

## AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

### Finland and the World at the Dawn of 2014 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

**13th January 2014, Helsinki, Finland**

#### **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.

#### **Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

In Part Two, the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:  
In the final discussion session of the Listening Post seminar, one of the participants pointed out that, by the end of the seminar, we had progressed from being individuals to being a group. Within the group, the members had begun to interact in a way that supported fluent movement between the extreme phenomena introduced. We moved from alienation to trust, from feet being on the ground and common sense to being abandoned by outsourced bureaucracy, from never-ending circling like a hamster on its wheel to traveling to different corners of the world with just a pack on our backs, from being smothered by selfishness and envy to "people needing other people" in coping with their surroundings.

In the group, we used metaphors and a schematic figure to grasp and divide life's "wicked" complexity, which cannot be organized into exclusive archives. In this 2014 Listening Post report, we tried to leave room for parallelism, stratification, incoherence, topsy-turvyness, and movement in different directions. Both of the suggested hypotheses are examined from several angles.

Identification of major themes. Analysis and hypothesis

## **Theme 1. Beyond individuality and a new type of communality between people – remaining in one place, leaving and returning**

### **Analysis**

Firstly, we shared depressing experiences with the realization that we have been relinquishing the idea of “improving the world”: experiences with externality and unawareness, what can be influenced and what cannot. Instead, we function as a hamster does, circling on the wheel in its cage, going nowhere and without a means of escape. What should be developed and what should be promoted? Professional tension between optimism and the fact that knowledge gained through experience is stepped all over. The participants told of their travels to various corners of the world and, in Finland, to the regions of their birth. They shared the pleasant feelings they experienced while visiting their birthplaces, for example, “Flowing water is a feature of my favourite safe landscape”. They also shared other types of experiences with traveling and having to leave, for example, “While in Ecuador, I realized how ensuring the European idea of development and well-being is selfish and increases injustice and suffering in populous countries” and “In North Karelia, I felt a great deal of concern for how people there were able to manage – regional inequality keeps increasing”.

It is evident that something must be relinquished; we should not simply consider it as a negative action, but also as a positive one, with a different belief in the future. We pondered the possibility of people being able to back off because they believed in themselves, believed that they could dare to change and find a new life. One of the participants told about her child, who moved from Canada to Brussels and who was hoping to take her family to Africa to do humanitarian work. Another participant told how her son went to the border between China and North Korea and began to practice ancient martial arts with a sword. She said that, as a mother, she remained in Finland and was afraid. One of the participants had an 8-year-old grandchild who had organized a collection to help her poorer classmates.

Experiences while on a sailing expedition in the Finnish lake region produced admiration for the ability of the people in the rural surroundings to network, each doing his or her part, since the government had centralized its services some distance away and the counties had outsourced their services to individual entrepreneurs out of reach of those in need. When one traveler entered a road church and wanted to light a candle, the tourist guide, a student, could not find a candle or match and said, “I was not given any instructions on how to handle this request”.

One of the participants experienced a sense of communality involving one's complete essence while on a trip to Thailand, where he lived in a retreat with professionals and volunteers from all over the world. Everyone in the group welcomed newcomers with clapping and also said goodbye with clapping. The primary objective of the community was that "no one makes money, but everyone benefits".

## **Theme 2. The never-ending circling like a hamster in its cage, money and power – giving space to new viewpoints**

### **Analysis**

One participant dreamed that she sold her carefully renovated home and was furious when the new owners immediately forced her to leave. They wanted to move in at once, "Leave now. We're in a hurry. There's no time for adjusting to the situation." A therapist told of feeling both guilt and omnipotence, as well as an increase in work pressure, when people in need of therapy began to plead for treatment, since the application for treatment had been "outsourced" by one of those in need.

The question of power is at the same time one of money, which also reflects on one's inner world. One entrepreneur who had been through three bankruptcies told that nevertheless she was satisfied with being an entrepreneur. She felt that she had been freed from the feeling of slavery and fear that is related to the power of money. When she relinquished the power of money, she gained faith in life; "Yes, my family and I will survive" when we focus on work rather than on money.

The participants spoke of feeling safety and the creation of trust, small sprouts that could grow quickly into different and new ways to approach people and local lifestyles. In the hometown of one participant, the crosswalk has become a place where friendly walkers and drivers meet. Drivers slow down as they approach and indicate the street with a gesture, while the people crossing the street wave in thanks. It has become a local custom, which nevertheless does not apply to everyone. Another, clearly still angry, participant told of a recent experience at a crosswalk in which her bike was nearly hit by a car. Once she was off the street, her first reaction had been rage: "Is there anything in reach that I can use to bang away at the car?" Worklife overcomes, driven by the need to rush and compete. Where is the crosswalk for thoughts and promises, when they are trampled coming and going?

## Hypothesis 1

The historical perspective. Modern culture created an industrial and bureaucratic society. Within the industrial community, the employer acted as the collective father, and the trade union was the mother. The future brought advancement and development. The postmodern era brought uncertainty, traditional industry was shifted to neo-colonially developing countries, and traditional institutions began to deteriorate. Patronage has become neglect. Society and culture emphasizes individuality and forces it upon everyone. The norm is to produce, be efficient, choose soon (already in playschools), carry the full responsibility. The means for coping is formed: "There are no instructions", in other words, there is externalization (also regarding morality and fairness), the result being avarice and egoism. With speed one is driven over and remains under; in rural areas, one is not even able to move about. Consumption within society is the prerequisite if the individual is to cope. To what should one commit; what can be trusted? Committing requires trust. How do we adjust to the need to commit if our most important ability is the ability to compete?

In psychodynamic organizational thinking, the object relations theory of Melanie Klein has been utilized. According to it, early development, what is called the schizoid position, is a strong attempt to maintain equilibrium, to be able to differentiate between good and bad. Change is shunned; one willingly rebuffs it and even tries threatening feelings. This attitude became attractive as a type of coping mechanism. How do we progress to the structured depressive position? For Klein it was based on love, the trust brought about by experiencing appreciation. Bion spoke of the container concept, the maturing of issues for the benefit of another. In the previously described experiential world, traditional supporters seem to have disappeared. As a coping mechanism, one can search for a retreat in Thailand or bring "mindfulness therapy" from the East in a form suitable for the West so that people can save themselves from themselves, even in the company of others.

The situation can also be seen as a complex theory that describes a "wicked problem". Then the problem itself is already difficult to define, and solutions must be searched for at the same time. However, the attempt is no longer so balanced, and one must adjust to change. On the edge of chaos a window should open to other opportunities. This uncertainty also needs support. The complexity theory offers the alternative of collective intelligence in place of diffusion. It is pertinent when a problem is handled; people understand its contents and significance in the same way, as wicked problems that are ambiguous with many answers. Development also requires interaction among people. Could it be

possible – after some rearrangement – that the Listening Post group represents just this type of interpretative work and alternatives of reflective collective intelligence? The group and its interaction are supporters of the work process. The group is also representative of self-organization. In place of planning, organizing feeds interaction between people. See the following figure.



Figure 1. Man's relationship with the world: from the social, psychodynamic and systemic point of view.

Meso = Meso,  
 Mikro = Micro,  
 Sisäinen = Internal,  
 Makro = Macro,  
 Ulkoinen = External,  
 LP 2014 = Listening Post 2014,  
 ryhmä = group,  
 Kompleksinen systeemisyyys = Systemic complexity.

## Hypothesis 2.

Wings and roots. Another coping mechanism could be to consider the metaphor of returning to one's roots. It is not only a dimension of society, but also returning to one's roots is linked with family, human history, and biological evolution. Is the occurring system change within the complete grasp of people, transcending the traditional body-mind dichotomy? Brain research plays a role in this instance. The body reacts; it knows before the mind. Those who have been almost hit in a crosswalk recognize the body language of rage and hatred. The body and senses react also to other excesses, also well-being. It is time for us to shift from the stiff machine metaphor to the biologically adjustable system metaphor, for example, to that of the brain, to "organic" organization.

The “hamster in its cage” is a metaphor for a forced pace. Often it is used to describe economic life, which is often perceived as one driven by inner laws, the power of money, which cannot be influenced. However, hamsters run with pleasure on a wheel, a never ending circular path, while not all people even step on such a path. At the same time many people want to step off. No matter how fast you run, the path stays the same; is that the cause of the frustration?

Fractality is also an interesting phenomenon. Certain special characteristics are repeated at different levels of a system and in different systems. Thus culture’s fragments are [fragmentation is] repeated in small systems. Individuals, work communities, and organizations begin to resemble greedy and egoistic “number/money economies”. How can one survive the internal turbulence produced by these broad systems? Metaphorically speaking, we need both “roots” and “wings”. Our roots keep our feet on the ground (i.e. focused on reality) and make us, as individuals, aware of our basic needs. But wings are also needed to help us look afar and reach new and strange viewpoints to turn around the entire layout.

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