

**"Ireland and the World  
at the Dawn of 2012"  
Report of a Listening Post  
held in Dublin on 5th 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. 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 convenor opened by asking members 'what's on your mind?' A member commented that it always seems to be dark on the approach to the New Year Listening Post meetings and that the dark feels like a holding of breath, waiting for the dark, for the storm, to pass. She noted that this feels like a metaphor for the country, for Ireland and she asked "how long can I, can we, can my service, can the country hold it's breath?" A member responded by sharing her experience of significant physical injury during the year and the experience of feeling that you could almost be overwhelmed but that there is something that defines – and bounds – the difficulty, making it possible to tolerate and to feel more hopeful. Another member referred to a visit to China, which felt overwhelming in size and scale. The parallel with the experience in Ireland is a feeling of coasting and of fear of the future – how will we cope? Will there be enough resources? She noted particularly the difficulty of the current situation for the younger generation, their lack of practice at adjusting their expectations. She contrasted her own experience of poverty in her younger life with that of today's generation, who have a different perception of poverty. There were two entwined themes of the massive differences between our experiences in the West and the vast numbers in China and, for example, large numbers being killed in Nigeria and alongside this, admiration and some envy of the energy and courage of the Occupy protectors now camping outside the Central Bank in Dublin city centre.

A theme emerged in the discussion about avoidance and infantilisation. Members reported not listening to news programmes, because they can't be understood, because they are frightening and because there is a sense of impending violence and threat arising from the apparently unending series of cuts and reductions in services and increases in costs. Members associated to the sense of despair about solving problems in the health service

There were many examples of adults being attracted to children's literature and other media and members speculated that this was because it is clear and simple. Members associated to this thought by noting the increase in the popularity of alternative therapies and interventions, as if the rational has failed so completely that we are turning to the magical in all its forms.

**Gaps** between those who can survive this and those who can't were emphasised, with examples including student fees, health services for older people, education cuts aimed at students with disabilities and basic public services like waste collection and water.

One member wished that she was younger, so that she could be part of the response of the younger generation. Another member responded that she was glad she was older, that she didn't have the responsibility for sorting out this mess. A conversation that began with a member's observation about the need for inner balance and a report about suicide among middle-aged women turned into a conversation about collusion, communication and inability to communicate, within or across generations. There was a question about what is possible to hear and what can get heard, in all this confusion. A member observed that she was excited by the confusion.

A member who had not previously spoken commented about the recent death of a journalist called Mary Rafferty, who had exposed and documented the abuse of children in institutions and by Roman Catholic clergy and the cover-up of that abuse by the institutional church. The member observed that the evidence from this journalist was that one person can make a difference. The member reported her own sense that "I can make a difference if I don't get lost in the paralysis of the bigger picture." She noted the need to risk being swamped and at the same time protect herself from being swamped by the enormity of the issues, the difficulties, the complexity.

## **Duality**

Another member described this comment as "staying in the adult position." She noted that there is a tendency to regress – acting like children, pretending/ wanting not to know, not wanting responsibility, 'playing house' – and that it is hard to stay in the adult position. She noted the advice of a popular psychologist that we need eleven positive thoughts for every negative thoughts for optimum mental well-being. A member asserted that not watching the news did not mean that you were uninformed – you would learn what you needed to if it is important enough. The economic news is so out of control, it feels like no-one understands it, it is not fathomable. The scale seems impossible to grasp – like China.

Death was introduced again in a reference to a campaigner for gay rights who has just died of motor neurone disease. A member commented that on the point of dying, in the face of the unknowable, he was able to be so concrete and explicit and free about inequality and discrimination. A member associated to this, saying that we seemed to be talking about complexity and simplicity – another duality. A member wondered if the simplicity and seeking simple forms and focuses was a flight from painful complexity. She observed that it takes courage to stay in the painful, complex – and adult – place and to take responsibility. Another member said that it was important to "put your seatbelt on and sort out your own oxygen before you go saving anyone else". She said that she was very aware of resources, of those with and without resources of different kinds. A member noticed the many **polarities** being discussed - being and doing.

Another member observed that she was focused on the dual roles of being the perfect mother and her work role and trying to undertake these "with actions that are simple and respectful", which is what she can do, what is under her control and accepting the things that are not under her control.

A member noted the surfacing of our dark side as well as the light and wanting to “put it into the wonderment”. The metaphor of the dance was used to represent the journey to getting back to what really matters.

## **Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. Members worked in small groups to identify these and identified inter-connected key themes relatively quickly and easily, with significant correspondence between groups.

### **Polarities**

Complex - simple  
Withdrawing - Engaging  
Doing - Being  
Coping - being overwhelmed  
Quiet - noisy  
Action - paralysis  
Domestic - public

### **Resources and/ for Resilience**

- Getting back to ourselves
- Taking time out
- Balance

### **Staying Adult**

- staying with confusion and complexity
- not abdicating to fantasy – the wish to deny/ espace
- having the capacity to be responsive
- the difficulty of persisting and resourcing this position

### **Allowing space**

- space between – required for relationship
- space for us to be able to respond into
- full of potential
- place of contact

Although not identified by the members, the convenor drew attention to the theme of death that had been present in Part 1, in reference to the death of two public campaigners, reports of the suicide of women and deaths in other countries through violence. The convenor observed that, in the context of the overall conversation, it seemed like there was a preoccupation with the **death of a way of life**.

## **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.

There was a preoccupation with the overall context of Irish society at this time: the increasingly severe economic downturn is a genuine concern and affects everyone. The members worked to go beyond the description of the experiences arising in trying to understand what is happening at a psychological level in society.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 1**

#### *Polarities - Splitting*

**Analysis:** We are startled and in shock and all we can see is the extreme. Because of the turmoil and disintegration, we believe that our worst fears might be realised. We adopt positions that either deny the complexity or we are overwhelmed. We withdraw to the dimensions that we feel we can control – the small, domestic, local – but we admire, even envy the activity and engagement of others, especially the young. Just as we locate the potency elsewhere – in the powerful or the young – we contain our own terror by expressing fears for others who are ‘worse off’ – also the young, the poor, the marginalised. One analysis is that the polarities are not extremes but are actually very close to each other. If we can allow this, it may be possible to understand and tolerate how they are connected.

**Hypothesis:** We are confused and unsure of how to think, how to understand, what to feel. We are uncertain of the future. We wish to withdraw to a state where we have no responsibility and no fear. We locate both the confusion and fear, including the threat of not coping, in others. Understanding and expressing experiences in a very polarised way is a way of distancing ourselves, making the problem remote, placing it elsewhere.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 2**

#### *The need for resilience*

**Analysis:** We recognise that we colluded, that we became dependent on 'external' things that we now recognise were not real. This crisis is forcing us to face up to our own part, as individuals, communities and society. We are afraid for ourselves and for others that we may not have the necessary resources – the resilience – individually and collectively, to withstand, survive and recover. We wish both that recovery was someone else's responsibility and we also wish to take up an adult role. It is the death of a way of life and this has implications that are both fearful and hopeful. We are aware of the range and variety of forms of resilience that we now need and the range of strategies for developing these.

**Hypothesis:** We are shocked at what has happened and our own part in it, so we deny by avoidance and blame. We recognise the need to draw on ourselves and our own resources and on each other and our common resources, but we are out of practice in doing this and to face up to this requires us to face that we have not been doing this in recent years, to face our own part in creating the crisis of resources and community and interconnectedness. “We were sleepwalking, now we're conscious”.

### Analysis and Hypothesis 3

#### *Staying Adult*

**Analysis:** In the face of the disintegration of systems of authority, we are asking ‘who will be the adult?’ We are both fearful and hopeful that we can adopt and maintain an adult, responsible position. We are feeling ill-equipped to take on adult responsibilities and we are concerned that younger generations have not been equipped and are not prepared, to behave like adults.

**Hypothesis:** We wish to find the responsible adult who will solve this problem that we have been part of creating. We resist the conclusion that no-one else will solve this, that we are the adults and that it is our responsibility to find solutions. We are both fearful and hopeful that we have the capacity to behave as responsible adults and to connect and commit to each other, to make the necessary changes individually and collectively.

We struggle to imagine ways to engage as citizens, to take responsibility and to work in ways that make a difference. The unspoken discourse is the balance between our responsibility to and for our individual selves and our collective and shared responsibility as members of a local and national community. We are working to rediscover or redefine who we are and to seek control and influence over and in our lives.

**Convener: Mary Rafferty**