

**"USA and the World  
at the Dawn of 2006"  
Report of a Listening Post  
held on 11th January**



**Encouraging The Reflective Citizen**

For the first hour, in Part 1, attendees fully shared their preoccupations and experiences including war, poverty, failure of democracy and New Orleans. Hard to talk across boundaries, intolerance of differences, lack of understanding, willingness to believe without examination, disenfranchisement, nobody will listen when trying to get a dishwasher fixed, inability of moderates to take a stand, end of the Christian Century, political system is about power and money, attack not discourse in government, oligarchy, not democracy, fear of the future, hunger for connectedness and mega churches. The break down of groups and community involvement, "Bowling alone", the more information we get the less we know about what is going on, violence - feeling unsafe in our communities. Globalization and the difficulties and complexities it creates, danger of speaking up, older people are not so secure, apathy - why try, what difference will I make? Private/corporate ownership of water, lack of separation between church and state, public education system is slipping, but kids are smarter, health vs. health care, system burns out teachers, public schools losing out to charter schools, the death of Theism, anxiety vs. certainty, it takes terrorism and Bird Flu as impetus for connectedness, and we have progressed but not evolved. Meanwhile the fundamentalist message is your in, which is especially attractive to the disenfranchised but is simultaneously intolerant of differences, conspiracy theories, talk radio complaining that a judge ruled in favor of needing to have headlights on when windshield wipers are on, even if it doesn't help you see it aids others to see you. For a half hour, in Part 2, participants worked in three small groups to identify major themes. One group noted alienation, powerlessness, fear/vulnerability and emptiness leads to drug use, mega churches, addictive behavior, obesity and war but it is hope and compassion that keeps people going. A second group spoke about alienation and anxiety leading to and resulting from the breakdown of our institutions that in turn results from and leads to the inability to compromise across our differences. This group also noted the persistence of human nature vs. the development of human nature. The third group noted the lack of connectedness, power and control, change but not progress, the fear of all of these and poverty leading to apathy.

For one hour, in Part 3, members worked on Analysis and Hypothesis formation.

**Analysis and Hypothesis 1**

*Because of less opportunity for genuine dialogue or acceptance of multiple views we have become self-centered and feel disconnected.*

**Analysis:**

Because of self-interest and the politics of self-interest, powerful influential people are using their resources (media access, bully pulpits) to convince members of society that they share common interests. These leaders influence by constant repetition and haranguing, producing a splitting phenomenon that divides members of society into multiple Us vs. Them camps. Many of these splits occur around lines of those who can tolerate ambiguity and complexity and others who seek refuge in certainty and dogma, limiting group and individual willingness to dialogue to a narrow and rigid framework. (Example: Black leaders in New Orleans convince their followers that disaster management and re-building is racially discriminatory. Religious conservatives frame social problems as the result of liberal tolerance.) When the self-interests of politicians and leaders reflect those of the majority, leaders find themselves working in harmony with their constituents and in the interest of the development of social systems that benefit all members of society. But when the politics of self-interest serve the interests of only a very powerful minority (and given that the primary task of power is to retain power), expression of disagreement even the expressed desire for clarification through examination and dialogue is shouted down, suppressing the democratic principle of participatory public debate. Recently this has been accomplished by framing various issues in terms that not only obscure a hidden agenda or potential effects, but that also repress thoughtful disagreement by other voices.

One crucial effect of this process is that the short-sightedness of immediate selfish gain will have significant negative impact on future generations thereby engendering a split between those pursuing immediate gain and those not willing to accept those short-term gains at a cost to be born more severely in the long-term (examples: environment, natural resources, financial opportunity, education, etc.). The result leaves dissenting voices sounding as though they are standing in the way of democracy or progress). Progressive measures opposed by the self interested elite are re-framed then by these influential leaders in anti democratic or anti-free-market terms (sometimes quite subtly and cleverly), again preventing open dialogue around issues requiring a thorough examination. They even resort not so subtly to religious or moral demeaning of other parties, nations and religions. This regressive defense against anxiety over the present and the future utilizes obfuscation of facts and anti-intellectualism to the point of dogma.

**Hypothesis:**

Members of society who find their thinking at odds with their leadership become not a voice to be welcomed into the debate but the degraded other, a source of anxiety to leadership, who fear the potential personal consequences of losing power, and react with increasingly authoritarian fiat in their effort to retain that power.

**Analysis and Hypothesis 2**

*Because of national and international tensions and no solutions there is a split between Self-Absorption and Generativity.*

**Analysis:**

Because of the despair noted previously, with more time to be narcissistic and the fear of not getting mine, most Americans experience a push to be self-centered. People are working more, with less time for interaction with their children. In addition the U.S. is losing out in the world and domestically the safety net built 75 years ago is being

undone. Inner city schools are bad and it costs \$1200 a month for pre-school in Boston, leading to our own caste system. Globalization is making adults and some private school children more aware of these international and national dynamics. Also one can't count on known traditions, parents, jobs, etc like we used to do. Under these mounting pressures members of society withdraw (Bowling Alone) and developmentally engage in self-absorption. One adult development split has been that more mothers are choosing to stay home to develop their baby's language skills and be more generative. This split seems to be happening now because of a wish to have more control over one's life and family and resist the fear of powerlessness. (This observation) may be due to the ages and stages of adult development of the attendees.

***Hypothesis:***

The changing and complex dynamics arising from the tensions between national and global politics and economies and the lack of knowledge about how to proceed has led to a split between Self-Absorption on the one hand and Generativity on the other in the hope of survival now and in the future. The split is actually a continuum going from self-absorption to generativity but it feels like a split associated with social class. There is also the hope/wish that our well-educated children will take care of us!

**Analysis and Hypothesis 3**

*Because of the breakdown in institutions and the lack of trust in the government we have become apathetic and alienated.*

***Analysis:***

Multinational corporations use outsourcing, are more powerful than most nations and have little, if any, accountability. The Arabs are holding us up and we collude by not using more energy efficient modes of transportation and heating. Government is not responsible. Our elected officials have moved to the right over the past generation. There has been a breakdown of our institutions and the shooting/murder of leaders, JFK, Martin Luther King, the Pope, President Reagan. We through our government seem to have lost our moral bearing. We cannot delay gratification, we spend money but do not raise taxes when we most need money to carry on the war and rebuild New Orleans. We are not using our voices to speak up. It feels like the thinking classes vs. the shouting classes. We do not trust government and do not see the government as us. Corruption is wide spread under the current administration but JFK was elected by dead people voting more than once in Chicago and Texas. Things are happening that we do not understand. Because of these dynamics people have given up, vote less and have withdrawn from many functions, groups, community churches, social clubs, etc. But we need to know more in order to survive and function in a more productive fashion. If we continue to be quiet we will fall further behind.

***Hypothesis:***

Current dynamics have made many citizens apathetic. Withdrawal has only encouraged the right to push their agenda more strongly. Being engaged is the only way to counter the current trend. But we need to overcome our psychology of being above the fray. Connectedness is a beginning to reclaiming a thoughtful society.

Convener: Ed Klein