



The Detail

Step One: Presentation to the Board

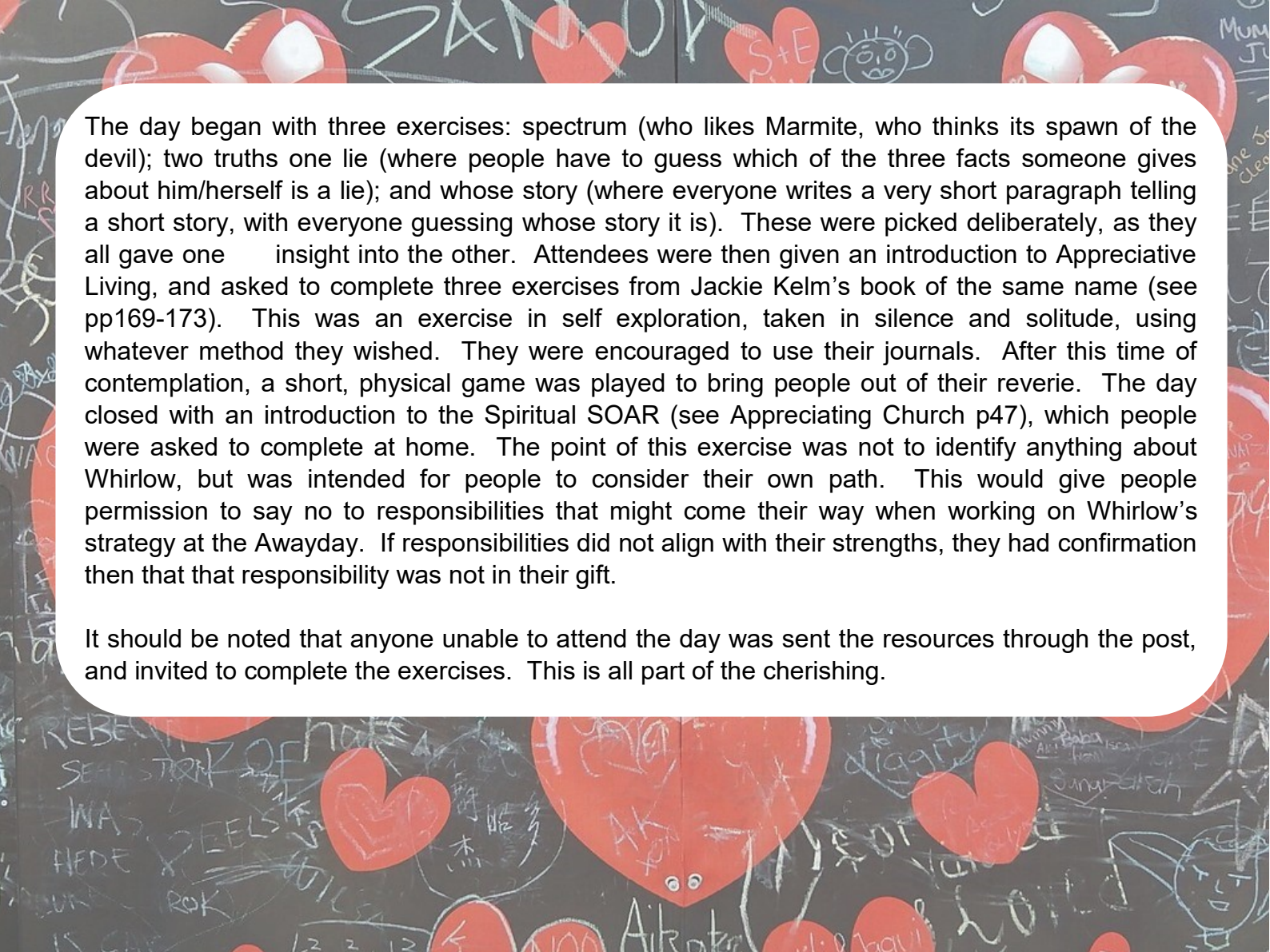
Taking place online, the whole proposal was explained. Particularly important was understanding the appreciative questionnaire. This is a series of five questions carefully designed to discover what people treasure the most about Whirlow. It is important that the questioners follow the exact same format to ensure the answers are comparable. It was important for the Board to understand this cannot be done by sending the form out via email, or using something like SurveyMonkey; and that they needed to speak to all stakeholders personally in order to receive useful answers. Of equal importance is that speaking to people directly makes them feel heard and cherished – their opinion is worth a personal conversation. Sending out a questionnaire evokes no such thing; people see an impersonal survey as exactly that – impersonal, and with no meaning. If people respond at all it is often badly, and without depth. It is important for Whirlow that its users know they are valued and cared for, and this personal touch let them know that. There is also an element of privilege for the questioners to hear people's innermost thoughts. It is an enriching experience for both questioner and respondent.

Step Two: 'Getting to Know You'

As there was to be an element of silent pondering in this session, all attendees (11 Board members) were given a journal. This is an important aspect, along with handouts designed to be well thought out, attractive and user friendly, which makes attendees feel cherished. Throughout this process people were made to feel thus. Every step was not just another date to bung in the diary and get it over with, but an opportunity to show people their value.

Handouts at this session included a folded A4 prayer booklet based on the Examen; a SOAR booklet which included the thinking behind it, a SOAR grid, full instructions and guiding questions for each part of the SOAR. There was also a folded A4 closing prayer booklet.

The importance of attractive handouts cannot be stressed enough. It is not enough to have plain A4 sheets with no embellishment. What message does that give the attendees? Who keeps a plain Word handout, and who keeps a beautifully created booklet with an attractive journal to put it in? I mean, you wouldn't be reading this without the cartoons, right? Nuff said.



The day began with three exercises: spectrum (who likes Marmite, who thinks its spawn of the devil); two truths one lie (where people have to guess which of the three facts someone gives about him/herself is a lie); and whose story (where everyone writes a very short paragraph telling a short story, with everyone guessing whose story it is). These were picked deliberately, as they all gave one insight into the other. Attendees were then given an introduction to Appreciative Living, and asked to complete three exercises from Jackie Kelm's book of the same name (see pp169-173). This was an exercise in self exploration, taken in silence and solitude, using whatever method they wished. They were encouraged to use their journals. After this time of contemplation, a short, physical game was played to bring people out of their reverie. The day closed with an introduction to the Spiritual SOAR (see Appreciating Church p47), which people were asked to complete at home. The point of this exercise was not to identify anything about Whirlow, but was intended for people to consider their own path. This would give people permission to say no to responsibilities that might come their way when working on Whirlow's strategy at the Awayday. If responsibilities did not align with their strengths, they had confirmation then that that responsibility was not in their gift.

It should be noted that anyone unable to attend the day was sent the resources through the post, and invited to complete the exercises. This is all part of the cherishing.

Step Three: Appreciative Questionnaires

The questions used were:

- What do you value about Whirlow and why?
- Describe a time when Whirlow has been important for you, or made a real difference. (*It can be just a small thing.*)
- What does Whirlow do really well?
- What would help Whirlow to become even better?
- Is there anything you think Whirlow could be doing that it isn't doing already?

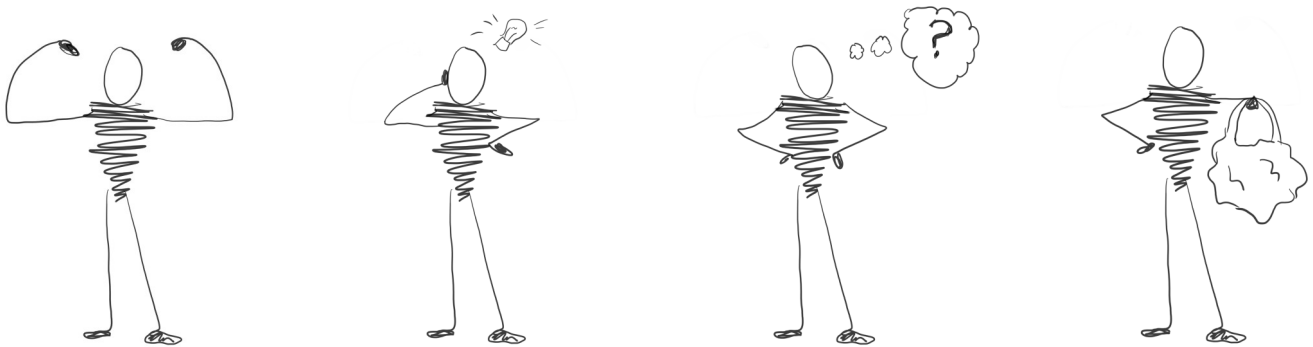
These questions were offered to all those who attend events; quiet days; Communion; book the quiet room/poustinias (for their own quiet days or for leading spiritual accompaniment); and external people who book rooms for their groups or own events.

The results were both surprising and affirming. Even those who did not have a faith or spirituality were struck by the ethos and feel of Whirlow, that the calmness of the place was what drew them back time and again to book space for their group. Staff at Whirlow were concerned that 'they didn't really do much', but respondents were clear that just the mere presence of the place and the safety it offered, allowing people to just 'be' was deeply valued. From these questionnaires it was possible to find five clear strengths. These were used to inform the Awayday.

Step Five: 'Awayday'

Before beginning a SOAR for Whirlow, attendees were asked to consider what they were already doing that they wanted to keep (which had to be in keeping with what the questionnaires identified as strengths) and what they wanted to ditch (stuff that didn't figure in the questionnaires). This was an important winnowing of what Whirlow was already doing.

For the SOAR, five poster rolls were prepped in advance, each one relating to one of the identified **Strengths**. These rolls were designed in linear fashion. Under each Strength, attendees were invited to consider the **Opportunities** (ideas) that that Strength offered. The next step was to dream dreams (**Aspirations**) in as much detail as possible, basing them on the Opportunities. The final section was **Resourcing**. For every idea that had been fully detailed, attendees had to list all the resources they would need to make it work, from something as small as a candle to something as big as staff or funding.



Note that the day began with people assigned to one of the Strengths; their job was to begin thinking about Opportunities. With each section to be completed on the SOAR, each group was moved to a different table. This is a really important part of the process that helps ensure everyone has buy in; everyone spends time planning each thought process. No-one can say something wasn't their idea, or that they had nothing to do with it.

To do a SOAR like this, displays a simple linear thinking process that can be used as a record to continually inform decisionmakers present and future. These poster rolls are the Minutes.

The final part of the day was a pinpointing process where everyone was given five sticky dots with which to vote for their favourite ideas, or those they thought would work best. The only caveat was the idea had to be fully resourced. Any that were not could not be included by this point. Finally, taking the top five (and it must never be more than five) ideas, the group decided what would happen **Now** (in the coming weeks) **Sooner** (in the coming months) and **Later** (within the Year). This was Whirlow's new Strategy. Note that this is NEVER an add-on to what is already happening in a setting. This is an opportunity to set down what isn't working or relevant, in favour of a new focus and the actions that go with it.

Before people had opportunity to pinpoint their favourite ideas, there was a time of discernment, giving them time to consider what had been written so far; whether there were any links between what they had discovered and what Whirlow was already doing; and to ponder on which of the ideas they thought most relevant for the Centre's ethos.



Step Six: Discernment

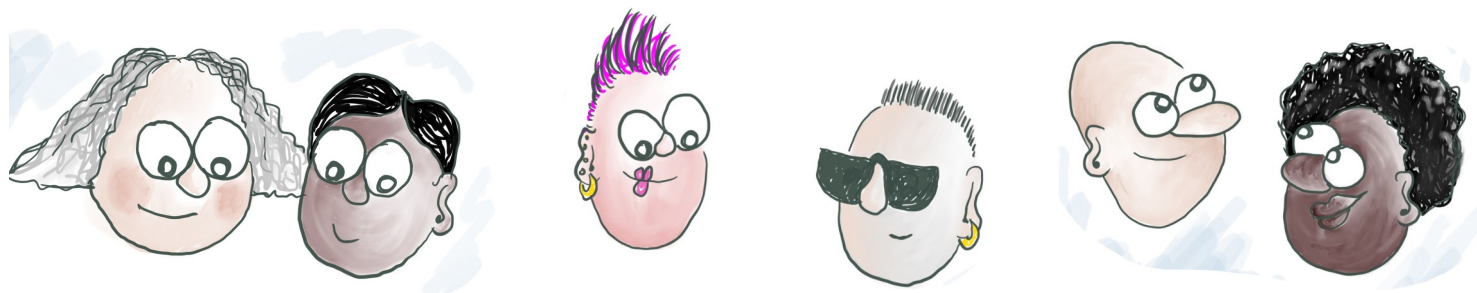
Requested by Whirlow as a part of its exploration, this half day took place online. The group considered questions around gifting based on John Ortberg's 'If You Want to Walk on Water You've Got to Get Out of the Boat'; and pondered on how we interpret the words 'success' and 'failure'. Once more there was an element of journalling, using an attractive guidance leaflet which had been sent out in advance. This session took place one week after the Awayday, giving time for attendees to think about their experience of the whole process and its outcome.



Conclusion

Board members were very supportive of the whole process, and bought into every step. They found the Appreciative Conversations thoroughly affirming for themselves and for Whirlow, and they appreciated the Spiritual SOAR which enabled them to explore their own place in Whirlow's future. The Awayday itself was a little challenging for some, who found it difficult to follow a linear process, but the outcome was good and people were happy to see that Whirlow's focus was in the right place already. The whole process was an affirmation for them.

Of great importance was ensuring all those involved felt treasured: those who answered the questionnaire because people took the time to talk to the personally; and the Board members who received free journals and attractive leaflets, workbooks and prayers they would want to keep (who keeps Word handouts and Powerpoint notes?), along with plenty of opportunity for ponder time. This is the most important lesson to take from this process – treasure your participants always.



References

If You Want to Walk on Water You've Got to Get out of the Boat
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Zondervan 2014

Appreciative Living
Jackie Kelm
Venet Publishers 2015

Appreciating Church
Tim Slack & Fiona Thomas
Wordscapes Ltd 2017

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