

**"Boston and the World
at the Dawn of 2007"
Report of a Listening Post
held on Sunday 7th January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighborhood or voluntary or leisure organizations, or as members of families and communities.

In early January of 2007, the US is deeply divided. The Democrats have taken over Congress (albeit with a slim majority). The growing dissent over the Iraq war has been exasperated by the president's promise of a surge of US troops in Iraq. The state of Massachusetts, where this Listening Post was convened, has just elected its first African-American Governor, and the first Democrat in 16 years.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. There were three themes as follows:

1.) **Dichotomies/dualities:** Our country is deeply divided along many lines. Our adversarial culture leaves little space for true dialogue between opposing sides. A number of participants spoke of being in a transitional period in their lives, in terms of family, work or community roles, and various internal conflicts pulls, as a result. We spoke of the need for and the difficulty of dealing with complexity and reconciling dualities both within ourselves and between us.

2.) **Optimism and fear/ hope and despair:** The media allows us to feel the immediacy of the world in our living rooms. We are in constant contact with problems and issues that are so much bigger than we can confront alone. We combat our fear and helplessness with hope that our small individual gestures will have ripple effects in the larger society. We seek safety from outside dangers by seeking refuge in our gated communities, or other silos where we can be with people like us.

3.) **Sense of place and sense of disconnection:** technology has allowed us to be in constant communication, but without the same kind of attachment to a physical place that we once had, has made it more difficult to develop community.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis:

Our country is deeply divided along many lines. Our adversarial culture leaves little space for true dialogue between opposing sides. Participants explored their experiences of dualities and dichotomies present in their personal lives, and linked those experiences to global issues. One participant spoke about an illness of a family member requiring both traditional and alternative treatment. Each treatment is important but the various practitioners were so scornful of each other, that the family member was afraid to bring them together. Increasingly we find ourselves in gated communities, or silos of people who look and act like ourselves. One participant expressed this as the "Talibanization" of our country into places people feel safe (exemplified by the "you are with us or against us" rhetoric). "Is this what we have to do in order to feel safe? I am struck by how un-diverse we are (in the LP). This is a rarified group of democrats. Why do we have to have one truth? ...What is the risk of talking to others? What is the risk of me talking to Republicans (other than increased blood pressure?)" The fundamentalism vs. scientism dichotomy plays out on all levels, from the personal to the political. We have difficulty dealing with complexity.

At the same time, participants expressed a desire to re-connect, to build bridges, to find hope. "A lot I'm pre-occupied with everywhere I go-it seems people are obsessed with re-weaving-of trying to bring things back together-be more tolerant of ambiguity... in my church, there is a small group ministry, where people want to be in discussion with each other, to my corporate or non-profit work-there is a theme of trying to re-connect with each other. We all want to be in intimate relationship to other human beings." How do we manage in a world where our institutions have changed?

Hypothesis:

We live in a world where there's much that needs to be done. Our traditional institutions and ways of operating aren't working for us. We manage our anxiety by increasingly being with people who are like us. At the same time, there is a recognition that this is not sustainable, and we attempt in small ways to reach out and bridge our differences - to try to find some whole-ness.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis:

Participants discussed how the media brings the immediacy of the world in to our living rooms. We are in constant contact with problems and issues that are so much bigger than we ourselves can confront. How do we deal with a complex world that we have no control over? We are more aware of ourselves as a tiny cog in a huge machine, which we can ignore when we are part of a tightly knit family system in a larger community. On microcosmic/familial level - the dualities (noted above) can be managed, but on a larger

level, we are helpless. We seek safety from outside dangers by seeking refuge in our gated communities, or other silos where we can be with people like us.

We feel out of control because we can't fix our president, but have hope that even small trivial gestures can have ripple effects. A number of participants are engaged in various kinds of change work (psychotherapy, organizational consulting, activism). There was hope that we can initiate activities in the microcosm and find the macrocosm is infected by our small acts.

A number of participants spoke of being in a transitional period. Some noted that however anxiety provoking this place of transition, uncertainty and confusion is, it is also the necessary starting point for creativity. Renewal comes out of this place. What both attracts and exasperates the rest of the world about us (Americans) is our capacity for optimism - we can fix anything, become anything, erase our past. The positive psychology movement is very big in the US right now. At the same time, this optimism and hope can separate us from reality, as evidenced in the current administration. We need to comfort ourselves with hope, hold on to hope, but not be pollyannaish about it. One person noted, "I am generally an optimist, but have to think, what am I dis-owning in my optimism? It is the despair."

Hypothesis:

As a result of finding the silos/dichotomies/polarities unacceptable and intolerable, we find ourselves alone together in a no man's land that is utterly unfamiliar, but full of potential and risk. We combat our fear and helplessness with hope that our small individual gestures will have ripple effects in the larger society. We need our hope and optimism in order to address our many problems. At the same time, we need to temper our optimism with reality.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis:

Technology allows us to be constantly connected to almost anywhere in the world. "I can call my son at the same number, and he can be anywhere. When I call his cell phone, the first words are hardly ever hello, but rather, where are you?" Place (physical location) has been removed from the equation, yet it has so much to do with developing community. "You grow where you are planted." Participants spoke about needing a sense of place in order to develop community. At the same time, being able to move around so easily, and not be tied to a particular place is appealing. One participant, who immigrated to the US a number of years ago, and whose parents remain in their country of origin, expressed the dilemma about place: "I have roots here now. They (my parents) are getting old, and it's harder to travel. What will happen in the next 10 years? What will it mean? I'm thinking of starting my own family. I won't be with my parents when they need me. What will it mean for my kids to have only one set of grandparents?"

When you don't know the place, you lack the physical cues that help you connect. How can we develop community? We are in constant communication, but don't feel connected. The younger generation is finding new ways to build community in the absence of having a place to which one is attached. 'Myspace', 'wikipedia' and 'weblogs' are examples of ways in which technology is helping to build community.

Hypothesis:

The fabric and thread of what we know and about our sense of place in the world is being torn apart by technology. At the same time, technology is also being used (particularly by the younger generation) to weave together what has been torn apart. Blogs, myspace, wikipedia are technological attempts to re-build what we lament losing. Our shared stories are replacing geography as ways to define ourselves.

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