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Grace Under Pressure

Clarity and Care as a Leadership Strength When Stakes Are High

Appreciative Inquiry is often mistaken for a feel-good approach that avoids difficulty. In practice the opposite is true. An appreciative stance is most powerful precisely when tensions run high. This article explores grace under pressure as a learnable leadership practice that holds clarity and care together and offers small, repeatable habits for staying present when stakes are high.

There is a moment many leaders will recognise. The meeting has tipped. A decision is contested, someone has said the thing nobody wanted said aloud, and the room goes quiet in that particular way. The proverbial elephant has entered the room. Eyes drop to laptops. In online meetings, the cameras stay off. The leader at the head of the table or as the only one visible in the call, feels the heat move up through their chest and has, roughly, two seconds to decide what to do with it.

Our organisations have never held this much diversity, of background, generation, geography, conviction. That is a gift, and it also raises the complexity in every room. As complexity rises, so does fear. And under anxiety, people contract. They withdraw, or they retreat into a functional reaction, not the flowing human exchange that the moment is actually calling for.

I have spent more than twenty years working with leaders as a coach, a facilitator, and a practitioner of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Appreciative Inquiry is sometimes misunderstood as a feel-good method, a way of looking on the bright side and steering politely around what is hard. In practice, I find the opposite is true. An appreciative stance does not mean pretending the awkwardness is not happening. It means staying present, grounded and honest when the pressure is high. So on the contrary, this is not the easy path, but the demanding one.

So this is not an article about conflict resolution in the traditional sense. It is about something quieter and, I think, more useful: the inner posture a leader

holds when the stakes rise, and the small practices that make possible the posture I call grace.

The phrase “grace under pressure” is the American author Ernest Hemingway’s, his definition of courage. But the original root of the word is the Latin *gratia* – kindness, generosity, the gift freely given.

Weathering the storm



Weathering the storm

Photo by Dmitry Ratushny on Unsplash

Leaders have always set the emotional tone of a room. The saying goes “the leader brings the weather”. People read the person in charge before they read the agenda. But it is unrealistic to think that a leader creates sunshine every time they enter a conversation. Often, leaders are trapped in the same storm they are supposed to shelter others from. Back-to-back meetings, high speed, too little time, too many stakeholders, too few resources fray the nerves and challenge an even temper. So, how can you remain the calm centre while the storm rages?

I want to put forward a first proposition here: not a hypothesis to be proven, more a pattern I keep seeing. Under pressure, most leaders default to one of two moves. They either sharpen the message to cut through the noise and take a stance, or they soften to it keep the peace. Both can feel reasonable in the moment.

However, clarity without care creates fear; people hear the harsh words and brace themselves emotionally. Care without clarity creates confusion; people feel warmly held but leave the room unsure what was actually decided. I call the latter “marshmallow love” – in the moment itself it may feel sweet and fluffy, but it doesn’t create growth. Grace under pressure means holding both clarity and care at once: saying the hard thing and staying in relationship while you say it. It asks us to recognise the positive intention or legitimate concern behind whatever caused the tension in the room.

This is harder than it sounds, because pressure does something to the body before it does anything to the mind.

Clarity without care creates fear. Care without clarity creates confusion. Grace under pressure means holding both.

What happens in the body when the stakes rise

When a moment turns hot, the brain’s threat system can fire faster than thought. This is the amygdala doing its ancient job, the fight, flight, or freeze

A hot spot is not a problem to manage away. It is information. The heat is telling you that something matters that has not yet been heard.

response we share with every animal that ever needed to survive a predator. The conference room is not the jungle, but the body does not always know the difference.

In Deep Democracy, the method developed by Myrna and Greg Lewis in post-apartheid South Africa, these moments have a name: hot spots. A hot spot is the point where the emotional temperature spikes, where something true is trying to surface and the group tenses against it. Most leaders, understandably, treat a hot spot as a problem to manage away. Deep Democracy treats it as information. The heat is telling you that something matters here and has not yet been heard.

When I ask leaders what actually happens to them in these moments, the answers are often describing the physical sensation: They go blank. They sweat. They go into tunnel vision. Some describe wanting to dive straight through the discomfort to get it over with. Others become irritable, impatient, sharp. What they have in common is that, for a moment, they stop being a steady presence and become part of the storm. They are no longer responding to the situation; they have been absorbed into it.

There is often a realisation or freezing that comes first, a half-second of suspension before fight or flight takes over. This moment actually has a lineage: Frankl called it “the last of the human freedoms” (Frankl, 1959), the capacity to choose our response to whatever we are handed. Covey later named it the space between stimulus and response (Covey, 1989). That half-second is, I have come to believe, where appreciative leadership lives.

The turn towards curiosity

In my search for practices to activate appreciative leadership under stress, I heard leadership expert and keynote speaker Cornelia Choe describe a quality she calls “courageous curiosity”.

From that observer's stance, something becomes possible that is impossible from inside the reaction.

She does not refer to the polite curiosity of an interview, but the courageous kind that turns towards the heat rather than away from it. The shift is subtle and it is everything: instead of becoming part of the emotion, you become the observer of it. You notice the heat rising in your own chest and, rather than being swept along, you grow interested in it. From that observer's stance, something becomes possible that is impossible from inside the reaction. From this space you can ask an appreciative question.

It helps to remember what emotion in these moments is actually made of. Anger, for instance, is energy, and energy can be worked with. But anger is rarely the bottom layer. Beneath it there is often something softer, sadness,

Instead of becoming part of the emotion, you become the observer of it.



Clarity and care held together

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frustration, a sense of not being seen, exhaustion. I have noticed, without wanting to over-generalise, that this surfaces differently for different people: some weep when they are angry, others harden. I am mentioning this so as to not mistake the surface for the substance.

Clarity and care held together

To stand in a hot spot and stay curious is to keep both clarity and care alive at once. Curiosity is care, it signals that the person in front of you matters enough to be understood rather than managed. And curiosity is the road to clarity, because the appreciative question, asked from the observer's stance, moves the situation towards what is real. So, don't be swept up by the noise. Observe and be curious:

- What wants to be seen?
- What allows the other to proceed in this way?
- What matters most here?
- What are we trying to protect?

These questions require staying open at the point where instincts might propose to close.

Why bother? The moral ambition of leading well

It would be fair to ask why a busy leader should take the harder path, when softening or sharpening would get them through the meeting just as well. I like the idea that Rutger Bregman proposed in his book *Moral Ambition* (2024). Bregman observes that a great deal of talent and energy flows towards work that is merely prestigious, and far too little towards work that genuinely matters; he calls on us to aim our ambition at what is worth doing, not only at what is rewarded.

I would like to expand on that idea and turn it inward. So, what if moral ambition is not only a question of which problems we devote ourselves to, but is also a question of how we choose to be with people when it is hard, particularly in the moments when no one would blame us for taking the easier route. The harder, more human response is rarely the one that gets noticed or praised, but it's graceful.

This is where Rutger's Moral Ambition and Appreciative Inquiry come together. Appreciative Inquiry rests on the premise: the questions we ask and the stance we take help create the reality that follows. We do not merely react to the room; in some real sense, we call it into being. A leader who meets a tense moment with curiosity rather than defence is shaping what becomes possible in it, and quietly setting the terms for how this group will handle the next hard thing. Moral ambition, in this light, is the decision to use the power hidden in this half-second well.

So leading with grace under pressure is a small, daily act of moral ambition. It is choosing, in the two seconds after the room tips, the response that is more difficult and more human, because the people in the room deserve a leader who stays, and because that choice, repeated, is what builds the culture they work inside.

Start small: The practice of micro actions

A micro action is the smallest thing you can do that has the biggest impact on the situation.

After trainings and coachings I have often seen my conversation partners either overloading on actions they wanted to take or shying away from the sheer multitude of possible actions. That is why I recommend micro actions, a concept from Appreciative Inquiry.

What can you do that yields the biggest impact on the situation? Later you can take another action, and so on. A micro action should not take longer than a moment and might be a single slow breath before you respond, long enough to let the freezing pass and the observer to manifest. It might be a longer pause where you would normally fill the silence. It might be one appreciative, honest sentence that names the temperature in the room, like "this feels difficult, and I want us to stay with it. before we go on". It might be the discipline of asking

Moving from Hot Spot to Appreciation

				
STAGE	HOT SPOT	PAUSE	CURIOSITY	APPRECIATION
WHAT'S HAPPENING	The atmosphere in the room tips. Something true is trying to surface.	The micro-moment before fight or flight.	Turn toward the heat. Become the observer, not the storm.	Say the hard thing. Stay in relationship while you say it.
THE MICRO ACTION	Notice the heat. Stay with it. Regard it as information.	One slow, deliberate breath in and out. Shift to observer mode.	Ask yourself: What matters most here? What wants to be seen?	Name the temperature in the room out loud. "Let's pause for a moment. I notice..."

Heike Aiello - "Grace under Pressure," AI Practitioner

An essential leadership strength: stay present, grounded and appreciative in hot spot moments.

one genuine question before offering one answer. Or looking for the positive quality that informed what just happened.

All of these small practices are available even on the worst day, in the seventh meeting, when you have nothing eloquent left. However, learning and behavioural change require intention, of course. Many fare well with choosing one micro action per day or even per week to focus on.

“Grace under pressure” is not a trait some leaders are born with and others are not. It is the cumulative effect of these small choices, practised until they become who you are when it counts.

The storms will keep coming; that is the nature of leadership now. So it is an essential leadership strength to stay present, grounded, and appreciative in hot spot moments.

In the words of Rutger Bregman: “if you manage to do it, and choose to go the moral ambition route, the ripple effect can be enormous. Your behaviour is contagious, so a better world does indeed begin with you” (Bregman, 2024, p. 225).

That, to me, is what grace under pressure looks like when the stakes are high. Not the avoidance of difficulty or slashing through it, but the grace to meet it with curiosity and appreciation.

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AI Practitioner's Bookshelf for the September 2026 Issue on Co-Authoring Our Lives and Our Future: The Words Create Worlds Principle in Action

Discover the bookshelf of this issue and book recommendations that delve into the transformative power of words and language in various aspects of our lives.



Which books do you recommend about the transformative power of language?
Add them to the shared file following this QR Code so everyone has access to them!
You will also find this list with hyperlinks.

Language for Social and Economic Change

[A Future Untold: The Power of Story to Transform the World and Ourselves](#) (2021) Alina Siegfried
[How to Fall in Love with the Future: A Time Traveller's Guide to Changing the World](#) (2025) Rob Hopkins
[From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want](#) (2019) Rob Hopkins

Language at Work and in Conversations

[Conversations Worth Having: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Fuel Productive and Meaningful Engagement](#) (2021, 2nd ed.) Jackie Stavros and Cheri Torres
[Coaching A to Z: The Extraordinary Use of Ordinary Words](#) (2022) Haesun Moon
[Leadership is Language: The Hidden Power of What You Say and What You Don't](#) (2020) L. David Marquet
[Learning to SOAR: Creating Strategy that Inspires Innovation and Engagement](#) (2021) Jacqueline Stavros and Gina Hinrichs
[Change the Story, Change the Future: A Living Economy for a Living Earth](#) (2015) David C. Korten
[Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events](#) (2019) Robert J. Shiller
[Die Sprache des Kapitalismus](#) (2024) Simon Sahner and Daniel Stähr [in German!]

Transformative Power of Language

[Re-authoring the World: The Narrative Lens and Practices for Organizations, Communities and Individuals](#) (2013)

Chené Swart

[365 ALIVE!: Find Your Voice. Claim Your Story. Live your Brilliant Life](#) (2020) Mary Alice Arthur

[Words Create Worlds: Cultivating a Conscious, Life-affirming Language](#) (2022) Claudia Gross

[Words Create Worlds: ReflAction Journal](#) (2025) Claudia Gross

[Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples](#) (1999) Linda Tuhiwai Smith

Language and Ecology

[Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants](#) (2015) Robin Wall Kimmerer

[The Lost Words: A Spell Book](#) (2017) Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris

[Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By](#) (2015, 2nd ed. 2021) Arran Stibbe

[Econarrative: Ethics, Ecology, and the Search for New Narratives to Live By](#) (2024) Arran Stibbe

[Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World](#) (2019) Glenn A. Albrecht

[Terrapsychological Inquiry: Restorying Our Relationship with Nature, Place, and Planet](#) (2020) Craig Chalquist

[Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World](#) (2021) Malcolm Ferdinand

[Reclaiming Narratives: Identity, Environment, and Resistance in Indian Literary Studies and Beyond](#) (2025)

Nizara Hazarika and M. S. Xavier Pradheep Singh

Language and Politics

[Unspeaking: Words Are Weapons](#) (2006) Steven Poole

[Little Blue Book](#) (2012) George Lakoff and Elisabeth Wehling

[Politisches Framing](#) (2018) by Elisabeth Wehling [in German!]

[Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century](#) (2022) Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman

[Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#) (1968) Paulo Freire

[Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature](#) (1986) Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

[Decolonizing Language and Other Revolutionary Ideas](#) (2025) Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

[Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World](#) (2020) Tyson Yunkaporta

[Discourse on Colonialism](#) (1950) Aimé Césaire

[Black Skin, White Masks](#) (1952) Frantz Fanon

Which books do you recommend on the transformative power of language?

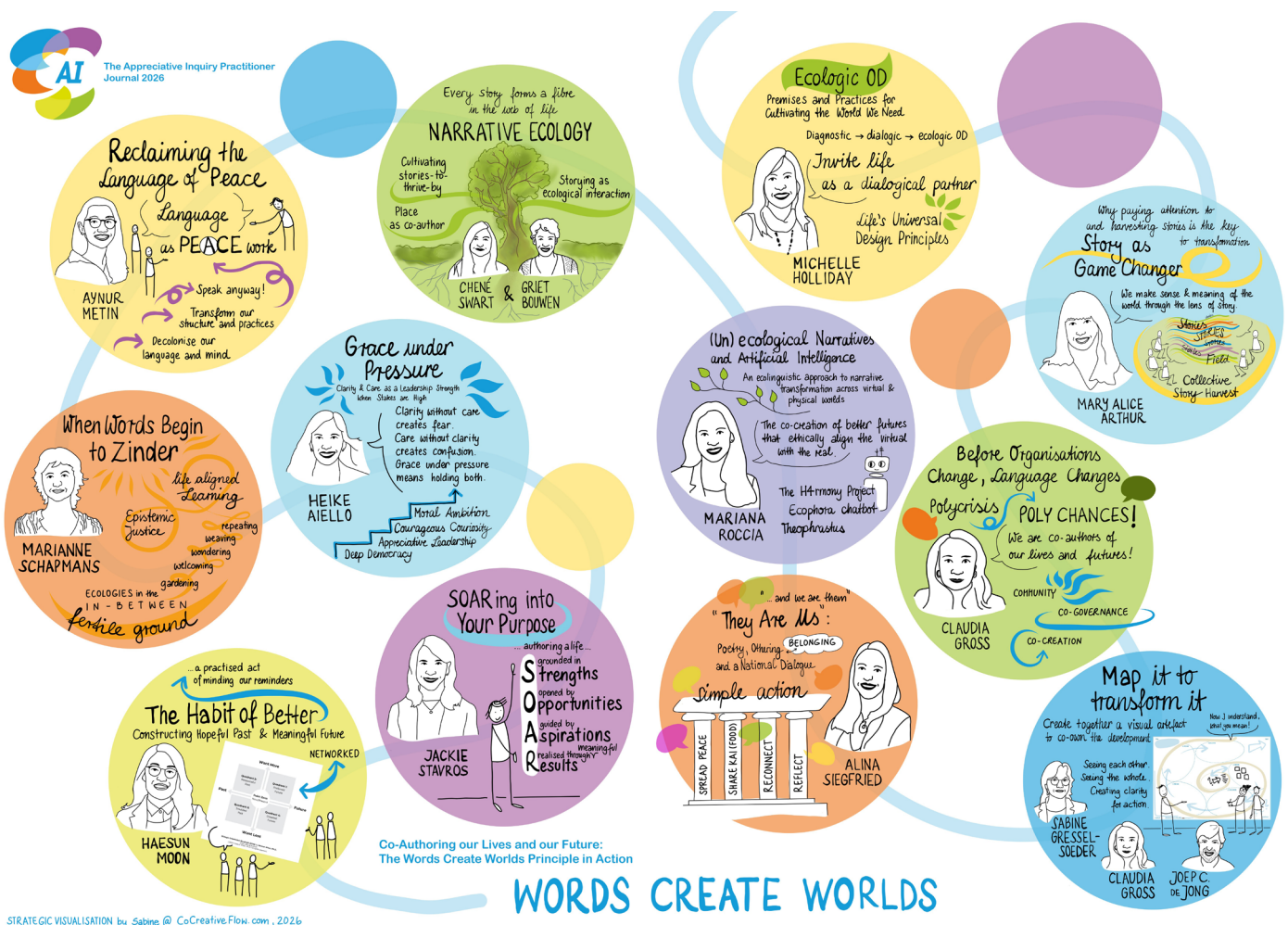
Add them to the shared file using the QR code at the beginning of the article so that everyone has access to them! You will also find this list with hyperlinks.

For more book recommendations check out the [speakGreen library](#) on the power of language with regard to:

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) Health and disability | (2) Racism and inclusion |
| (3) Women and gender | (4) Sexualized violence |

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Strategic illustration by Sabine Gressel-Soeder gifted for this AIP edition.