

"Brighton and the World at Summer 2010"

Report of a Listening Post
held in Brighton on 14th June



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 as citizens, whether as worker, unemployed, or retired, as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, 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. These themes emerged from the personal experience of the social world in the material explored. Out of the themes identified there are naturally many ways of organising them and making sub-headings. The ones that follow are an attempt to draw on those of the sub-groups and those of the convener. Each is described as a tension experienced through internal contradictory experience, while responding to opposite demands from the wider social/political/economic environment. The later hypotheses will try to link these up.

1. Robustness needed for survival vs. Vulnerability and impotence

Our first reported experience was related to the vulnerability of the bee community, its place in the eco-system, its susceptibility to pesticides and our own vulnerable dependence upon this vital part of our natural world for re-germination. Some bees live and work as independent aggregates, others as masses that appear to co-operate socially. This led to a discussion of bugs imported along with globalised trade (bugs from Indonesia that live independent of nourishment and then can attack like a computer Trojan, or wax destroying bugs from Hawaii).

A friend with ME lives on very little revealing a singular aspect of dependency and survival. Depending on a place in society & being resourced is key, but are we individuals or dependent on a provided or found place or role? This dichotomy seemed fed by social fantasy that in reality proved untrue. Adolescents are feared for aggression but in fact do show kindness to elders and not just in Kenya where the Mazai (elder) is highly respected ("Sir"). Are such social roles distancing or respectful, rigid or authorising?

Vulnerability was articulated as a theme through the rites of passage in aging – seats on the train, medical operations/recovery, pensions, husband struggling to retire & find a place in 70s; some have a need to work and launch parts of their career (lack of work can cause depression) – can they/we find a base/place/field/clients for work. Is the only security in individual independent self-support – vegetable growing, bee keeping that might also serve a common good? Is there a fear of the lack of hope in the future expressed through feeling in couples of lack of resources for children & the next generation? Could the phantasy be as if having children is a life-style choice rather than

hopefulness about the future and a source of strength in supporting elders, nations and mankind? Strength is reflected in over 50s being more creative as less dependent on finance & paid work. 48 yr old policeman retiring. Fear is also in how you will be seen.

2. Responsibility vs. Shame and guilt

The BP oil spill raised strong contradictory feelings: Who was taking responsibility? Was it BP's list of safety failures? Was Obama blaming UK for greedily wanting pension dividends rather than a safe world? What was being projected into Tony Hayward (BP CEO) in US Congress fury & scorn – shaming him or more than that? One senator said “shame on us” for agreeing to most profitable exploration without doing risk assessment. Was it just an accident beyond prediction? Are we involved as citizens in our dependency on cars, planes and an oil carbon economy? Should we protest by not using cars & planes? Is BP a global giant more powerful than nations?

Linked to theme a), we explored experience of business mindedness. Moral robustness or ‘blasting through’ exploitation – what are business ethics – fair or exporting impotence? One-person campaign against small town highways being re-designed for powerful Tesco against competitors and residents – in Tesco's policy of giving council a land resource in all their new builds in return for favourable access. Greed – is it their or ours lets them get away with it in “shiny polished world of spin” that makes others vulnerable. Disaster of perpetual growth model (Rowan report never mainstream).

Shamelessness of media in reporting the need for Cumbria to have peace to grieve after gunman's 12 murders, while putting cameras & microphones under noses of the bereaved. Photographer too ashamed to take local pictures while on holiday – felt he should have photographed press!

3. Simplicity vs. complexity

Desire for a fairy godmother to explain and promise, rather than the struggle to find way through to a shared and integrated truth. In relation to BP oil spill, search for blame = desire for clarity if not simplicity. Feelings swinging around on unsafe ground. Don't know who to trust. Where can you get information you can trust? Leaving uni. & finding job desert is a mess in social planning. (Boys are so messy = primal father who exploits). Is this an expression of our messing it up for next generation by plundering resources and hope?

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 this moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them. To some extent they reflect further work by the convener even though this is refined by consulting with members of the LP.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Principled robustness demands a firm fair container for vulnerability

Analysis: Survival dynamics are very scary. Forces at work globally feel beyond control. Belonging to something (group/values) bigger than ourselves is risky and hard to sustain. Authority and authorisation carries huge risks – rejection/ failure.

Hypothesis: Our ambivalence about belonging or leading rather than retreating to survive, reflects a deep confusion about a world that we can experience as challenging in a way that threatens to overwhelm the mind. In consequence we swing between feeling mad to join in and mad to retreat to isolation. Our primary risk prior to engagement is in our sense of whether our vulnerability is both internally or externally contained. Because of this our engagement is often compromised.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Shamelessness and the anxiety it causes

Analysis: We are shamed and fascinated by the seductive shamelessness of others. Obama is at last advancing from his rigid depressive position of post-partisan politics to shame shamelessness as well as holding a core of universal values. Dare we follow or will we see his partisan paranoid-schizoid position is destructive and against us, or else just too late?

Hypothesis: Because of individual and collective shame at joining in the greedy ruthless world of consumption in satisfying our desires we are left in a state of anxiety. These anxieties shape and fuel our seducible voyeurism through the media and our impotence in joining groups to collectively confront shameless violations of human dignity.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

The ethics and morality of the unconscious mind and of a social unconscious

Analysis: The discipline and ethics of harkening to unconscious messages in ourselves, others and society shape an ever transforming kaleidoscope that demands an ethic of thoughtful reflection for emotional containment to be possible. The temptation to simplify is seductive. Single message solutions abound. Foreclosure lures. Yet for action that is collective, ethical, reflective and meaningful we need a framework of socially understood words, and skilled organising, to give shape and movement. Aggression and sexuality demand expression. Politics & religion has fumbled both. This shaped our response to Obama's challenge: Can we do it? – Yes we can.

Hypothesis: Twin fears of being overwhelmed dull the motive for action. One fear is in excessive complexity; the other in over simplifying. Thinking wider and deeper in the context of action demands reflection that we easily resist for fear of acting out. Because of this, the disciplines of personal and collective study of unconscious and suppressed experience threaten getting lost yet again.

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