



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 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', which relates to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

The immediate context of the listening post was a staff meeting of a leadership development programme called AYL (AFFs Programme for Younger Leaders). The venue was AFFs Oslo office. Participants were 7 organizational consultants of various educational backgrounds, mainly holding masters level and higher degrees in social sciences. The Listening Post followed immediately after a day of staff supervision by the convenor, Rune Rønning, AFFs R & D Director. AFF is a consultation company at the Norwegian School of Economics in Bergen, Norway.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several themes presented these have been drawn together under the following seven interrelated themes.

1. The precariousness of individual life

The first theme to emerge was 'the meaning of life', and then that individual life may often seem haphazard in terms of who is 'lucky' and who is not. An illustrative image used was that of Gladstone Gander, walking under clear skies and in sunshine alongside Donald Duck, who is walking with a permanent raincloud above his head. Then the theme evolved briefly into that of individual biographies, how changes which may at first seem for the worse may result in unexpectedly good outcomes. Understanding good and bad as a continuum, rather than a polarity of individual life was briefly explored.

2. The disappointment with politicians

Via a brief discussion of the relatedness of the individual to larger society, and the feasibility of trusting social structures, an exploration of the situation of war veterans signalled a lengthy discussion of politicians and the various ways in which they fail. Politicians were said to seem to deny the existence of war situations that has significantly affected war veterans in very adverse ways. Thus, when people are shot and tortured it seems cowardly not to accept that a state of war exists. Politicians thus emerge as cowards. Also the lack of content in the way politicians speak was used as an example of their lack of honesty. Another example was failure by politicians to advocate political actions which might strengthen the community and thus secure a viable network for individuals.

3. Norway as an (apparent) affluent 'bubble' in wider society

It was pointed out that Europe is in a state of emerging crisis, while Norway experiences a time of affluence and good fortune, largely because of the oil fuelling the economy. It was pointed out that this lack of a crisis may contribute to the politicians' vagueness and lack of leadership. The contrast between Norwegian soldiers going out to fight in other places of crisis and the 'fat', complacent Norwegian society was mentioned. There was explicit and implicit concern about the

possibility of a crisis emerging also in Norway. Words and expressions used were; “Succumbing”, “one should not take anything for granted”. However, gratitude for the good Norwegian life was also mentioned. However, the question was posed: would a crisis be more beneficial than this present complacency?

4. The Threat From Inside: Social differences as a source of crisis in Norway

The existence of differences in social status and wealth in Norway heralded a discussion of problems relating to differences. It was stated that the overall affluence actually may exacerbate negative differences. Examples used were children feeling they have to lie about their origin in order to gain acceptance in the Norwegian ‘in-crowd’, Somalians struggling to get by in Norway; the lack of proper care for some Norwegian elderly, the discrimination of Norwegian Jews and homosexual Muslims. The upshot was that there is a threat of a crisis emerging also in Norway, posing significant risks for individuals who belong to minorities. Being different may thus constitute a risk. One way of being different is voicing criticism, or putting difficult issues on the agenda.

5. The difficulty of placing difficult issues on the agenda

While individuals may be privately concerned and even aggravated by societal issues – large and small – it seems very difficult to voice concerns on a wider social arena. “It does not seem to be sexy” was one characteristic given. Examples of possible impending catastrophes which would merit a place on the agenda were: the meltdown of Greenland’s icecap, the possible plight of the Maldives as sea levels rise, the environmental problems and the lack of sustainable development. Examples of problematic issues included: “Travelling by air is too inexpensive”, “I spend and consume like a drunken sailor”, “I cannot regulate myself; the politicians must help us.”

This theme heralded a return to theme 2, but in a ‘sharpened’ form as the failure and lack of competence of politicians. Example: “The Prime Minister apparently does not dare to correct us”. After this more signs of impending catastrophes were listed:

6. On the edge of Ragnarok (the end of the world in Norse mythology)

“What is of value in Norway may be destroyed”;
“Migratory birds no longer find their way”;
“The Earth’s magnetic field is flipping and the consequences will be disastrous”;
“The atmosphere may disappear into space”;
“The oceans may evaporate”;
“The extinction of the Human Race may result”.

7. Approaching the other lovingly in the face of threatening catastrophe

In conclusion, after the descriptions of possible catastrophes, love emerged as a theme: “Love will be the last to die”;
“I want to love and to know love”;
“Love is the most important source of meaning in individual life”;
“It is more important to love than to be loved”.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members should ideally be working with the information resulting from Parts 1 and 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. However, the members in the Norwegian listening post 2013 lacked specialized knowledge of relevant systems-dynamic theory so this part was not given top priority. However, the members did seek to formulate ways of understanding what was occurring at a psychological level in society. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following interrelated hypotheses.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

The vulnerable individual and the threats to individuals

Analysis: The analysis around this hypothesis was varied and fragmentary. The precariousness of individual life was elaborated upon and there was a rich collection of possible threats. There was, however, scant mention of potential feelings of guilt and shame resulting from Norwegian affluence and complacency in times of crisis elsewhere. There seemed to be a realization that the wealth and the vulnerability represent a paradox and that Norwegian society does not exist in a vacuum: External threats are becoming ever more difficult to ignore and there are also internal threats. There was a sequence where participants focused on the importance of being taken care of, and protected by politicians.

Hypothesis: Faced with an awareness of an increasingly complex and volatile wider society, as well as their own perceived vulnerability, members of an affluent and outwardly complacent Norwegian society withdraw from this complexity. This may result in a drift towards an individualized society where concerns with individual life, spending and consuming take priority. But this retreat is becoming ever more precarious as the crisis outside 'the Norwegian bubble' is becoming more and more difficult to ignore, and as rifts in the Norwegian complacency become more apparent. So the retreat is not complete, it is episodic and characterized by unrest. The retreat may take the form of idealization 'love conquers all'. Alternatively the theme of love in the face of impending catastrophe might be read as a rallying of forces for community and solidarity as a means to cope with crises.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

The emergent disdain and contempt for politicians

Analysis: There were numerous descriptions of risks and threats and they were consistently linked to lack of action and leadership from politicians; most clearly stated as: The politicians must help us...I as an individual cannot regulate myself. The convenor had the feeling that there seems to be an underlying realization that the state of individual impotence in a highly individualized society may be linked strongly to shame and disgust with oneself. There was a realization that severe criticism of politicians and collectively "speaking the politicians despicable" may entail the risk of rendering them impotent and in consequence despicable.

Hypothesis: The experience of individual vulnerability and the strong anxiety resulting from lack of structure, signs of crisis and possible catastrophes in wider society give rise to a pattern of dependency:

One such strategy may be speaking in woolly terms.

One might also hypothesize that the shame of not mastering one's own individual life in an individualized society may be projected upon politicians.

Convenor: Rune Ronning