"USA and the World at the Dawn of 2004"
Report of a Listening Post held on Tuesday 13th January

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. SHARING 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, neighborhood or voluntary or leisure organizations, or as members of families and communities. This being the political season, with the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primaries occurring this month, much of the discussion was focused on the impact of current political realities (the Bush administration, the War on Iraq, the economy) on participants' work and private lives.

Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. On this occasion, themes were difficult to name as discrete entities, since they all seemed connected, but can be drawn together as the following three interrelated statements:

1. There is concern over the current US political agenda. There is a sense of anger, depression, disconnection and powerlessness, likened to stages of grief (a la Kubler-Ross). There is a certain amount of disillusionment in this group of 60's veterans-a sense that we are living in a world where it is all about money and power. There is a sense of loss of past values, of a sense of connection with community, an unraveling of the social threads that have held us together. There are mixed feelings-a sense of being betrayed and confused as to how to spend one's life and energy. The sense of powerlessness about being able to do anything about the big picture leads to a focus on doing what one can in small day to day ways-focusing on work, making a living, volunteering. Hope is lodged in the children.

2. There is a sense that we have lost the more relational "feminine" aspects of our culture. As one participant put it, "we are a patriarchy on steroids," with an increasing preoccupation with territorialism, war, money and power. There is a prioritization of whatever men in power are thinking, and a certain fear of speaking out, being seen as unpatriotic. The metaphor of living in a dysfunctional and abusive family, where our brothers and sisters have joined the abusers. We have little power relative to the team of Bush/Rumsfeld/Cheney. We feel paralyzed by our powerlessness.

3. We seem to be in a socio-cultural coma/fog. We've been lulled to sleep by generations of entitlements. "Just give us our entitlements, not problems." We

have a mask over our eyes and can't see what the issues are. We feel paralyzed-the issues are so big and overwhelming. The masses take comfort in the black and white commitment and conviction of others, like Donald Rumsfeld. That's exactly how abusers get power.

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 that moment. There was a recognition in the group that this particular group of participants did *not* represent a microcosm of all of American society, being a group of all white, mostly female, middle-aged, upper middle class, left-leaning, anti-Bush liberals, with many having grown up or come of age in the 1960's. There was a sense that perhaps we represent a microcosm of a particular voice in American society-one that is not heard often, or has been repressed, in an age where dissent is "unpatriotic." Given the current nature of discourse in this country, it is not insignificant that there was little dissent in this group as well. All participants work as change agents in various settings. There was some difficulty identifying discrete themes, as all were seen as connected and interrelated. The discussion was rich, and thoughtful. This analysis has been distilled into the following interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1.

Analysis: "It ain't what it used to be." Globalization and technology have made the world a much smaller place. We have instant access to what is going on around the world-Somalia, Africa, Bosnia. We watch a sanitized version of the war in Iraq unfold on television. It resembles other "reality TV" programs. We have more information than we've ever had, and are more aware, but don't know what to do with all of this information. Being informed is a bit of a curse-it makes us think that we can do something on a more global and systemic level, when we can really only work on an individual level. On the one hand there is an expanded sense of connectedness with the world around us, and on the other hand we are overwhelmed and depressed by it.

Hypothesis: Faced with globalization and growing sense of awareness and connectedness with the rest of the world made possible by technology, individual citizens feel overwhelmed by the challenges presented by this knowledge. They react with outrage on the one hand and helplessness and depression on the other.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: It feels as though there has been a major paradigm shift in this country and in the world-since 9/11 certainly-and probably since the elections of 2000. What does it mean to be a citizen now in the US, and who decides it? The mentality of competition in which "winner takes all" is reflected on all levels-in reality TV, in the violence in one to one relationships, and in the violence in the US relationship to other nations. The news is rife with reports of dysfunctional institutions that have systematically abused their

power-the Catholic Church, Enron, Worldcom, the Mutual Funds Industry. Dissent is considered "unpatriotic" in the current political climate, with consequences to speaking out. This feels new and frightening. Yet, there is a long history of violence, war and corruption from our earliest days (in the form of genocide, slavery, and foreign wars, the McCarthy era, etc.). We (in this particular group) feel less afraid of the terrorists outside the country than from those within. We put up with the corruption and abuse of power because despite everything, we are comfortable. Like the frog that boils to death when it remains in the pot of water as the temperature is turned up gradually, we as a society remain in the pot of boiling water, even though we risk death. We are paralyzed in our pot of comfort and privilege. For a brief moment after the trauma of 9/11, it seems there was an opportunity to reflect individually and as a society about who we are to ourselves and to the world. Rather than ask for sacrifice, the administration suggested that Americans go shopping to support the economy. The question, "why do they hate us?" disappeared in the rhetoric of taking action and the war on terrorism. The moment of opportunity for true reflection was lost. Our leadership's lack of capacity for reflection and consequent inability to hold complexity is mirrored in the larger society. We live in a world of sound bites. There is some comfort in seeing the world in black and white terms and knowing that someone (Rumsfeld, Cheney, Bush) is *doing* something about it. That starting wars (on terror, in Afghanistan and Iraq) makes us more secure is an illusion. We take action, but remain traumatized. Being the only Superpower in the world now, the US is unchecked.

Hypothesis: The legitimacy of the 2000 presidential election results remains in dispute in some sectors of the country. Existing splits in this country (between those with power and money and those without; between conservative and liberal, etc.) have become more pronounced since the election of 2000. Because of our relative comfort and privilege, we have failed to notice or act on the gradual erosion of our values and rights. 9/11 served as a wake-up call, and for a brief moment it seemed that we might be able to reflect and rethink who we are to ourselves and in the world. In our wish to escape exploring the pain of the trauma of 9/11, we have colluded with George W. Bush. It remains difficult to own up to the part of us that *is* George Bush, and a grudging recognition that if we don't see that we are part of the problem, then we can't be part of the solution.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: Part of the work here concerned a struggle to be hopeful and to own our power in a useful way. We reflected on our collective roles--on the fact that all of the participants in this listening post work as helpers/change agents. How does this color our worldview? We want to fix things-to alleviate pain and hurt. There is a certain amount of power in the role of helper/change agent. We become particularly depressed because we don't know how to fix this. What if this is too big? What if we can't fix it? Have we arrived or will we soon reach the "tipping point" beyond which it can't be fixed? It requires some degree of arrogance to believe that it is possible to fix things-it may be a particularly American characteristic to think that we have the power to affect the course of world events. Perhaps we have more power than we allow ourselves to exert. We hold on to hope in that we haven't given up on the framing ideals/principles in this country.

Hypothesis: The massive changes in the political and economic environment fill us with uncertainty. We grasp on to hope with the idea that we can try to affect small changes

in our immediate environment (our work and families) and the possibility that we might link to other efforts globally. Our hope may be defensive in nature-a way of avoiding confronting the reality of how bad things really are. Feeling hopeless on the other hand, may also serve defensive purposes and keep us from taking action on that which we can change. We have on the one hand a sense of power and potential (based perhaps on cultural assumptions), and on the other a sense of despair and frustration over how we may use that power and potential.

Convenor & Reporter: Tracy Wallach