



LISTENING POST

Irland at the Dawn of 2020

Dublin, 10. Jan. 2020

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, 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': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Elements of sharing are reported under themes in Part 2.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

Theme 1 Generational tensions and contrasts

A younger participant kicked off the session by telling the story of a friend who has recently got married. Previously the friend had complained about not finding any satisfaction in a "pointless" job, promising "I'm gonna move, I'm gonna move". Now however he felt that he needed to stick with the job to earn an income and settle down. The complaint about the pointlessness of jobs, not productive but filling space and taking time, was echoed by some others. Other participants countered that they found meaning in their work and pointed to positive generational shifts such as women's access to the workplace.

Theme 2 Living in a bubble while mourning the loss of community

One admitted to being preoccupied with "staying happy in my bubble, because within my bubble I can find meaning". How did we get here? On the tram, everyone was looking at their phone, no one was exchanging pleasantries or acknowledging the wet weather, "the soft day". The presence of other people was ignored, shut out, denied. Arriving by bicycle, someone with dodgy brakes, cycling slowly through the rain, was beeped at by drivers in a hurry. One participant remarked that people seem afraid to come across as unfashionable if they are not frantically busy. This seems more marked where the sense of community and belonging is diminished, for example, in a new suburb compared to a rural village. At the same time there is a resistance here to idealising the past. The scandals about institutional abuse in Ireland serve as too strong a reminder. But the bubble that shelters against indifference is not strong enough to protect against the active incivility of the angry.

Theme 3 Coping with information and environmental overload

One contributor linked emotional distress - the mental trauma of cyber-bullying, and the creakiness of overloaded mental health services, to the external phenomena of raging bushfires and melting ice-caps. One, the manifestation of the inner pain of individuals, the other, the manifestation of the pain of the planet. The recent deaths of a number of well-known broadcasters was remarked upon. "She spoke as I used to think". They helped articulate the national conversation, helped us make sense of ourselves and the world around us. We miss them more than ever in the media overload, where we have too much information from all over the world, from all its political systems. Our political discourse is coarsened by partisan indifference to truthfulness. But there is no time or space for nuance in the truncated communication of tweet or a text. Bad news makes better clickbait and sells more advertising. Sourcing our news through social media feeds reinforces our own point of view and encourages tribal identification rather than dialogue. We are literally not on the same page. Are we even on the same planet? "The people I meet are great, but the news is bad".

Theme 4 Helplessness

Horrors grow under our noses. An estimated eight thousand people are trafficked in Ireland, working in nail bars, shipping, brothels and elsewhere. Some humans are deciding that others are disposable. There is a tension between one's own revulsion at this and our tolerance for the economic, legal and policing regime that allows it to continue. We feel helpless not so much in the face of obvious evil, but in the face of the complexity of globally inter-connected social systems.

Theme 5 The human condition and change

How do things morph? Leaders pretend to us that we can deny consequences and avoid pain. And people do avoid pain by distraction, alcohol or drugs. In doing so we avoid part of the human condition. We are destroying our environment. Perhaps in the future we can look forward to a mere hologram of what nature was. "It took me a long time to understand what was meant by "preoccupation"", said one, older member, at last, speaking for the first time. She recognised in herself many of the preoccupations already surfaced and professed "my desire is to find out who I am".

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3, the participants 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. Here, participants 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.

Because we are in a time of rapid change, instanced by new technologies, changing geopolitical relations, and climate change, every institution we rely on has broken down and no longer plays the role they did formerly to contain our existential fears. Therefore we have retreated into our individual bubbles, withdrawing from community and genuine interpersonal communication.

It is as if we are going through a birth process where we do not know what is going to be born, whether a monster or an angel, therefore we have to find the resources within ourselves to ride out the outcome.

The consumer system is in collapse and the emerging substitute is still unknown leading to a polarisation between those people (or parts of ourselves) clinging to the consumer system and those striving for change. We experience helplessness because we cannot affect the system, but offset this with the positivity we find in changing ourselves.

Because the human condition is not changing as rapidly as the circumstances surrounding us, we cocoon ourselves in a bubble, a form of hibernation.

Because the things from which we formed our identity are no longer there, we seek and latch on to new authorities, in contrast to just being and sitting with discomfort and uncertainty, the lot of being human.

If our external environment is exploding, and our identities are dissolving alongside the monoculture that formed them, wherein one could only belong by being with or against the powerful Church, then where do we look for our belonging?

If the older generation had the confidence to express themselves freely, and admit their own incompetence in the face of the challenges facing the younger generation, the latter might have the confidence to claim their own resources rather than be repeatedly disappointed at not finding in the older generation the mentors they seek.

“The more I know, the more I know nothing, though we strive to know everything, because we cannot deal with the panic.”

For those of us who have lived long enough and by not questioning the received wisdom, the shame is paralyzing my ability to think, which blocks those behind me from taking up the mantle, leading us to feel guilty about leaving the resolution of the mess to those coming after, whatever their abilities or disabilities.

We are bound to conformity with a narrative of how life is to be lived (work, relationships, retirement, etc) which gives a learned helplessness as individuals when our experience runs counter to the narrative, as a result of external system changes, such as the reduction of caring for older people to transactional terms.

Those institutions need to be rebuilt through a combination of individual and collective action and authentic identity building. [Though not referenced by participants, the Listening Post took place on the day when the Northern Irish devolved administration was re-established, something which dominated the news].

If I can't own my shame and my guilt, I push down those who confront me, and only by acknowledging this can I act responsibly and help in rebuilding institutions.

“I feel silenced by climate change but I don't want this to stop me from caring”.