**"Sweden and the World
at the Dawn of 2006"**
Report of a Listening Post
held on 16th January

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. SHARING PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Fourteen persons, nine women and five men, had gathered for this Listening Post. Agewise most of them were in their upper middle ages. Many were occupied in human services: consultants, supervisors, management trainers, psychotherapists and teachers. Some retired persons and students also were present.

During the initial presentation most gave their reasons for taking part. Issues mentioned were: what are our chances for creating something good out of the multicultural society we are living in at the moment? Technological development and its impact on people's ways of relating and handling intimacy and contact. Generational change and relations between old and young. Changes on the labour market and the lost security. Cheating in society and difficulties encountered when trying to be authentic.

Conversation started with an observation of the importance of either belonging to a group or being barred from the group one wants to belong to.

One aspect of belongingness voiced by the older participants was the experienced need to look back in order to come to terms with one´s life and the choices it has brought about. From a segregated suburb of Stockholm experiences of what alienation means were conveyed; not to be counted upon, to be given special treatment and to be met with fear and to be excluded. The question was raised whether these circumstances could develop into violent confrontations similar to those, which took place in Paris suburbia during autumn.

What outlook on mankind do we have and how do we treat each other? Examples were given from e.g. psychiatry how attempts are made to map human beings in a never-ending number of diagnoses with accompanying treatments. This course of action demonstrates a fragmentation of people and an attitude saying that each part, just like in a machine, can be fixed in a mechanical way. The manifoldness represented among people was stressed and it was asked if it really were possible to open up for everyone's peculiar nature. Does everyone possess an equal value? Do we dare to open up? Am I prepared to let myself be integrated? An observation, that aroused many feelings, was the fact that we willingly go abroad but find it difficult to visit a segregated area, such as suburb Tensta. Go there and learn something! was the enthusiastic exhortation.

A paradox of the Swedish society was observed. Odd persons are not accepted; we are unaccustomed to differences. The odd jobs disappear and consequently it is close to impossible for odd characters to find positions. Confronting this, is the fact that in order to be visible you have to out-of-the-way! On this point a description was given of a culture that amounts to the demand that everyone should become a celebrity, something emerging from the need to be visible. This may give a feeling of belongingness and in consequence answer the important question of how one could

possess a personal worth. Examples were given of how easily curiosity on what appears as foreign may lead to the discovery of what is common and in turn may create contact and solidarity.

Once again, the issue of how we treat each other came to the fore. Attitudes and treatment was viewed as crucial to how we can bring about human dignity, value and equal rights. Are we looking at a society trying to form rules and regulations for all areas of life? Is it possible to act according to one's own judgement? If you follow the Christian morals and care for your neighbour, you may, in a complicated system of rules, come into conflict with laws and regulations! The complex problem of prejudice against "the foreign" was stressed again. The pivotal point was found in the idea of the Swedish Welfare State (Swe.: "välfärdstaten", Ger.:"Volksheim"). Studies of residential areas from the 1940ies with a homogenous population of older Swedes have demonstrated the highest degree of resistance to immigrants and foreign elements. It is there we meet with norms and values that have formed and got cemented over a long period. The question was raised how this solid stronghold could be influenced.

Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

- pluralism, integration, splitting

- dependency, closeness, anonymity

- belief, disbelief, superstition

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis:
The multi-cultural society highlights existential issues pertaining to each and every individual and inevitably confronts us with our peculiar nature. The relationship to other humans, to be bounded, to belong or not belong to a group, to be odd, excluded or seen and confirmed, all are experiences that taken together form the basis for how we meet and treat others and ourselves. We often find ourselves oscillating between hope of success and development and a feeling of the splitting and cutting-up of what we still long to call the Swedish Welfare State (Swe.: "välfärdstaten", Ger.:"Volksheim").

Hypothesis:
When demands on the individual to be able to integrate the unknown increase, conditions in society connected to identity, spirit of community, group belongingness and feelings of being an outsider become highly charged. We experience a penetrating power in these issues that evokes fear. Fanaticism, fundamentalism and the foreign become frightening and full of conflict when you approach them. Increased knowledge, with the ability to hold on to what is authentic to oneself, gives the precondition for being able to get into contact with the foreign and thus being able to counteract splitting.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis:
Relations over generational boundaries, between parents and children, as between grandparents and grandchildren, in many ways appear as easier for us than for preceding generations. Family ties, however, have a more complicated structure today. The nuclear family is only one of many forms of family formation. We find diversity here too. Questions around how you can establish satisfying relations seem to be voiced in the public area with help of technical devices. In this area signals from the mobile phone may be about availability, but also about the dependence of an audience for the value and capacity of one's person. The opposite is also conveyed in the intimate conversation on busses and subway trains. The anonymity, which is pressed on the involuntary audience, constitutes a palpable loss of human relating. Intimacy as a bothering factor is eliminated in relation to the neighbour on the seat next to you, while at the same time the mobile phone makes this possible with the conversation partner on the other side of the globe!

Hypothesis:
In addition to having to conduct themselves in relation to a multicultural society people also have to take a stance towards changes that technology brings along - a technology that often carries the illusion of human relations. To be present and in contact is probably totally different in essence when we move in a world of computers and mobile phones. To delimitate, sort and evaluate limitations of capacities and resources in this, are necessary but difficult tasks. Confusion, and sometimes even a sense of disintegration may be consequences of the new technology. Too high demands, technological governance and control also are experiences that easily may be located in anonymous power centres.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis:
In the secularized society we now inhabit, many look for a substitute for the belief in God which earlier gave confidence to lean against. Belief and excessive belief in the power of technology may serve as substitutes. This can also lead to a feeling that something overwhelming is taking over. The former over-confidence in society's capacity to create security has suffered a blow. This also means that a vacuum has to be filled. The insecure labour market induces disbelief and a threatening feeling of lacking worth when jobs are not sufficient in supply. Old models for power and exercise of power find new forms. War is not waged in old ways. Terrorism as a weapon is new to our time. The work to defend human rights and to form possibilities for people to believe in their own worth and ability gives hope.

Hypothesis:
Survival issues are close in society's different attempts at development. Competition and advantages in power are confronted with political responsibility and security. The feeling of confronting a dissolution, that other cultures are taking over, also are signs that the process we witness points to real changes. In the new we may also get an inkling of something good. An expression that could damp down worries was: Has it ever been as good as now? To believe in that, is one way of parting from the old and give the new a chance.

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