

**"Sweden and the World
at the Dawn of 2010"
Report of a Listening Post held
on 18th January in Stockholm**



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 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.

Work started with the reading of a short description of the module and after a short silence, a male participant described recurring experiences in his role of an organisational consultant: The meaning of work appears to be lost as well as the goals. The comment was the first in a row of observations on meaning and organizational and strategic matters. The impression was that most of these comments emanated from organisational consultant roles. The disaster in Haiti was mentioned early on; it is upsetting – but for how long, and how deeply? In the role of participant in this Listening Post someone said that they were convinced that participating in this event could be a way of influencing development in the world.

The rapid internationalization in many areas of social life and matters was mentioned and led to questions about how we, as a nation, are represented in Europe, with reference to Sweden's recent chairmanship of the European Union. Do we really want to be described as the prime minister recently expressed his own, and the rest of the world's expectations of our citizens: "Swedes are punctual, well-prepared and professional."

In the role of a citizen of the world it was pointed out how difficult it is to adopt and stay in such a role since it means that the distressed people in Haiti are brothers and sisters. Such thoughts are extremely painful. Somebody else expressed doubt about his own stamina for seriously involving himself in the suffering of the people in Haiti. Another participant described how he has given up the efforts to influence the world and described how ideals and belief in radical changes from 68 have turned into adjustment, disillusion and conformism.

A female participant, in her role as citizen, talked about the difficulties in adapting in a society that has moved from ideological government to economy.

Everyday life for the inhabitants of the large city was mirrored by a student who had had a work placement at a children's nursery and had discovered that it was possible for

parents to leave their children there as early as 6.30 a.m. This observation was followed by a couple of general questions and comments about the cost of our welfare.

In the role of a psychotherapist undergoing basic training the problem of handling one's own experiences was mentioned. Should advice be based on events in one's own life or should one trust 'the manual' and give more general advice? How emphatic can one be whilst still maintaining one's professionalism?

In the role of sleepless citizen one participant referred to a late-night viewing of the film about Alexander the Great. He had seen the film recently and pointed out that Alexander had something to explore and conquer; things that might be missing now when the colonialism has fallen. Incidentally, he mentioned his own experiences of living in a nation marked by colonialism and the anger he feels at the thought of colonialism.

The possibilities of exploring one's own inner world and finding affiliation are mentioned by a participant in the role of a believer. He made a direct reference to the title of AGSLO: next summer conference. In the role of atheist with a Catholic upbringing and education, one participant mentioned the paedophilic abuses that have been exposed in Catholic organisations. The same person exclaimed that God must be monstrous if he allows the catastrophe in Haiti to occur.

In the role of convener an attempt was made to remind the participants about there being space for observations made in somewhat more every-day roles. This intervention was followed by an observation in the role of passenger in the public transportation system from a journey in Southern Europe: an absolute insight about the fact that the growth of private car driving cannot continue – we will literally run out of gas!

As a consumer one participant commented upon the effect of date-marks on provisions: Huge quantities of food are discarded. This is not because the food is unusable but because it is out-of-date. This means that it becomes illegal to make the merchandise available for consumption. This results in mountains of refuse and great amounts of edible food being wasted.

The question is: Dare we taste the milk after the sell-by date?

In the role of passenger one participant described a flight between Budapest and Damascus in a plane full of Israelis, Lebanese and Syrians – every group appeared concordant with the stereotyped images the traveller had and could be seen as representatives of some of the nations involved in one of the most long-lasting and violent conflicts in the world.

A convener calmly commented that it was probably a very safe way to travel for all aboard.

One participant related a very powerful recent experience of his capacity to watch himself from the outside in his role of individual. The description was followed by a question from another man: Did he mean it was as if he had an extra limb, equipped with an eye, that was able to move around and even focus on his own body? This attempt of steering the work towards a group-interview was warded off by a short intervention from a convener.

As a citizen who moved from the country-side into the city, the striking absence of eye-contact between strangers encountering each other in the urban city environment was

commented upon. This was supplemented by a comment on the phenomenon of being 'absent whilst present' – people are physically here but are using their cell-phones to communicate with someone else who is in another place. Young people actively avoid eye-contact.

As a pedestrian, one woman commented on modern prams where children ride facing in the direction of travel and thereby miss eye-contact with the adult that is so important for the processes of attachment. A convener remarked that one of the best-selling models is called 'Urban Jungle'.

This term reoccurs a number of times later to refer to different phenomena in urban life.

The struggle not to become cynical was raised and the same participant delivered a quite poetical description of how he finds meaning in his existence in the love of his partner.

A female elucidated: "Meaning comes from relations between humans."

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The group noticed and described the following themes:

- Experiences of going astray – the lack of meaning, commonly or individually.
- Lack of contact between people in urban life.
- The absence in the seeming presence.
- Is there still something valuable to explore and if so, where?
- Adaptation and resignation.
- How to find courage to think, explore and try?
- How to take responsibility – how to show courage as citizens?
- Preoccupation with the earth's resources and climate issues as efforts to find a common global project.

These different themes might perhaps be condensed so as to be said to be revolving around the following conflicts.

The conflict between trusting one's own capacity or leaving it to others to take a stand and act.

Conflicts between resignation and withdrawing to intimate relationships; retreating to private projects and resignation on the one hand and a vague and unspecific longing for affiliation and responsibility on the other.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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. 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.

The group of participants was dominated by well-educated, intellectual and well-informed middle-aged city citizens. The perspective of most observations was from professional roles and relatively few from the role of citizen. A possible hypothesis in this respect was made during the work when it was pointed out how a growing number of dimensions of social life are thoroughly organized; experts and systems replace individual judgement and really creative capacity and initiative.

Strong expressions of affect were rare in the meeting, with a few exceptions; we experience the atmosphere as tolerant and mild. The lack of hope and power was well articulated and led to neither suggestions of action nor open expressions of anger, although anger was mentioned by one participant.

When a participant declared: "Haiti is closer than SAAB"; the comment precisely captured the lack of reactions or reflections about the current international financial crisis as well as the national effects of the crisis. Faced with the Market and its laws we are powerless.

There was a short exchange about the town of Trollhättan (centre of Saab's automobile division) comparing it with mining and manufacturing towns and neighbourhoods totally dependent on a single industry. Very little empathy, however, and no solidarity was expressed with those who are threatened with the loss of work and income. One of the participants declared hopefully that something much better may follow the closing of SAAB.

In the role of convenor, one of us for a while became very occupied with inner pictures from the bitter and heart-rending death struggle of the English coal-mines and how violent and long-lasting the resistance to the governmental plans had been.

The disappointment over all the expectations not realised during the recent international conference on climate change are perhaps expressed in the passages about global climate issues. The hopes of radical change in many international issues, which peaked a year ago when Obama was elected president, seem to have rapidly vanished, faded or died.

There are tendencies towards nostalgia: knowledge about milk in the old days is compared with the more fashionable and widespread knowledge of wines.

The early comment about the opening hours of nurseries could connect to such a nostalgic longing to times when one salary often could support a family, and mothers were often house-wives. In society, child-care is often described in pedagogic and child-centred terms and one could surmise the return of the idea that daily child-care should be produced in accordance with children's interests. This notion seems to be supported by information and marketing from public and private actors in the field. At times it is

quite difficult for citizens to distinguish the original primary task: To make it possible for both parents to work.

On yet another level the streak of nostalgia might be about aging: Has the group, in spite of an infusion of youth, already passed its best-before date? Are the experiences of people in their upper middle-ages relevant and valuable? It should be mentioned that this theme quite well corresponds with Eric H. Ericson's model for developmental psychology, where the central conflict of aging is: 'Resignation and bitterness or atonement and wisdom.'

In an analytical perspective the connection milk-mother is obvious and could also be directed towards Mother Earth, who really seems to have passed her best-before date.

The enchantment with, and the repeated use of, formulations about milk and best-before dates could also be the point of departure for another hypothesis. On one level these comments can be about the Tavistock-tradition. With its growing recruitment problems and connection to psycho-analysis, it is surely in the eyes of many people a phenomenon that has passed its best-before date by a long way.

The image of a flight where the groups of travellers from different nations in conflict at least temporarily share territory could be seen as an expression of hope: If we could, at least for a moment, see that we are all on the same flight some of the life-threatening conflicts and break-downs could be avoided.

Following up the observations about loss of meaning a convener commented on the connection leadership-meaning: one aspect of leadership is to describe goals and methods in such a way so they are understood and contained by as many as possible of the individuals concerned. Perhaps we have to admit that we live in times with an increasing number of people called leaders on different levels whilst at the same time an increasing number of employees lack a genuine experience of meaning.

A convener suggested that the violence and anger that the conflicts described could elicit are perhaps exported to the periphery, both nationally and internationally. This suggestion was soundly rejected, referring to the fact that mechanisms for such an export have not been presented. Here it seems urgent to maintain an image that outbursts of violence, for instance in the suburbs, have nothing to do with the surrounding systems. It is our impression that this perfectly reflects the mainstream of the public discussions about violence and destructivity in our societies – the phenomena are regarded as matters of order, discipline and/or individual psychological problems. The resistance towards a systemic approach is equally strong when it comes to football hooliganism as well as the wide-spread burning of schools by children and adolescents.

The somewhat bizarre image of an extra limb with an eye warrants an attempt at an analysis: From the obscene cliché language of the one-eyed phallus it is possible to proceed to think about our capacity to observe and reflect upon our selves, our decisions and actions and their consequences. The 'one-eyedness' of seeing everything from an individual perspective might be a threat here. In a wider perspective, collective and national narcissism can easily turn into ethno-centrism, making the surrounding world more and more dangerous and impossible to understand.

From a group-dynamic perspective, we believe that this Listening Post had elements and dynamics from both the previous and the forthcoming group-relation conferences and their titles. Two of the AGSLO board members had the role of conveners; one will also be

on the conference staff 2010. Four of the participants attended our conference in 2009, whilst others had experience from AGSLO or other group-relation conferences, seminars or Listening Posts. It is possible that an arranging organisation with more distance to AGSLO would have fewer influences of group dynamics from these events.

A male participant asked what OPUS is and why and how we agree to participate in an event linked to an unknown organisation. This question was not directed towards a specific person and was left unanswered and uncommented.

The fact that several participants turned up very early might have to do with experiences of the time constraints at conferences and might also serve as an illustration of the quotation from the prime-minister, mentioned above, about the punctuality of the Swedes.

With regard to the composition of the group it also is quite likely that some of the comments about the lack of eye-contact are also related to experiences of meeting small-group-consultants in role during group-relation conferences.

Conveners: Peter Hugo and Bengt Guvå