Published on Axiom News (https://axiomnews.com)

Where We Work Is a Place: Marijke Boessenkool

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Generative Journalism brings us together where we work

Humans are not isolated beings. We are somewhere, in a place. We make choices about where to live and those choices bring about a set of conditions that change and shape us, says Kessels and Smit human geographer and organizational journalist, Marijke Boessenkool.

Human geography explores the relationships and connections between people and place. Marijke says people are both changed by and change the place where they choose to live. There are a variety of spaces we can consider ‘places’ including our neighbourhoods, cities, and environment.

Organization is a place too, says Marijke.

Most people spend more than 40 hours a week working in organizations.

“They are big places to live in,” she says.

These places, organizations, also shape and are shaped by the people in them.

“The moment you have an interview with someone, and you make that very generative, conversations can become much more meaningful. The person who has been interviewed might also look at his or her own work as being more meaningful because you touch a level deeper.”

Marijke works with narrative practices to cultivate change in organizations. Her craft includes generative conversations as well as the creation media artifacts to share the resulting stories.

She shares a story about working in a company in which things were not working well. There was a great deal of conflict. There was tension between departments. Things were stuck because of the conflict. A team of consultants, of which Marijke was a member, were engaged to address the problems.

They chose to stay out of evaluation processes in order to avoid bringing more judgement into the mix. Instead, they chose to focus on the stories that were alive in each department.

“We could tell people were angry sometimes or very emotional. We felt like we really needed to create a space where people can share their story without judgment or without also getting into evaluation mode themselves. We just made space for that. We had interviews with all kinds of different people involved within that project,” she says.

During those interviews, people spoke of their anger and were sometimes very emotional. The team made space for those stories to be told. Then, they took the step of asking interview participants, ‘okay, so what’s at stake for you? What makes it important that this goes well? What are your worries? What makes it so this touches you so much?

“The moment you have an interview with someone, and you make that very generative, conversations can become much more meaningful. The person who has been interviewed might also look at his or her own work as being more meaningful because you touch a level deeper,” Marijke says.

Following the series of interviews, a theatrical presentation in which a collection of ‘voices’ arising from the interviews had a ‘conversation’ with one another. *

Afterwards, participants were asked what they heard and to reflect that back to the room. The first man to speak was someone who’d previously expressed a great deal

of anger. He said, “we all want the same thing.”

Now there was what Marijke describes as a ‘moving-forward energy’.

The process of generative interviews followed by a media representation of what arose from those conversations catalyzed forward motion.

“That’s part of the organizational or the generative practice. Sometimes, journalism feels a bit static because you come up with a product. So, we have this product now and here you go. But what I find important is that it is really a practice that brings something about. It ignites conversations or new thoughts,” Marijke says.

That puts things in motion and generates change.

Marijke says she feels lucky she gets to be part of this kind of work.

“I hope that it becomes more normal, in organizations, to create this generative space.”

When engaging in generative practices, Marijke notices something happens in the connections between people. “When I have an interview with someone, when I feel like it was generative, I also feel a very close connection to the person. I believe it could be a way to have more togetherness or connection in our societies today. All of our meetings, and also things we watch on television or read in the media could be so much more generative,” she says.

Marijke has encountered many people who have shared that during the current pandemic they have felt alone and isolated.

She speaks of a Generative Way of Being and hopes that practices like Generative Journalism can change our lives and places for the better. That includes the organizations that shape us, and which we shape, as well as our communities and society at large.

* Listen to my podcast conversation with Marijke to hear more about the variety of media forms she and her colleagues leverage to bring about change. The common element in each of them is that they are non-fiction. Within that boundary, podcasts,

written word stories, magazines, video, and even poetry are used.

In this podcast Marijke tells stories of her work in generative, organizational journalism. ***This article is a weaving of some the insights shared during our conversation.***

Listen to this and other Axiom News Podcasts on Spotify.

To learn more about Generative Journalism visit the Journalism for Change podcast. Also check out the September 2020 edition of the Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner

Upcoming Event

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