"Switzerland and the World at the Dawn of 2012"
Report of a Listening Post held in 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.

People talked of illness either in themselves or their families, of feelings of being worn out, worn down and tired. Death had been very present in the last year with colleagues, friends, family and even children passing away. The past year was felt by most to have been difficult — this was not related to any one thing but to a feeling of being overwhelmed and stretched by having more emotional burdens than felt manageable. The difficult economy was mentioned, but more as something 'out there', which still affects other countries much more than Switzerland, so it's impact was felt to be indirect and looming on the horizon rather than something direct and present.

The New Year brought a sense of optimism and of new hope, but this hope felt fragile — almost as a brave attempt at self-reassurance. How long would it last? It was almost as if the past could be contained (and forgotten) by looking forward with hope that this year would be different. Perhaps representing a childlike wish to avoid the responsibilities of adult life? Conversation about alternative ways of life emerged, both as alternative ways of earning a living through part time work, independent work or loose collections of partnerships and as searching out alternative lifestyles for example seeking out complementary medicine and therapies. Food was also a central theme with pre-occupations centring on health and laughter being shared about unusual eating habits (often originating in other cultures).

A story was shared of a young girl being followed to school which highlighted concerns for the protection of young people, who represent one of the most vulnerable parts of society. Concern was expressed as a desire to preserve their youthful innocence, their right to childhood and the freedom that brings. Stories were shared of getting lost, whether outdoors in nature, or in the legalities of dealing with probate or the complexities of managing a major project in which trust broke down.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

1. **Death, Divorce and Cancer**
   The theme of break down physically, emotionally and socially was very present with fears of illness (specifically cancer) and death, concerns about the break up of couples leading to uncertain family structures. These difficult subjects, death, cancer, divorce lead to feelings of weariness and sense of foreboding. In previous years many of the splits that were discussed were seen to exist in the outside world, but these themes of death, divorce and cancer, touched on issues of disintegration inside people. For this reason it was experienced as particularly frightening not simply because of the fear of physical and emotional pain but also because these issues affect deeply our sense of identity and well-being.

2. **Search for Meaning and Connection**
   A small touch, a shared meal, a conversation, micro examples of human connection were experienced as very important — creating a feeling of potency in being able to create the fabric of connection especially within families and neighbourhoods. Being mindful of the abundance of these marvellous simple connections was felt to be a balm in the midst of an externally stressful environment. It put people in touch with their ability to be generous and generative despite the backdrop of difficulties — as if difficult recent experiences and the fear of the unknown pushed people to talk to find meaning and connection within their lives.

3. **Individual and Organisation**
   The organisation was seen to be a source of significant power and economic stability — perhaps more so than in the past, reflecting the underlying fears of the threat of the economic crisis hitting Switzerland. A feeling of a spilt between those with security through working in organisation and the insecurity felt by those working more independently was evident — each carrying different benefits and burdens. Those associated with organisations are seen to carry economic security, which is envied by those with more independent contracts. Yet they also carry the burden of dealing with the politics of competing interests from both within the organisations and from customers or investors outside the organisations, which is not envied at all. Those working more independently carry the benefit of a greater sense of freedom, unencumbered by politics and the constraints of organisational life yet below that lies the struggle to prove businesses successful and economically viable and also to actually have sufficient meaningful contact. The relationship between organisation and individual seemed to carry greater tensions and felt more split in the mind than in recent years.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post 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 following two hypotheses are offered drawing on the pre-occupations and themes outlined above.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Vulnerable Identities

Analysis: Switzerland was seen to carry an even more privileged position within the world economy than in previous years due to a relative protection from the problems faced in the US of recession and within Europe with problems of the Euro. Yet it was thought that Switzerland might learn something from the US about how people have had to re-invent themselves and their way of life in the wake of the recession.

Hypothesis: Because Switzerland is seen to provide a refuge from the craziness of the world with its economic problems and issues of intolerance based on differences in race, religion, education and economic means, many living in Switzerland expressed feelings of gratitude and relief for the relatively good situation here. Yet just beneath the surface of these expressions of relief is enormous fragility and anxiety. This seems to be based on the desire to maintain a particular way of life and the fear that it might disappear but more fundamentally the fear seems to threaten individual or even national identity.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Intra-Psychic Hope Compensates Lack of External Potency

Analysis: Splits between the individual and the organisation in the mind, fear of disintegration and death sit alongside a search for meaning and connection and a reaching out to others.

Hypothesis: Because many feel small and powerless in the face of the power of organisations and the force of nature (symbolised by death and cancer and natural disasters) it is hypothesised that there is an internal pre-occupation with hope and regeneration as a way to hold some feelings of potency. In line with these feelings of hope, this might be the start of taking control of a small area what Robert Young has called 'Mental Space' (Young R. 2004) as a way of beginning to gather energy to take up power in a more externally oriented way and to deal with the threats to identity which are hypothesised above to be felt in a profound way. However, there does remain great ambivalence towards taking up positions of authority within organisations, let alone society so the pre-occupation with internally felt Mental Space, might also be a strategy of avoidance and an indication of a further split between the individual and society...

Let us see how this year unfolds.

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