cellular organisms—that’s what organizations are, is multi-cellular organisms—so how do we have the healthiest multi-cellular organisms that are possible. Well, there’s a lot that we can learn from science and nature and how it happens in the natural world and natural systems, and there’s a lot that we’ve learned now over the course of human evolution—what works and what doesn’t, what creates healthy systems and what creates dysfunctional systems. And so that’s where I see your work being so vital in this moving us forward into some kind of a healthy—hopefully healthy—future, but yet, as you say, being present to the possibility that we might not make it. One of the other people I’m interviewing in this series, Carolyn Baker, is really holding that space—almost like a hospice worker—holding that space that yes, we as a species might not exist, or at least there might be such a tremendous suffering and die-off that, sure, there might be a few million human beings, but we could create the conditions for either our total demise or such a catastrophic set-back—and yet how to hold that, like a hospice worker, someone who views death as sacred, as part of the process of life. Um, I know I’m motivated, I’m not—I mean I do slip occasionally into despair or anger or fear, or whatever, those are normal; but I don’t typically stay there, and part of that is because, as you say, quoting Dee Hock, you know, that things are too bad to be pessimistic. It’s arrogant to—you know, that we are the result of 13.2 billion years of creativity, and each of us is the survivor of survivors of survivors of survivors of survivors of countless chaos and breakdowns—ah, it would be arrogant to assume that we can’t make it again. So, how do we stay engaged? And I just love your work in that regard.

Peggy: Thank you. You just reminded me of a piece that I wrote recently for a leadership blog that looks at a model of change that was actually developed by the Berkana Institute, which is the non-profit that Meg Wheatley helped start, Margaret Wheatley who wrote *Leadership and the New Science*. And they call it their “Two

Loop Model.” And it’s, uh, picture a rising curve that comes up and falls, and as that loop is dying that there is another loop that starts small, and as this one (*first*) is dying, the second loop is beginning its (*inaudible—loop??*) up. And one of the notions that I came away with that I appreciated from that particular model of change, is a role—they speak of the different roles that people play in the process of change, and one of the roles they talk about are protectors. And protectors show up, in particular, as the people who have the biggest stake as the old system is reaching its peak, and continue to hold on and protect it from dying as it begins to fall off. And it’s very easy to get angry with the people in that role, because they’re the ones that seem like they’re holding the—and they are—they’re holding the old structures in place. Um, the thing that I find myself having to remind myself is that they’re doing it very often not for reasons that we ascribe to them, like, you know, greed, or loss of power, or what have you. While those may be factors, there are also factors of just tremendous responsibility.

Michael: Yes.

Peggy: You know, the sense of jobs and economic well-being of these large organizations, for example, that may cease to exist if those structures are no longer serving us. And so, learning how to work with the people who are playing an important role in keeping old structures in place as new structures find their way, as those small, slow to start experiments—most of which will fail, but where a handful will arise you have this interesting, murky period of time as new, again, new coherence arises—of working with the people: both the hospice workers, who help the old system die, and then those who are helping the new system to be born, and those who help bridge, you know, the majority of people, from the old to the new. It’s a way of thinking about the different roles that show up.

Michael: Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. Well you know, what you’re reminding me of, Connie and I have been listening to second half of Paul Gilding’s book, *The Great Disruption*. He’s in Australia, and in fact I’ll be interviewing him here in another two hours. But, every time I sort of slip into despair or overwhelm, or depression, I sort of break out chapter eight of Paul Gilding’s, *The Great Disruption*, and re-read it—it’s also available on audio book—and then, the whole second half of the book from that stand point. But one of the things he’s talking about is exactly what you were just describing in terms of these two arcs—the dying of the old system and the emerging of the new. And there’s a generosity of sentiment the way you expressed that that he also expresses in that kind of way, um, recognizing that there are many different roles that are being played in this larger body of which we’re all a part, and that there’s this creative destruction, there’s this breakdown of what did work—and what needed to work—but will no longer work in any kind of a healthy way into the future, and yet, the new, healthier or new, more life-giving structures are still in their childhood phase, or their infancy, or their whatever; they’re not

mature enough to hold the size or the complexity that we've now created for ourselves. You add to that the mix of peak oil and other, you know, these sort of converging challenges and—god!—we're not gonna have any lack of interesting times in these coming decades, that will include both glorious breakthroughs and tremendous, painful endings. Uh, I'm seeing both are inevitable I think.

Peggy: **Yup. I'm, I may edit this out, as well.** I'm going to send you a link to some pictures associated with that two loop model I was just talking about.

Michael: Alright. That's great. Thank you. So Peggy, could you share about the successes that you've seen or experienced yourself, you know, breakthroughs in emergence at whatever level that come to mind for you, because so many times people really find inspiring examples or models of possibility, to be like, "Ah-wow! I didn't..." until you hear an example or a story of success, or whatever, you sometimes don't know what's possible. And so stories can open up that doorway to, "Oh, wow! I never thought that was possible. Now I see it is." So, any stories that might come to mind, in terms of successes that you've experienced or witnessed others'?

Peggy: Yeah. Um, let's see. I'm trying to think of the kinds of examples that might be useful, and some very different ones come to mind. So here's one out of my consulting work a few years back. I got this call out of the blue from the National Institute of Corrections. And these are the people who run federal prison systems, right? And they were dealing with what I found a fascinating question, 'cause, needless to say, this is a pretty conservative kind of organization. And one of the people in their world who is highly regarded in the prison reform movement had died. And to honor his legacy they wanted to pursue a question of, "How do we create a prison system that is more just, efficient, and humane?"

Michael: Mmm. Great question.

Peggy: Great, profound question. Very profound question. And interestingly, they started their work by hiring a couple of researchers and went looking for, you know, who's done work in changing social systems and how've they gone about it. And one of the conclusions that they reached was that one of...the most effective path that they ran into in that research was the notion of using this kind of whole system change practices that are documented in the *Change Handbook*. And we talked about their situation and what they wanted to do, and my core advice to them was, ah, one: that they needed to bring the diversity of the system together. So, if it's just the people who are, you know, already within the system, the chances of finding breakthrough ideas goes way down.

Michael: Yeah.

Peggy: So it's partially about thinking about who makes up the system. And we actually worked with, um, one of my colleagues—er, two of my colleagues, Marv Weisbord and Sandra Janoff—have a nice mnemonic for thinking about who makes up a system when you're thinking about who do you need to involve. And it's that you need the people who are in: a-r-e i-n, people with authority, resources, expertise, information, and need. And if you've got that mix, you've got a pretty complete view of those who care about the system. And so they began their work by putting together an advisory group that drew from people from all of those different aspects of the corrections system. The other “aha” and the big hurdle for them was the notion of working with an emergent practice. I mean this is, again, this is an industry, a system that thrives on certainty, reliability, and it's certainly something that we want in systems that are dealing with people that society has judged as dangerous to the rest of us. And yet, when you're asking big transformative questions, that willingness to step into the unknown, as we've already talked about, is essential. And I will never forget the project director who made the decision to do this work, um, talking—when we brought this advisory group together—talking to the group as it was, you know, kind of rubber hitting the road time, and talking about taking the proposal to do this project to his board. And his board saying, “Ok. Let us get this straight: you don't know what the outcomes are going to be, you don't know specifically what kinds of actions you want to take, and you're asking us to fund this?”

Michael: *(Laughing.)*

Peggy: And, to his credit, what he said to them is, “Yes. We've tried everything else and none of it works. Nothing else is worth the trouble.” And I just found that...

Michael: *(Interrupting.)* Wow. Yeah. It took a lot of courage for him to say that.

Peggy: Tremendous courage! I mean what leadership in the face of, you know, a system that thrives on predictability. Anyway, to fast forward a bit, they came out of this first planning meeting with clarity on their direction, which was the recognition that if you are going to deal with the system of corrections you need to deal with it in the context of community.

Michael: Wow.

Peggy: And what is profound to me about that—and they were then moving on to, as a result of that, a next step where they were looking at how to convene conversations in communities around the country to look at, you know, the vast interrelationships of things like education and incarceration, and economic well-being, etc. So, I'll end this particular story at that point. But one of the aha's for me, because I've had the chance to work across a number of different sectors—whether you're talking

about health care, whether you're talking about journalism, whether you're talking about education, or corrections, um, all of them are reaching the conclusion that the answers rest in community. And I actually take a great deal of hope out of that recognition, because all of them, it's drawing them all to the question of, "How do we create a sense of community?" And, therefore, we have more and more people from different sectors beginning to look at that question.

Michael: Yeah that's great. That is so great. Because we are such tribal beings, we're tribal animals, we're community. And I think that we only thrive in community—which is not to say that there's not a place for individuality and solitude and all of that. But we, it's been the breakdown of community in so many of our different institutions and sectors, and just our lives, that I think is a source of so many of our problems.

Peggy: Well there's an interesting element about that, because I think that, you know, as I was talking earlier about the nature of breakthrough in society, I think part of that breakthrough has to be our understanding of what it means to be a community. Because at the moment, our unspoken assumption about being a member of a community is: if I want to belong I have to conform.

Michael: Hmm.

Peggy: And it's soul death for most of us. It's soul death for all of us. And, in fact, when communities are vibrant and healthy and alive, um, part of the way I would describe a thriving community, is that it is a differentiated whole. It is a place that calls on us, expects us, requires of us, desires us, celebrates us when we are at our most quirky, unique, and distinct.

Michael: Yes.

Peggy: Because that's how we, that's how we grow. It's through you see it one way and I see it another way, and our capacity not to shut up in order to conform but to bring the gifts that we have to contribute, and, where they seem to be clashing, to get curious about it, to explore it. Because, what I've witnessed over and over in the work that I do with groups, is that when you dive underneath the surface layers and get to the deeper places of value, that we're actually drawing from the same human stream.

Michael: Yeah. Yup.

Peggy: And when we connect at that level, that deeply personal level, we discover the sense of connection. And therefore, communities that thrive are ones that have learned that where there are differences, ah, that we want to invite them, draw

them out, and make the best creative use of them possible; because that connects us.

Michael: Yeah. Yes. Exactly. I'm reminded of a quote I used to have memorized, from Thomas Berry. I can only probably give the gist of it now, but that the central task of our time is to facilitate communication and cooperation among diverse entities in ways that accentuate the diversity and the uniqueness of each—sort of that “both and” sort of thing.

Peggy: It's, actually, a mutual friend of ours, Juanita Brown, uses the term *conversational literacy*. I believe it's a birthright that we've forgotten and need to relearn the capacity to engage with people who are different from ourselves.

Michael: Yeah. Well, you know, one of the things I want to come back to, that this is now reminding me of, is that the central role of asking, in community, pregnant questions—questions that are fertile in just the pondering them, and then in the discussing them. Is there an art form to that? Like how does one go about, sort of, learning more how to do that better?

Peggy: Oh, man: the art of the question. Isn't there just an art form to asking great questions? And, frankly, again, it goes back to one of my, um, aspirations in working with journalists, because right now journalists tend to ask us bifurcating questions that tend to be divisive: yes-no, black-white, red-blue. And part of the art is developing the...to ask those questions that have within them, um, as you put them, “pregnant,” a sense of possibility, innate possibility, that lift us to an aspirational place. And so, actually, some of the guidance I've learned through the years about what makes for great questions—ah, there's one that actually comes out of a Quaker process called “A Clearness Committee,” which is an individual problem-solving kind of process, but the guidance...in it the vast majority of time of this committee that you choose for yourself—three to five people—do nothing but ask you questions. They don't give you statements, they don't tell you what to do, they simply ask you questions. And the guidance on those questions is twofold: One, it's something that you're genuinely curious about, that there is a real juice to it, that it's heartfelt; and, secondly, it's a question that you don't know the answer to—so, in other words, it can't be a, “have you considered x, y, z?” which is a veiled way of giving advice—but is actually asking a question about, perhaps, some area of exploration. And then the other element that I would say comes into what I've learned about great questions is that they point us towards possibility. So they, in a sense, have a future focus.

Michael: Yeah. Well, this actually reminds me to ask you—because I know you're familiar with this body of work called “appreciative inquiry”—if you could say a little bit about that.

Peggy: Sure. Um, actually I'll say that my core conversational practices are informed by three particular modalities, as my starting point. And one of them is appreciative inquiry, which is a practice that is based in the belief—and research, more than a belief, is one of the things that is powerful is the body of research that sits underneath, um, appreciative inquiry that David Cooperrider, its principle investigator, and who coined the term appreciative inquiry—his dissertation was about the correlation between positive image and positive action. And so, appreciative inquiry is a practice that's based in a deep exploration of the best of what is, and imagining what's possible, in order to create the conditions for us to move forward to create it. And it's often compared with problem solving; and so a distinction that...one of the challenges with appreciative inquiry is it sounds like the power of positive thinking, which it is—and it's much more. And it's the sort of thing that, without actually experiencing it, it can be pretty easy to dismiss. So, one way I tend to think about it is, if you think about problem solving—which is what most of us are taught to do—there are two basic questions to any problem solving, which is, “What's wrong?” and “How do we fix it?”

Right? Well, it's interesting, because there's something implicit between those, which is, “What does it look like when it's working?” And, in the “What's wrong? How do we fix it?” that's implicit. The what it looks like when it's working is something that we, you know, either was something that existed in the past or it's some ideal that never actually really existed, but it tends to be looking over our shoulder. And so the work of problem solving can feel like you're carrying a sack of rocks up a hill. You know? It's a sisifis...

Michael: Sisyphus.

Peggy: ...yes, in challenge. By contrast, appreciative inquiry also starts with current reality, but it asks a different question. It doesn't ask, “What's wrong?” It asks, “What's working?” What do we appreciate about, given no matter what the situation is, “What's working?” And then it asks the “what's possible?” question, out of which—and, again, part of, um, one of the, um, bedrock pieces of, foundational pieces of research that David Cooperrider points to is a social scientist by the name of Fred Polak, who was doing his work in the 50s, and looked at the rise and fall of cultures. And he called his master work, *Images of the Future*, because what he found was he could predict the fall of a civilization within a generation, and he could pinpoint it to when that civilization, that society ceased to have a positive image of its own future.

Michael: Wow. That is so important.

Peggy: It's vital. As a matter of fact, I was talking to a colleague who works in disadvantaged communities in this country, and he talked about the rate at which

black men youth were dying in Los Angeles because they had no image of options for themselves other than, you know, a violent death or incarceration. So, you can see a sample of that predicted failing of a culture that Polak was talking about.

Michael: Yeah.

Peggy: So, anyway, back to the sense of appreciative inquiry—“What’s working?” no matter what conditions you’re talking about—and I have a wonderful story I can share about that in a moment. “What’s possible?” And out of that, what I have observed with groups is that, rather than feeling like they’re carrying that sack of rocks up a hill, when you start to get images of what you want to create, we move towards those images—that’s in our innate, human nature. And so it’s like you create this vacuum of possibility, which we filled by beginning to move towards, “How do we make it happen?”

Michael: Yeah. Yeah.

Peggy: And the story that that reminded me of—actually I have several in this arena, but this one was when I first started working with appreciative inquiry. I was working with some colleagues in a neighborhood in Tacoma, Washington, called the Hilltop neighborhood; and at the time (this was 15-20, about 15 years ago) Hilltop was the drive-by shooting capitol of the country. And we were working with a hospital that was based in this community and had been charged with getting involved with the community, because what they said was, “We are in this community but not of this community.” And what they did was they reached out to service providers in the area to go talk to residents about the community, using appreciative inquiry. And one of the people on their advisory group was a minister who had been working with at-risk youth for something like 30 years. And he decided to try this experiment with this group of young men that he was working with, and rather than going in with the usual kinds of activities, once introduced to AI, he started asking questions about what they loved about where they lived—you know, this drive-by capitol that they lived in, right? And he came back to the next advisory meeting that we had walking on air; because he’d been working with these boys—you know, these particular boys for several years but with these kinds of kids that we label “at risk” for 30 years—and all of the sudden he got to see this other side of him, and they got to see this other side of themselves, that they were more than this label—that they, indeed, had gifts and things to offer. And so, rather than trying to fix the problems, they could work to amplify the best of who they were and where they lived.

Michael: Mmm. That’s fabulous. Wow. Well, you know, let me, uh, this is sparking a thought that I think, the rest of the interviews—because I’ve not been asking this question, and I’m now thinking, “Why didn’t I think to do this before?” When you

imagine, say 20 or 50 or 100 years out—you know, something at least 20 years out and no more than 100 years out—what vision do you see of what’s possible, that inspires you, that’s an inspiring vision of humans and our relationship to each other and our relationship to this planet?

Peggy: Wow. Isn’t that a big question? *(Both laughing.)* You know, I do see us at our creative best, where we have learned the lesson that self-organizing and emergence teaches us—that the differences that we have become the basis for our creative evolution; and that, in a sense, we become each other’s fan clubs; that our willingness to take risks goes up because we feel such a sense of support from those around us; our recognition that we need diversity of perspective, and that, rather than seeking to homogenize, we start moving in the other direction; that we become more playful; that we thrive through our creative use of head, heart, body, and spirit; that we trust both that in our rational selves. but also in our intuitive selves and our spiritual selves; that we feel more whole as individuals and in collective. I guess those are still pretty general terms, but, you know, those are the kinds of ways in which I see us being different with each other.

Michael: Yeah.

Peggy: Um, I had the opportunity to work, to do some work in Israel. Actually, I was there recently, but I was also there about ten years ago, and had the opportunity to do a workshop on appreciative inquiry with Palestinians in Ramallah. And that was a pretty profound experience. The person who brought me in, as we were getting ready for doing this workshop, I asked her for a topic to work with, and she suggested the Occupation, because it’s something that all Palestinians deal with, and I thought, “No way am I equipped to create appreciative questions about the Occupation. I don’t know enough to be able to do that.”

Michael: Right.

Peggy: So, we landed on we’ll do questions about leadership. So, I’m there on the first day and we’re going through the cycle of the appreciative inquiry process around leadership, and they’re definitely not getting it. I mean, they’re externalizing leadership; it’s all about what the other should do, and the, you know, the, at that time it was Yassir Arafat was still alive, and so it was all about how he should be different. And so as we start the second day I’m scratching my head trying to think about how do I turn this, because, ultimately, it is about our capacity to take responsibility for what we love that moves us, um, moves us forward. And so I just started with us sitting in a circle and listening. And, of course, people started talking about how hard their lives are. And I’m in Ramallah, where you are literally seeing the façade of a building, an apartment building, gone, so you can look in and see people living in their apartments with no wall there, right? It’s one

of the most eye-opening things I've ever seen of this, sort of, semi-working city, that is, you know, partially in rubble, and yet people live there. And I know once people start complaining they can do it all day.

Michael: Oh, yeah.

Peggy: And it was very clear to me, spending time with Jewish Israelis and the Palestinians in Ramallah, that this is a game they act out (*inaudible*). And I use game in a respectful sense, but everybody is out to demonstrate how they are the biggest victim was my observation of part of what goes on there. And so I asked them if they'd be willing to take the ideas that they'd been learning about appreciative inquiry and apply it to living with the Occupation. They said yes. They split into groups, and they started writing questions, appreciative questions, about things like—they started with resistance to the wall, because the wall around the West Bank was in the process of being built. And out the other end came this question about working with the wall. And it was things like, tell me an experience about when...I'm sorry, I'm thinking about one associated with checkpoints, which was another hot button of crossing through the wall, getting in to the...um, actually this was the working with the wall question; no, I'm sorry, this was around useful checkpoints. That was what we came to call it: useful checkpoints. And they asked two questions. So, "tell me an experience that you've had that was productive and positive when you were waiting at a checkpoint." And, "imagine a time when these checkpoints are no longer needed—what would you turn them into?" Anyway, each of the groups came up with questions along those lines. One was around the wall, another around checkpoints, and then there were a couple of other topics. And they started interviewing each other with these questions. And all of the sudden I'm hearing giggling in the room. And you could palpably feel the energy shift as they started answering these questions. And when we got back together they went from being victims of the Occupation to towers of strength, because what they were discovering was situations where, you know, they could build a relationship. You know, it was things like, don't just build relationships with friends, reach out to everyone. Um, and, where there's a will there's a way. That when you're clear about your objective that you can find pathways through to make them happen. And these, this particular group that I was working with were teachers, so they were going to be taking this back into the classrooms with the children that they work with.

Michael: Wow. That's so great. Now you mentioned earlier that one of three sources for you, sources of inspiration or empowerment, is appreciative inquiry. What are the other two? I'm just curious.

Peggy: I'm glad you asked 'cause I wanted to go there anyway. I'll say the other two. One is a practice that I really consider the heart of what I do, which is open space

technology. And I'll say a few more words around that in a minute. The third one is a practice of dialogue, or circle process, of simply sitting in a circle, because, interestingly enough, one of the things that it taught me is the importance of listening. There is no dialogue if, you know, all we do is talk.

Michael: Right, exactly.

Peggy: And, you know, it, um, that helped me understand a distinction between inquiry and advocacy. Where in advocacy I'm listening, and as I'm listening to you I'm thinking about what my arguments are going to be to counter what you said. Whereas in inquiry it's about following the thread of that curiosity, um, out of which I've come to know—it used to be an operating theory, at this point I've never had a situation where there isn't a place in if I continue to follow the energy of an inquiry that some assumption gets uncovered that helps us better understand our differences.

Michael: Wow.

Peggy: But the heart of open space technology, and the reason I consider it the heart of what I do, is a lesson that I actually used earlier which is the notion of taking responsibility for what you love.

Michael: Yes.

Peggy: It is an act of service. And it's an interesting thing, because on the surface of it—particularly when you're working on an organizational setting, but even in a community setting—the mechanics of open space are very minimal. It's basically about a circle and an invitation to pose topics of interest, with a framework of four principles in the law (*on the wall??*). But at its heart it's about this notion of passion and responsibility, because, when we operate in that way, you know, if you just have passion—and this tends to be the fear of people with organizational authority, whether it's a congress person or a government person, or whether it's a manager in an organization—the fear that you're gonna end up with chaos, everybody's gonna go off and do their own thing. On the other hand, if all you've got is the responsibility with no passion there's no creativity, they're dead. So you need those two in concert with one another. And so what provides the order in an open space is the organizing question, which is, you know, given X—the issues and opportunity for the future of health care. That provides the framework, that organizing question, in which people are then invited to pursue the questions that matter most to them. And what I've observed in 15 years of working with open space, as I said, it becomes an act of service, because when people pursue what matters to them, rather than pushing their position, they start drawing from the deeper place within themselves. And because we all do draw from the same human

stream—from that, you know, there’s this small number of human values: we all want a better life for our children, we all want the chance to lead healthy, productive lives—when we draw from that same stream, the issues, the topics that we love actually become a source that others relate to, and therefore asking a question discovering who else cares about it becomes a source of contribution.

Michael: Yeah. That’s great. That was a really helpful overview, as well. Well, there’s a question that I’ve been asking almost everybody—I’ve forgotten I think twice—but Connie was the one who suggested it. And I purposely don’t let anybody know that I’m gonna ask it ahead of time, because it’s the, “Oh, wow! I hadn’t thought of that,” you know, and sort of see where you go with it; which is: If you were to invite for dinner—or you know, have a glass of wine, or whatever—with three people from human history—they can be alive today or at any point in time in human history—um, and it could be either sort of a dinner party where, you know, they interact with each other as well, or just one on ones, either way—but who would they be and why?

Peggy: That’s a great question. Um, I can tell you one name popped in immediately, and that is Mohandas Ghandi, Mahatma Ghandi. Um, in part because he was such an inspiration to so many people of this, one man turning the direction of a nation non-violently. And how on Earth did he do that? Um, so, you know, he’s the top of my, “I wanna have dinner (*inaudible*) with him” list.

Michael: Ok, good.

Peggy: And another which comes to mind, and I think it’s because she is so freshly on my mind, is Maya Angelou, who, again, I think is somebody who has overcome so much to achieve a position to bring such a sense of wisdom and love, which I guess is a core thread of the people who I want to spend time with, are those who have dealt with extraordinarily challenging times and done it from a clear center of love. Huy. And who would be the third? Oh, of course, you know, the other thing about Maya Angelou, is the creative spirit that is so profound in all of her work. Um...the third? Well, he keeps popping up, so: Albert Einstein. Just, again, a man who was never afraid to ask deeply profound questions, although I’m hearing right on his heels is Viktor Frankl.

Michael: Ah, ok, cool. That’s great. I’ll give you four. (*Chuckling.*) Well, Peggy, thank you so much for taking the time. If people want to learn more about your work or go more deeply into it, where would they, where’s the best places to go?

Peggy: www.peggyholman.com

Michael: Great.

Peggy: Thank you for doing this, Michael. It's, um, you always ask such great questions that I come away learning more about me. And I hope the offering is of value, of service, to the people that you touch, as you touch so many.

Michael: Thank you.