"Belgium (Flanders) and the World at the Dawn of 2011"
Report of a Listening Post
held on18th January

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.

We started the evening by getting acquainted based on the question: 'Who are you, from which roles are you speaking here tonight and what are you curious about?' We then exchanged experiences and concerns. Someone started with a story that had been in the news last year: a lecture on world-views was abruptly disturbed by a few radical Muslims. This raised the question: how to deal with our Western values, such as free expression of opinion and democratic citizenship, when such things happen? How can we live together? How to deal with different world views in our society? This is reflected in the economic domain: how are we relating on the market? What happens with different world views in education? A group member had the courage to express his internal struggle between intellectually and morally being against racism on the one hand, and on the other hand having a daily experience of racist reactions and behaviour in response to what happens around him. This is confusing. Things change when they come closer to your daily life. He raised the question: are we losing our identity? A group member observed that his children, who are adults now, barely have any values or a world-view to guide them. They just work and get through the day; it seems like a ship adrift. At the same time we have never had so much material prosperity as today. Another person adds that people do have values even if they just seem to be 'surviving'. However they may not be aware of the values that drive their lives; they are not explicit.

Someone added that 'happiness' research has confirmed that people living in more homogeneous societies are happier; this seems a politically incorrect thing to say out loud. However, we cannot close our boundaries for other people and become a fortress. Painful things happen around us. For instance, recently, a family of asylum seekers with three young children did not get a decent place to stay in the prosperous city of Louvain. But there is always room for businessmen.

We talked about the 'busy' world we are all living — or surviving — in. When you ask someone 'How are you?', the standard answer is: 'Busy, busy!!' There are so many 'musts'! The use of antidepressants is increasing and people have trouble to follow the pace. Someone pointed out that what strikes him most when he returns from India, is the stress, the hurrying, and the 'greyness' of our country. A grandfather observed how

his grandchildren are under pressure, just to 'belong'. They are running from one activity to the next and doing multiple things at the same time (e.g. mobile phone, games, Facebook). The demands are increasing and putting pressure on young people. At the same time we are aware of the fact that our children will not have the same level of 'prosperity' as we have now. However, there is also a movement of people who are reflecting on the essence of life, trying to make the shift from 'having to' (moeten) to 'meeting' or 'connecting' (ont-moeten). Of a more personal nature, linked to 'conscious living', was the question: 'How can I, in a conscious way, not transfer my burden to my children?'

In companies the same crazy rhythm is making people ill. The assumption is that growth is inevitable. Why can it never be 'winter'? Would it be possible for management to integrate a period of stand still and reflection, after harvesting? Why do companies have to keep growing? Someone wonders whether we are prepared to really make time for each other in organizations and whether 'team work', for instance, is not under pressure in today's organizations. The 'masculine'structures are in decline (e.g. banks, church) and we are looking for more balance and connection, a 'feminine' value. We seem to be at a turning point.

The 'baby boom generation' is gradually leaving the organizations. The so-called 'generation Y' is entering the work field and this requires a completely different leadership style. Management is concerned about preserving the know-how of the 'old' generation. For the young generation, however, this is not necessary; they can find all the information they need on the Internet. Collaboration between the two generations is difficult. We are in a space where there are no ready-made answers. We need to have the courage to admit we don't know. What it takes is daring to ask the relevant questions and to search together for what is required. The advice of management gurus is obsolete in today's organizations.

We are faced with more complex societal processes. It seems harder to get to a shared analysis of problems together. Shared action and commitment are even harder. It is striking to observe that no one in the group explicitly addresses the most obvious societal issue in our country at this moment: the never ending government negotiations (more than 200 days by now)! There seems to be some sort of pessimism and the awareness that the 'manipulability' or 'manufacturability' of things may be an illusion. Isn't it dangerous if people working in welfare and the social domain stop believing in what they are doing and are losing hope? What if they also let go?

A therapist is struck by the fact that people don't seem to have space to share their story anymore. They have to pay a professional to listen to them. The therapist experiences a tension between the wish not to make her clients dependent on her, and on the other hand she wants to listen to their stories. People need to belong somewhere (e.g. neighbourhood, family, friends) and want to be (inter)dependent. She wonders whether her belief in positive psychology is naive, because she is confronted with so many negative people who are stuck in negative beliefs. Another group member is struck by how much we talk and how superficial it really is. People seem scared of the 'negative'. We expect things to be positive; it always has to be 'summer'! When her father had died people seemed to avoid talking to her and she also noticed that she didn't always feel like taking the time to talk to her mother. There is no time for such conversations and it doesn't seem to be our priority to ask someone, with real interest, 'How are you?'

Another issue that is raised is tolerance. What can we tolerate and what can we not tolerate? A consultant in the group is confronted with an increasing demand for conflict

mediation. She also experiences there are more conflicts in organizations than before. She wonders whether our tolerance for differences is decreasing. The same is happening in personal relationships (e.g. couples, neighbours). People seem to focus more on the differences and lose track of what they do have in common. Tolerance is more difficult when people experience the pressure of a busy life. The combination of a full time job with a family life, for instance, increases stress. We have to fulfil so many roles and do so many things, such as working, being a mother, doing sports, maintaining our friendships, making sure we go on a holiday at least twice a year. When people are so busy they lose connection with themselves and this may lead to more intolerance. When young people demonstrate 'problem behaviour', they may express that they just cannot cope with the pressures anymore. In schools today, every child has a 'label' (e.g. ADHD, highly gifted). Maybe our tolerance for children who somehow need more attention is also lower. Do we invest the time and energy to take our children for a walk in the forest when they have too much energy? There must be a link! A participant is wondering whether we are still able to relate to children in a 'natural' way, especially to children who are not our own. This is about communicating with them, setting boundaries or just saying hallo. Children sometimes seem to live in another world that is strange to us. We need to make time to communicate with them in order to understand their world.

We believe that we have to maintain the 'caring' aspects in our society and in organizations, but maybe that is not feasible. We assume, for instance, that elderly people need care; reality often proves otherwise. This is also true for companies. Why, a participant wonders, did we invest so much time and energy in trying to save the plant of Opel in Antwerp? This hope was not realistic.

A group member points out a central issue that emerges: being really present and making contact. The reverse is losing ourselves and ending up in conflicts. Someone describes how she is able to observe herself while this happens: sometimes she is able to stay close to herself and be reflective, and at other times she notices how she loses herself. For instance in her car: staying calm in a traffic jam or joining in the aggression. Another person gives the example of the collective greed and craziness you can observe in a shopping street when sales start ('filling but not feeding').

Someone observes that we seem to find creative mechanisms to avoid our responsibility. Schools, for instance, are made responsible for the education of our children. In that way we dis-empower ourselves. Another participant is concerned how this evolution will affect (future) teachers? Will they still be happy in their jobs with so much responsibility on their shoulders? Are young people still interested in becoming a teacher when expectations are sky-high? Whenever there is a problem or something is not perfect, someone (not me!) has to be responsible! For instance, when a child meets an accident, someone has to be responsible. We blame our public authorities when things don't run smoothly. For instance, this winter we were confronted with big traffic problems because of heavy snowfall. In a few days time the supplies of de-icing salt were finished. We find it hard to accept these kinds of things.

One group member gives the conversation a different turn. He points out there are also positive and hopeful things that happen, such as his children investing their time and energy in the youth movement, neighbours in his street organizing a 'potluck' dinner every month, or parents who start new schools. A manager gives the example of how his company explores the question: 'how can we as a company contribute to the joy and happiness of children?' The same positive note can be made for new technologies. On the one hand they seem to keep people busy without making contact; on the other hand they offer new opportunities for contact. Online contact can strengthen face to face contact. Research has demonstrated, someone adds, that people on Facebook have

genuine contact with maximum five of their so many 'friends'. This means not all virtual contacts are superficial.

About halfway in the conversation, a (male) group member observed that, so far, only the men had spoken. This encouraged the women in the group to speak up, share their experiences and concerns and join in the conversation.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part Two, the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part One. Small groups of 2 to 4 participants wrote down the main themes on post-its notes. The themes collected were: poverty in this rich world; 'musts'; time; does time exist?; busy; business; priorities; take up responsibility; happiness; happiness as the highest good; values; cohesion?; manipulability; future?; respect from within; make real contact; dialogue about how you are really doing; being fully present; connection/ togetherness; tolerance; living with differences; wars; fragmentation; relation between formal and informal world views; identity; the search for 'who am I?'; future for the children.

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. The interrelated hypotheses followed from a lively and stimulating discussion.

Hypothesis 1
Because happiness ('the big happy feeling') is promoted as the highest good, citizens do what they can to hide, suppress or swallow their sadness and to carry the burden alone; this leads to loneliness, isolation from themselves and disconnection from others and it leads to an 'infantilization' of the media.

- The assumption is that we are responsible for our own happiness. So if you are unhappy, you can only blame yourself!

- We are not allowed to be unhappy, but on the other hand, we cannot be too happy either, because we also believe that life is not a 'present'!

- It has also been found that striving too hard to be happy, leads to unhappiness.

- 'Infantilization' (in Dutch literally: treating people like toddlers) of the media refers to the imperative need for amusement, entertainment and laughter. Television programs strengthen'; periods of 'winter' are no longer tolerated.

Hypothesis 2
Because social differences are exaggerated and blown out of proportion, values are eroded and therefore social connections cannot be made; this leads to isolation and poor social cohesion.

- We are losing important values, such as solidarity and taking care of each other, which is an important value in all cultures. However, we focus on the differences and no longer see the similarities. This hinders contact and connection.

- But what are the essential values? For instance, the equality between men and women is a value we do not want to give up. So what if other cultures living here don't share that value?

- There is also a group of people who refuse to join in toning down values and who keep looking for connection between communities with different values.

- It is striking that the role of the media is coming to the foreground in our hypotheses now.

Hypothesis 3
Because we have so many options and opportunities, this increases the pressure which may, on the one hand, lead to stress and exhaustion, but on the other hand, it may also lead to a conscious search for the essence, our identity, and for making conscious choices.

- We have to make choices about many things today, such as: which telephone company or energy provider do I choose? Which formula? Etc.

- Many people don't have the opportunity to make choices. They are overwhelmed by the complexity, get confused or don't have the required information to do so.

- However, there is a new trend. Supermarkets are reducing the number of products on the shelves to make it easier for the consumer to make a choice.

Hypothesis 4
Because a capitalist economy, characterized by mass production, can only grow when there is mass consumption, people need to be aligned in their needs and desires. The 'media' promote a certain image of what a 'good life' is, based on consumption. The central idea is: happiness, coupled with sexuality, authenticity and composure, is manipulable and can be reached by satisfying certain needs. Human rationality is used in an instrumental way to satisfy these needs in the most efficient way. People also put pressure on each other with their behaviour; they choose for temporary and volatile satisfaction and happiness; this means they do not follow their authentic needs and thus get estranged from themselves. In the end, this mass consumption does not necessarily satisfy people. Many are confronted with feelings of pressure, fragmentation and disconnection. However, some people do make authentic choices and go against this dominant trend; in doing so they must justify their choices in their own community and are sometimes confronted with rejection; therefore they need to look out for new communities that can support an authentic way of living.

- The negative part of the hypothesis reflects a negative spiral in which we can get trapped, resulting in an endless search for 'happiness', getting alienated from ourselves and our real desires and needs, and finally falling to pieces.

- Happiness is driven by capitalist values. What can be an alternative model?

- Although temporary authentic spaces, such as 'De Heerlijckyt' (the place where we are talking at this very moment!) help to make the transition to a different way of living, the real challenge is to find a sustainable community to 'live' in.

Hypothesis 5
Because we believe or wish to believe in the 'manipulability' of things, we can no longer accept that people and organizations have boundaries and limits; this leads to sky-high expectations, frustration, looking for someone to blame when things don't work out the way we had hoped for, and shifting our personal responsibility to the external world.

- We cannot accept imperfection. It is hard for parents, for instance, to accept that their children are not perfect.

- It is not necessarily an individual choice, but a choice influenced by the system in which we live. The idea of manipulability and happiness is generated by the capitalist economy that has created a 'happiness market'. There is a mutual influencing of both levels (individual and system).

- You can only let go of this belief, if you believe there is an alternative discourse.

- Once you have discovered your authenticity, it is easier to consciously deal with, for instance, consumption.

- In the past there was only one system in which people experienced a sense of shared meaning and values. In Flanders most people lived and were raised in a catholic community. It was clear for all what living a 'good life' was about. We no longer have this clarity or this sense of shared meaning/values/identity. We have a choice now and can oppose a way of living that is forced upon us. The new media play an important role in this evolution. They can generate a platform for a new way of living, for exchanging about what 'good living' is about ('world view discourse'), they provide space for communication, and can be a forum for building new communities across all sorts of boundaries.

Hypothesis 6
Because diversity is growing, we are increasingly confronted with our own identity; this can either lead to polarization or to enrichment.

- This is true, for instance, at the level of Belgium, Europe, and the United States and China.

- At this moment we are confronted in our country with the difficulty of bringing together two identities (government negotiations).

Hypothesis 7
Because of shifting and ferocious international competition, reinforced by the belief that progress cannot be stopped, the decision cycle in organizations is under high pressure; this may lead to alienation and unethical behaviour or it may stimulate new forms of organizing where connective strategies are reinvented.

- This hypothesis was introduced with the words: "the big angry world!"

- Examples for new forms of organizing are: team work, participative management, new forms of connective leadership.

- When the decision cycle at management level is under pressure, this may lead to hasty decisions that are not thought through, not supported by the organization, and in the end not effective or even destructive.

- One of the participants, a manager, gave the example of his company (Colruyt group) where decisions are taken by using different steps in order not to fall in the trap of 'action-reaction': build a new strategy in response to changes in the environment — look for commitment at the management level ('to federate') — and only then take action. This is a way of integrating solution strategies and commitment strategies.

- The conversation moves back to the government negotiations. Maybe our country as an institute has become obsolete. It could be that Belgium is only relevant as a brand name reflecting a certain quality (e.g. 'Belgian beer', 'Belgian chocolate', 'the Belgian education system'). Maybe we keep our country, and not only our country, artificially alive. Political power based on votes may also be an archaic system that no longer works.

- We need new forms of consultation, for instance in companies. People hardly talk about these mechanisms and the underlying logic today. Belgium is an 'undressed state'. What really matters in the way things work here is Europe and the international companies. Processes are more important than structures. There is no longer a match!

- Simple solutions don't work. Maybe we need an even more serious crisis than today in order to be ready for change. And then the obvious people, those who live with a minimum income, will be the first victims.

Hypothesis 8
Because gathering volatile goods is on the top of our list, we neglect relationships and this leads to a reduction of genuine contact among people and therefore we need to pay professionals to really listen to us.

Hypothesis 9
(And in line with the previous hypothesis)
Because fragmentation in our ways of living and handling is increasing, real contact is reduced; on the other hand, if we are aware of the opportunities this multiplication of actions and contacts represents, this can also lead to more and richer contacts.

- Research has demonstrated that managers engage in one activity for maximum 3 minutes.

- We do many different things in one day and often we do more than one thing at a time (e.g. mobile phone, e-mail). By this fragmentation in time (multi-tasking) and in space we have more opportunity to pick out something that could be interesting for us.

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