"South Africa and the World at the Dawn of 2007"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 12th January
in
Port Elizabeth

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. This part was concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that related to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

The subject of boundaries was raised first. One member spoke about encountering several patients where there seem to be few boundaries. Mention was also made of the difficulty of drawing boundaries in life and therapeutically. This situation is also evident in the broader sense in South Africa as a whole. There is still a great deal of **chaos** politically and in the structures in society since 1994.

We face municipal elections and the ruling party, the ANC, is trying to tighten boundaries to reduce the chaos of theft, fraud, violence and mismanagement in government and municipal structures across the board from education to health. Mention was then made about the total violation of boundaries that occurred over the past few months in small towns near Port Elizabeth. Two young women were murdered in the one town and a young boy of 6 in the other.

The difficulties, experienced by family members who are involved in family businesses, were mentioned. Several discussions had taken place in the group that meets monthly where family members had requested assistance to resolve conflict and / or manage the dynamics and emotions between family members. In one instance the parents divorced and the adult children remained in the business working for the father. This situation led to many muddled boundaries. Experiences in the work with these family businesses is that roles are often inappropriate with adult sons not being allowed sufficient freedom and being kept frustratingly in a child position, as well as fathers holding on to the authority. There were strong feelings of competition, rivalry, jealousy, helplessness and many more. In addition there were boundary problems regarding separating the business from family and personal life.

The conversation then moved to increased numbers of people working from home both in South Africa and abroad. This also often led to boundary problems regarding ending work at the end of the day and leaving the office firmly closed. Intrusiveness into one's

home from outsiders as well as family members encroaching on the work space was mentioned.

A conversation then took place about children and education and the differences in education between South Africa and UK. Two grandchildren had moved recently to the UK and the one moved from year 2 in South Africa to year 4 in UK because of his age. The change for the younger child was less because she moved from a pre-school year to year 1 in UK.

Still staying with education, several professional educators are seeking therapy because of mergers in South Africa of several large educational institutions. These mergers have not only included different universities but Technicons as well. In the run up to the merger people were afraid that they would loose their jobs. Now there are issues of superiority and inferiority. The university staff members consider themselves to be superior to technicon staff members. This is causing huge amounts of stress, tension and rage. In addition many previously known boundaries have become unclear as staff remain unsure about new rules and roles. There is suspicion and a continual "looking over the shoulder" as it is evident that there is no longer a need for all the staff and there is uncertainty about who can be trusted. Leadership positions have as yet not been clearly defined, some leaders have been deposed and there seems to be a search for new leaders. These dynamics ripple down to teaching and students suffer. Some students who would have done post graduate studies at this university have chosen to go to a university which is not undergoing the same transition.

The conversation then moved to couples and a remark was passed about the fickleness and brittleness of relationships that are being seen in therapy. Some couples present as though the relationship is strong and yet within a very short time the relationship breaks down. There is a chaotic quality to relationships as couples move rapidly in and out of a healthy state. One wife married for 25 years reached a point of such desperation that she felt it preferable to kill herself than remain in the marriage for another day. After a brief period of time this crisis subsided and the marriage is on track again. These dynamics reflect an all or nothing quality and that something of the "throw away" culture in which we live may be influencing hasty decisions about relationships. These dynamics also seem to be evident in other relationships. An example was cited of a friend who was experiencing marital problems and the group member gave emotional support generously and unstintingly only to have this same friend then just distance herself. The group member was left angry and wondering about what was real. This sparked off a conversation about what was real and what was not. This is complicated of course because individual perceptions play a role. There are differing perceptions about what is safe and what not in Port Elizabeth and in South Africa as a whole. Even in the group there were marked differences. Some members would not walk around the block alone while others walked alone in the bush believing it to be safe. Crime has been normalized to such a degree that we have become desensitised. A black lady who worked as a cleaner for one of the group members spoke about not letting her son into the house if he was drunk because then he may rape her. There is a higher tolerance for violence as it is seen as a daily hazard.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

- Boundaries - chaos, violence and crime
- Continual change affecting perceptions of what is real or not
- Educational chaos - leadership struggles and blurred boundaries
- All or nothing culture that causes vacillation in relationships

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. Here the members 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.

Constant change leads to different individual perceptions about

- what is real or not, safe or unsafe
- who is in charge or where the real leadership is (Past Deputy President Zuma saga is an example)
- great difficulties in setting and maintaining boundaries which leads to chaos in many spheres of life.

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