

→ **Boston Report**

**"The USA and the World  
at the Dawn of 2012"**  
Report of a Listening Post  
held on 10th January in Chicago



**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 organizations, 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 related to the 'social' or 'external' world of participants.

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

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. In Part 2 we divided the group in 4 groups and stated that the task was for them to further develop the themes for sharing with the larger group. They readily took up this task, enjoyed the smaller group and assigned a scribe to take notes for their group. The following themes emerged as the group reflected on the content generated during Part 1:

### **a. Economical inequities**

- Access to and distribution of wealth
- Chicago seems to be a shrinking city
- Rich and the poor – “There are the 99% and 1% distribution in this country while other countries are more evenly distributed like Denmark.”

### **b. Hopelessness / fear / hope that things could change**

- Dangerous times – “crime rates are very high and we are feeling vulnerable in some areas of the city.”
- Predatory entities – “In a newspaper article from my hometown in Texas there was an incident of a stray bullet hitting children in a playground in Texas.”
- Fear of the unknown – “As a parent I am terrified of what kind of world my 3 year old daughter is growing up into. How do I prepare her?”
- Impotence, frustration and victimization – “Where are the protests and why are we not resisting and protesting in the streets? Where were the 99% during the Occupy Wall street? Don't we care about health, food and lack of opportunities?”

### **c. There is no magic bullet that exists to solve our insurmountable problems**

- Complacency – a feeling of powerlessness to change things and challenges experienced in feelings of disconnectedness.
- There is still a strong need to be connected to families and our communities – “In my grandparent role I choose to spend my Mondays with my two grandsons.”
- In contrast, we are faced with a feeling of being disconnected as well as difficulties in trying to connect on a deep and meaningful level – “Technology is flooding us with information. We just capture sound bites at times and the information is being truncated. We are becoming disconnected and losing focus on the larger picture in our society.”
- In addition to this there is a general lack of attention to community health and well-being.
- It is as if the rapid changes and disruptions make it more difficult to create meaningful relationships in communities.
- Still we see traces of hope in the fact that the need to connect still exists and that there are examples of people deciding to not keep up with the societal pace, but to slow down and connect with each other – “Where do I decide to put my energy and investments and what do I choose to commit to.”

### **d. Leadership / lack of leadership**

- - Leaders of small communities are not able to lead effectively and bridge gaps in our communities.
- Government policies are in the interest of special interests groups and not the common good of the people.
- Closing of libraries – “the mayor had closed the libraries on Mondays to cut the budget and for poor families the library was a center for books, learning, computers and a place for poor communities to gather and while cutting the \$11/ hour library wage. This is at a time when the mayor is opening new developments in affluent areas.” “Food policy and obesity – the obesity rate in this country had reached an epidemic rate and government and federal policy subsidize rice and grains and do not support the nutritionally needed green food to the poor.”
- Chaos (political, healthcare, etc) or organized, deliberate system – The realization that institutions had thrown caution to the wind in a world of illusions contributing to our financial economic collapse had resulted in powerlessness and fear of trust of ethical leadership – “we seem to have lost sight of our economic collapse and the important need for health and education in this country.”

### **e. Polarization**

- We pay more attention to our own, short-term individualistic needs (and the needs of our own group) than the needs of other groups and the community as a whole.
- We have become complacent and rarely stop to ponder about the greater good and seeking out others needs.
- We have become a Me-society where our own self-indulgence takes priority.

## **f. Technology**

- Technological advancements lead to a situation where instant communication takes precedence over deep, solid and real communication.
- We have become a microwave-society where we expect things to be quick, instant and easy.
- This rise in technology contributes to the process of individualization as described above as well as to the rapidity of change that makes connectedness in communities more difficult.
- Still there is a glimmer of hope that technology can be applied differently to create change (as was seen in the Arab spring).
- Despite the technology we all are still on some level all connected.

## **g. Religious/spiritual contribution, hope and opportunities**

- A general feeling that the level of consciousness that brought us to where we are now is not going to help us get out of this mess.
- We need to transcend our level of thinking and this has a spiritual feeling to it.
- We have the ability to create and forge strengths despite the adversity.

## **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.

A number of hypotheses were formed. These hypotheses are tentative in nature as the group didn't have enough time to refine and develop each of them into more formal hypotheses.

### **Hypotheses**

1. Because of anger and disillusionment (similar to that in an adolescent), our society is falling into a dependency culture which results in blame-shifting and a lack of taking responsibility.
2. Due to the rapidity of change, communities cannot hold boundaries or roles and so we are struggling to become a 'we', resulting in society becoming increasingly fragmented in spite of our deep need for community and connection.
3. Because of the way in which we have exploited our natural resources, we are putting pressure on all societies (as in a pressure-cooker) resulting in an increasingly chaotic situation in which competition for and conflict over scarce resources creates tension and not unity between nations.
4. Due to the fact that of the increasing realization that we don't have limitless resources, we are experiencing increasing amounts of fear, paranoia and pessimism, to the degree that we have become immobilized and complacent.

5. Because of the increased occurrences of huge natural disasters, coupled with our knowledge that we have not been able to solve the big problems of our times (for instance, overpopulation), we feel impotent and powerless and we project these feelings onto the leaders and blame them for not being able to rescue us from this situation.

6. Because of individual lack of responsibility, complacency and fear, members of society blame those in leadership for societal problems resulting in a sense of powerlessness, anger and injustice.

7. The overwhelming availability of information and the rapid rate of change contribute to an increasingly complex world where members of society experience a lack of clarity. This leads to a general feeling of being overwhelmed and in turn resorting to strategies of polarization in order to retain some sense of coherence and control.

8. Because of our rapidly changing and our increasingly complex world, and a current environment of anger and disillusionment (similar to that in an adolescent), individuals and groups will need to do the difficult leadership work of organizing, finding voice, taking action, and making adjustments for continually new leadership efforts in an environment with limited external support.

### Analysis

There were two main underlying threads that came through in all the discussions. On the one hand, there was the thread of feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems that society is facing accompanied with anger and disappointment towards leaders for not addressing the issues that are in urgent need of attention. There was an agreement that there has been a passivity of and collective unconscious that has been in play regarding policy on health care financing, education and the need for us to learn to collaborate and not compete with other nations. As part of this underlying thread, issues about feeling passive, helpless, disillusioned and angry were discussed, particularly, how we are disowning the feelings of helplessness and projecting them onto the leaders. We perceive our leaders as failing in their ability to serve as containers for our society's anxiety and vulnerability. The result is to experience them as impotent and deserving of our anger. This might point towards a deep feeling of helplessness and bewilderment in ourselves and anger with ourselves for not being able to do anything about it.

The second main thread revolved around the frustrations we experience in trying to connect with each other in our communities. The deep need for meaningful connectedness was acknowledged but at the same time we are aware of how difficult it is, in a time of unprecedented change and uncertainty, to maintain roles and boundaries that are necessary to foster and develop meaningful relationships and work together collaboratively.

When these two threads are put together, we become aware of the underlying angst due to the fact that we feel increasingly isolated at a time when strong communities could have given us the security that we are not experiencing to come from the authorities. We have a strong sense that the tools of the past do not serve us anymore, coupled with a cynicism regarding our ability to effect any meaningful change on a large scale. However, when we turn our focus to our immediate environment (our neighbourhoods and cities) for nourishment and security, we are faced with the fact that the isolation and everyone-for-him/herself dynamic is permeating even this micro level of our existence. We continue to become defeated by our own inter psychic dynamics. This

utter feeling of helplessness creates a sense that we need to move beyond our complacency.

- ▶ We pay more attention to our own, short-term individualistic needs (and the needs of our own group) than the needs of other groups and the community as a whole.
- ▶ We have become complacent and rarely stop to ponder about the greater good and seeking out others' needs.
- ▶ We have become a Me-society where our own self-indulgence takes priority.

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The idea of needing other people, that we are connected, and that our survival may require that we acknowledge our inter dependence and inter-connection with others, is an inherently difficult one for Americans, who have notion of independence and individualism. We retreat into our personal worlds through the use of technology, such as Facebook. At work, our focus on individual tasks keeps us in a silo.

**Conveners: Janet Chandler & Jean Cooper**

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## **"The USA and the World at the Dawn of 2012" Report of a Listening Post held in January in Boston**

### **Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES**

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It has been a year of unrest globally. Fourteen men and women were gathered, including the conveners, on an unseasonably warm afternoon in Boston. The group was a well-educated group of men and women who were diverse with respect to race, ethnicity and age: the youngest participants were in their mid-late twenties, and the oldest participants were 94 years old. We are in the middle of the Republican primaries (with the NH primary coming up), and we are more polarized than ever. The US has withdrawn from Iraq. It is the final year of President Obama's first term; the Occupy Movement has

taken hold around the world, inspired by the Arab Spring; the economy remains in a deep recession; Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple died. Much of the discussion focused on dualities/polarities, out of which the other themes emerged.

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

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

On this occasion, themes seemed to be inter-related and laden with paradox. While some of the broader themes were similar to those at the last listening post in Boston (held in 2009) the group felt less of the glow of hope than it did on the eve of Barack Obama's inauguration. In discussion of preoccupations, people went back and forth between place and time. Participants talked about their experiences visiting different parts of world. Surprisingly, there was little mention of local politics. Global issues were very present, as if the boundary seemed blurred between where we in Boston begin and where rest of the world is.

1. There was a preoccupation with the notion of sustainability, which had multiple levels and meanings: on the environmental level, with deterioration/threat of deterioration of our environment; on the economic level, with the recent financial collapse and on-going recession; on the international level with on-going wars; and finally there is a question as to whether our identity as Americans is sustainable. The Mayans have forecast 12.21.12 as the end of the world. There was a sense that our globe is in a crisis. The Chinese symbol for crisis means danger or opportunity – are we facing the end of the world or is this an opportunity? If this is the end of the world as we know it, is that *all* bad?
2. Individual vs. the Collective: while we as a group are relatively privileged, and our lives are good, what's happening in the world is 'messed up.' This is the best of times and the worst of times. What is our responsibility for our environment/world? Whose job is it? Do we focus on our own lives? What is our responsibility?
3. Past-Present-Future: we are at a time of transition – on an individual, national, and global level. Content of discussion was about the past and the future, raising the question of whether it is possible to live in the present, when it feels so overwhelming.
4. Information overload: People are bombarded with information about global crises, such as the earthquake in Haiti, or the Arab Spring, but there is no follow up. Once the crisis abates, we no longer get any information. How do we sift through all this knowledge? How do we take in the world?

## **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. This analysis has been distilled into interrelated hypotheses:

## Hypothesis and Analysis 1

**Hypothesis:** The evidence of serious environmental decline, climate change, rapidly disappearing natural resources, global financial meltdown and inequality has led to an emerging recognition that our way of life is not sustainable. We attempt to manage the anxiety about our survival and to make meaning of our lives in several ways: complete denial; retreating into one's own personal world or professional/disciplinary 'silo'; retreating into rigid ideology and finding an enemy (government or Wall Street); or activism.

**Analysis:** There is a sense that everything is broken, and our way of living is not sustainable on an individual or collective level. We meet this threat with both cynicism and hope. We feel horror and terror about the sustainability of the land, natural and water resources. While there are sectors of society (including the political sector) that deny climate change exists, there is overall a greater acceptance of this fact. Along with this, there is a recognition of the fundamental interdependence and interconnectedness amongst nations, generations, classes, and individuals: our actions and inactions impact the other individually and collectively. The idea of needing other people, that we are connected, and that our survival may require that we acknowledge our interdependence and inter-connection with others, is an inherently difficult one for Americans, who have notion of independence and individualism. We retreat into our personal worlds through the use of technology, such as Facebook. At work, our focus on individual tasks keeps us in a silo. A younger participant reported that these silos in the workplace made inter-generational learning difficult. Life can be more manageable through an iPhone.

Though the amount of information that we receive (which is facilitated by technology) can feel overwhelming and lead to a wish to retreat, it can also provide a way to connect. As one participant noted: "I can connect with people I don't know on activist websites; and by collectively coming together it gives my voice meaning... And it allows me to do something that is beyond myself (e.g. write to congressperson, send money to fund a cause)". "That is one of the ways we try to help issues. We are organizing. For those from 60s the occupy movement resonates. For me it is the virtual that translates. Technology can help to connect us."

## Hypothesis and Analysis 2

**Hypothesis:** The complexity of today's world and its challenges are overwhelming. Facing the threats posed by the world today would require that we expand our capacity to be with uncertainty for long enough to develop new strategies for understanding and resolving the dilemmas of the present. We try to simplify these challenges with simple prescriptions, such as those offered in rigid ideologies: 'the problem is the government,' or 'the problem is Wall Street.' Rigid partisanship protects our fantasy of a simple singular identity.

**Analysis:** The world and the US are changing in profound ways: the environment, changing demographics, and our place in the world. We are waning as a superpower (though this notion is mostly denied on a political level). This poses challenges to our core sense of identity. We need to transform our way of being in the world. We look to the past for answers, but the scope of the challenges we face requires entirely new ways of thinking and being in the world. One participant reported on a recent article that suggested that every decade has a defining character, around which it organizes itself. This has not been true since 2000.

It was noted that this generation will be the first to achieve less wealth than previous ones. Our nation as a whole faces the same challenge. The sobering reality is that the best times may be behind us. We may be in a grieving process. In 10-15 years, the US will no longer be a majority white country. We tend to focus on the past or on the future. Some of the younger participants expressed fear for the future for their (unborn) children, and a fantasy that things were much simpler in the past, especially the 60s, when it seemed as though people felt they had a voice. The elderly pair expressed the belief that one should just get on with it. There was hope that the Occupy (Wall Street) movement may be the impetus for people to become more socially and politically responsible.

Despite the promise of greater cooperation in Washington DC with Obama's election, we are more polarized than ever, and seemingly stuck in rigid ideologies. This is particularly salient as we enter another presidential election cycle. This manifests also in mainstream news coverage, where it is increasingly difficult to delineate truth from fiction, since much information comes through ideological filters. One participant recalled the example of a recent US dept of agriculture appointee. Fox News (a right wing media outlet) showed a video clip of the appointee (a Black woman) that made her look racist. She was fired, and even the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) came out against her. It took many weeks for the truth to come out and for her remarks to be contextualized.

It was noted that the Tea Party Movement and the Occupy Movement are not so different. Both stem from a sense of anger that something is clearly wrong in our country, but disagree as to the cause. We manage our anxiety about the state of our country by finding an enemy (defined by our particular ideology). The Tea Party blames government for society's ills, and the Occupy Movement blames Wall Street. Rigid ideology offers us a sense of identity.

**Convener: Tracy Wallach**