"Germany and the World at the Dawn of 2010"
Report of a Listening Post held on 11th January in Kronberg

OPUS

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, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for us to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. These themes constitute the material in Part 3.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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.

Analysis: The initial experience was concern about the apparent loss of tangible truth; every question ends up as generalised relativity of the so-called opinions exemplified in talk-shows. One teacher expressed the difficulty of senior pupils in comprehending unseen texts; their horizon resembles that of ubiquitous soap-operas and short text messages.

The group turned to the sheer mass and speed of radical changing of perpetually new medial technology of such complexity that has lost transparency or even overtaken mankind. Worries and distress are expressed that priority is given to higher speed and efficiency, for example in University requirements to the cult of so-called excellence over longterm concepts in Natural Science. Simultaneously there was a mood of calmness in the group; this lay in the emphasis of social contact and relationships and an obvious seeking of meaningfulness. The group was more or less agreed that the introduction of complex systems is irrevocable and that the attempt must be both to endure this and explore structuring possibilities. Focussing on meaningfulness is viewed as space for active intervention by virtue of which people may evolve what steps suit a situation. One participant illustrated this with the example of a consulting agency that

did not merely integrate a complex electronic managerial programme but examined what sensible advantages balanced out senseless bureaucracy. Working out what is meaningful can function by selecting priorities, withdrawal if necessary, setting limits. The dynamic discussion of the group shows that both aspects are constantly re-positioned side by side: the feeling of threat and excessive demands and, on the other hand, active dealing with challenges via problem confrontation.

The ability to create meaning grows out of relationships. One participant recounted how a mother explained and integrated her tiny daughter into a dialogue in a supermarket on what, why and how much should be bought. Another participant reported how after an aborted terrorist attack airline security organisations are beginning to realise that technology alone cannot ensure safety, but that intuition, knowledge of human nature, staff qualification are equally important. Another participant described how in the paediatric field the realisation is gradually being admitted that there is no such category as the handicapped, but that treatment facing needs and wishes — even with children — should be essentially conducted 'at eye level'. This basically constitutes a revolution of a paradigm.

Hypothesis: The main theme was the overwhelming complexity in the world we live in. From behavioural reactions such as omnipotence, trivialisation, struggle for feasibility, flight, refusal etc. we assume that behind these in many cases there lie shame and powerlessness that may not be admitted: shame since one feels so stupid — even 'teeny-weeny' as one put it — in the face of scientific and technological products; powerless since countless dangerous problems — such as the crises of economy and finance, natural catastrophes, terror and war — can not be efficiently sorted out and removed from the world. To look these dangers in the eye would be synonymous with facing one's own limitations and individual complexity, neither avoiding nor succumbing to the ambivalence of fear and fascination.

In order to endure complexity and be able to confront the menacing, there needs to be a development of emotional competence. This can only be achieved in relationships and in contact with others. It enables the acknowledgement and acceptance that many problems may not be solvable but may be lived with on the basis of taking meaningful steps and rejecting anything that is pointless. The important aspect is to retain the seeker and questioner attitude and not claim to know all the answers. The development of this quality was seen as the essential pedagogical task — even for the political realm — without which considerable anger and aggression potential might be unleashed in many sections of the population.

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