

"The USA and the World at the Dawn of 2008"



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

This was our third Listening Post. Two years ago we had 11 people, Last year we had 17 people. This year we had seven white, professionals, mostly from health and the church. We meet from 7:00 to 9:30 on January 9, 2008.

For the first hour attendees shared their concerns. It started with a member announcing that he was running for public office and his willingness to serve. Others expressed their distrust of government. California is 14 billion dollars in debt the governor is suggesting freeing 20,000 short term, non-violent prisoners to save money. Then covering one's real views to preserve one's job. Taking a stand vs comfort level-settling for whatever. There was a discussion about religion and prayer in public life. One example was Xmas being celebrated in public schools and not taking into account non-Christians' feelings. It was noted that the boundaries between public vs private life are being blurred. "As I get older I don't worry about being different making me more willing to take chances or opt out".

People talked about the lack of local leadership on racial issues, feelings of despair, students displaying a sense of entitlement and hopelessness to deal with these issues in school or at work with younger employees. On the other hand younger people seem to have a better balance between work and family than older generations. The youngest member spoke of the fear of not being able to retire because of the economy and personal reasons. Which lead into a discussion of being in a recession, which may lead to a depression. Immigration as a major issue in the primaries with a great deal of projection and blaming immigrations for things going wrong and we are losing our jobs and position in the global economy because of them. "They" and "them" vs "we" and "us" occurred though out the evening.

Looking forward with hopefulness vs hopelessness and resignation. Then are credit card companies and other financial institutions getting young people into overwhelming debt because of incompetence or on purpose? There was the 'Devil' theory vs the 'Boob' theory of history. Why doesn't the government get out of this impossible war and use the money to address major health, educational, social, and community issues at home? We spend twice as much on health care than other Western countries; MBAs are taking over health care for profit not for excellent medicine.

Fear is in the air more now because of a single terrorist destroying a city or someone driving up next to you and shooting you for no reason. We had more faith in our elected leaders in the past then now. Will our children be worse off then we are economically? I'm working harder than ever. Now my wife gets one quarter of what she used to get for the same operation 10 years ago. Technology is leading to distance between people instead of bringing us closer. This theme was in last year's Listening Post.

There is greater isolation by social class, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. What is new is the large middle class is also getting poorer, carrying the tax burden for everyone.

Many polarities noted: feelings of hopelessness lead to Conflict vs withdrawal, sterile empiricism vs personal and rich interactions. Technology leads to isolation and solitude and not feeling that we can develop a critical mass to make changes and therefore 'Bowling Alone' and not joining groups. Reliance on media for identity whereas in the past one could rely on family and community. It's hard to direct alone one needs support and positive sources of identity/process and identity development. 'Selling out to the Man' vs 'Sticking it to the Man'. Anxiety (tune out, withdraw) vs security (The common good). Sacrifice for the greater good with leadership defining the greater good. We used to have more faith in our leaders now there is a lack of faith in leaders. The content and tone was somewhat depressing which may be related to the small number of people in attendance and the nature of the task, which usually involves negative issues and concerns.

For the next half hour participants worked in 2 small groups to identify major themes. One group noted 4 themes:

1. Is there a plot to load young people with overwhelming debt, which will take a lifetime to pay back? Is this happening because of incompetence or is the 'Devil' at work, i.e., is it a conscious evil plan?
2. Technology with its potential to bring us together in an interdependent Global Economy instead is driving us apart leading to greater sense of isolation.
3. Anxiety vs security (fear of terrorists, random acts of violence, insecurity about surviving economically).
4. Us vs them, the social class divide getting greater each year with the middle class being systematically impoverished.

The second group had 2 themes:

1. Powerlessness in the 'Us vs them' paradigm.
2. Moral guideposts (of the past) vs moral ambiguity (of today).

For the last hour members worked on Analysis and Hypothesis formation.

Hypothesis 1 – Because of anxiety, fear and a loss of a sense of community people withdraw resulting in great difficulty in forming commitments to anything and a greater sense of isolation (Bowling Alone).

Hypothesis 2 – The lost of connectedness has been brought about by the unstable global economy, and local economic, political, military and religious factors that lead to withdrawal. To counter this we can run for office as one person is doing. Therefore as people vote and join in the political process that should lead to a more engaged, less despairing community, country and world.

Hypothesis 3 – As people spend more time with their PC, Blackberry and TV there is a lack of connection, little sense of fellowship leading to psychological numbing and a retreat from reality. Many High Schools require community service. Colleges and universities have courses on service learning involving students with the larger and more

diverse community. This reaching out may lead to a restoration of a sense of hope and meaning.

Note the greater sense of hope at the end of the evening to counter the earlier feelings of hopelessness. This dynamic in the Listening Post creates a greater sense of balance as in family/work relations and the Jungian polarities (young/old; male/female; good/evil and love/hate). A similar balance (from despair to hope) occurred in last year's Listening Post too.

Convener: Ed Klein