

**"The USA and the World
at the Dawn of 2009"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 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, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organizations, or as members of families and communities.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

The event took place shortly before Barack Obama will be inaugurated for his first term, after a particularly long, exciting, and contentious election season. Themes seemed to be inter-related and very much connected to the outcome of the presidential elections (and upcoming inauguration), which have raised a sense of possibility and hope.

This happens in a context where so many systems have broken down, and we are in crisis. Themes were expressed in terms of dualities/polarities:

1. Crisis and opportunity/ Hope amidst the rubble

It is the best of times and the worst of times. On the one hand, we are a nation in crisis – all of our systems are broken – health care, the economy, climate, our world standing, etc. On the other hand, we feel a tremendous amount of hope as a result of Obama's election. Barack and Michelle Obama are containers of hope for the whole nation.

2. Isolation and connection

Technology can overwhelm and isolate us, as well as foster connection and engagement. As a country, there's a feeling that it is again ok to be an American. One can venture out, without lowering one's head in shame. There is a feeling that the crises we all face now may bring us together to fix what is broken.

3. Generational shift/ movement

This is felt on a personal and systemic level. Participants noted a change in social role expectations: we are living longer and need new categories for social roles. It is possible to re-create one's life. This is both exciting and stressful. We are overwhelmed with the 'tyranny of choice'. We struggle to find balance, through yoga, meditation and spirituality. The larger system is also in need of regulation, an antidote to 'continuous partial attention'.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

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, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Hope

Barack Obama's election and impending inauguration have filled us with an enormous amount of hope. At the same time, we are aware that many of our systems are broken: health care, the economy, education, the climate – "it's like a scenic train wreck." This crisis has been a long time in coming, yet we have kept ourselves from seeing the red flags. Finally problems that the poor have been feeling for a long time have reached the affluent part of society. We can no longer deny the system is broken. There was some hope that we are no longer in denial, and we can begin to correct what is wrong. As one participant put it, "here we are, in the midst of the worst of times that I've seen in my life – and yet I have a sense of abiding hope or possibility. At the same time, I can't run as far or as fast or think as straight."

We wondered about what the Obamas represent for us. We are aware that we are assigning Messiah like qualities and expectations to them, and at the same time participants empathized with the impossibility of his role and our expectations of him. This was combined with a desire to take up our citizenship roles in a new way. "Do I have the ability to put in the work that makes this happen? How much can he push things back to country? Will we be called upon or volunteer to do things for our country?" One was preoccupied with his health.

One participant described a radio report about a group of African American women in NY who wrote a book called 'Letters to Michelle'. One of the letters was by an English professor at the University of Rochester, articulating the African American experience – the assault of history, suffering and hope. That letter was called 'Leading up to you'. The last letter said "we are here with you, next to you, behind you, in front of you." An African American participant thought about the meaning of Obama's election for her parents who experienced segregation. When her mother was pregnant in 1953, she drove through Texas and stopped at a gas station to use the bathroom. The owner said "niggers aren't allowed here." This election represents a major shift.

Obama's 'differentness' his 'exotic-ness' allows us to project so much onto him. His election, may be an expression of rage as well as of hope. People who have felt excluded can now be included. We explored the notion of his holding both affection and rage for America. Can we hold and bear both? If so, is it hopeful? The destructive piece is not quite conscious – where is the aggression?

One of the conveners (TW) noted a distinct difference from previous listening posts, where the sense of hopelessness was so great that people focused inward and on their immediate environment and this one in which there is a sense of hope and outward focus.

Hypothesis: As inauguration day approaches (1/20/09), we are filled with hope for our new president and proud of our collective role in electing him. At the same time, we are in the midst of the greatest economic crisis since the great depression; we are fighting two wars; and our status in the world of nations has been severely damaged in the past eight years. Rather than face the terror, despair, and rage about the consequences of our actions domestically and internationally, we instead invest enormous hope and great expectations in our new first family.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Change and uncertainty

Analysis: Participants were pre-occupied with their family roles, as children taking care of aging parents or grandparents concerned about their grandchildren. We noted that social expectations are changing – for families, in work, in community. People are living longer. As we age, we are not necessarily living up to conventional ideas of what that should look like. Retirement is not what it used to be. It is possible to use Starbucks as office space. We have a technology and the internet that offer ways to connect to people around the world, but it can be harder to find authentic connections. It can be lonely and isolating amidst all of these possibilities or connection. We wish for grounding connection with other people. It is no longer unusual to be single later in life. Does this represent disillusionment with the previous way of pairing? There is no strict script about what one is supposed to do when. Without norms, we have the opportunity to constantly re-invent ourselves – this is both thrilling and exhausting. On one level, there is a fantasy that it would be easier from the other perspective – all the unknowns and uncertainty are unsettling. One participant called it the “tyranny of choice.”

As we re-configure our individual identities, as a nation we are also engaged in re-configure our national identity. We noted how Obama’s election almost instantaneously changed the perception of Americans in the world. The classic American role is the ‘lonely cowboy’ (a metaphor often used to describe Bush). One participant suggested that we are moving towards a more feminine way of being – a desire for connection, collaboration, need for feminine energy. It was noted that Obama is not a ‘manly man’ – he is seen as being in touch with his femininity (first female president). Perhaps this represents a more female agenda coming to surface.

One participant offered the metaphor of boats heading out of harbor or heading in. It feels as though we as a nation are heading out into the world. It is not clear or cozy, but it is exciting. He suggested that if the listening post had been convened prior to the election, he would have felt despair about how divided and tribalized we are. The Obama campaign got people out of their tribal affiliations.

We share an illusion – or is it a delusion? – that we are all together and will be led by a brilliant leader. In crisis, we tend to pull together, and there is more of a connection with others. Perhaps it is easier to fantasize about how great things will be under President Obama, rather than face how awful things really are. Is this a grand denial?

Hypothesis: The baby boomer and later generations have broadened our social role expectations, allowing us innumerable opportunities to re-invent ourselves. These new choices and their accompanying uncertainty are thrilling, terrifying, and exhausting. We are faced with the ‘tyranny of choice’. The anxiety of having to face these choices on our own leads us to seek community and to examine how to be better citizens. This dynamic is paralleled on the national level. Post election, we feel proud of our country. As we consider being better individual citizens our country-as-a-whole has the potential to be a better partner/citizen in the global community.

Convener: Tracy Wallach