



AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

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Part 1. The sharing of preoccupations and experiences.

In this part the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they 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': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. Identification of major themes.

Theme 1: Globalisation: the frightening oneness

Some members of the group described the invitation to connect with others using the metaphor of tectonic plates. Tectonic plates shift and when they touch they create a massive disturbance beneath the surface; out of view from the members of societies. The changes supporting the global market render both leadership and citizenship impersonalised. Global leadership is not voted for; it emerges from power influences and from market competition, as in the case of China, which was a preoccupation of a member of the group. The face of global leadership feels contradicted and vague. What felt to be scary in our discussion appeared to be its power to shape global values. The idea of China presenting itself as the most dominant candidate raised fears and hopes in the group; democracy might be undermined and replaced by strict values, internet restrictions and cruel practices. At the same time China was seen as having a fascinating cultural inheritance and humble citizenship. A member of the group wondered: Has America been any better, any more democratic? Moreover, which country is not cruel? UK is also cruel, but in a hidden way. The discussion around China was felt to be boring by some members of the group. Perhaps what was difficult to think about was the despair of people having to go along with a solution of damage limitation rather than a solution that is felt to be the best possible. How could such a solution be arrived at? Can citizens contribute to this solution?

A member of the group pointed out that even the private relationship between the GP and the patient is becoming public, commercialised and penetrated by other parties; she had received a message from her GP saying that data related to her would be passed on. There seems to be no control around people's boundaries. Another aspect of global forces and the commercialisation of relationships was that young people do not nowadays learn from a schoolbook, according to a member of the group; they download information from the Internet. Although the internet makes it easier for people to access knowledge freely, or to download know-how information, the idea of learning from another feels lost. The Internet is the impersonalised other. Thanks to the Internet, people work from home and can manage their time with more flexibility. Still, someone wondered, how can one deal with life from home? People live in Facebook. Furthermore, information of who they are can be used against them when looking for a job. Young people have started to quit Facebook. Young people may be in a social gathering, yet they spend their whole time talking to, or texting, someone who is not there. Young people take photos of their friends and of what they are doing to upload them on various networks. A member of the group talked about the respect and fear towards global communication. Impersonalised leadership at times can feel liberating and at others dangerous. The mistrust towards impersonalised leadership renders reasonable and taken for granted an attitude of disconnectedness, distancing and demoralization. People can feel drawn into a retreat; into a world of isolated omnipotence. A need for boundaries was identified. A member of the group said that he did not have a TV and is not on Facebook. He stressed how important it was for people to be able to set their own boundaries of time, information and social contacts.

Theme 2: Shame as an obstacle for giving and for receiving.

A member commented about consumerism rising in parallel with inequalities. People tend to hold onto possessions. He described this as a global pattern. Another member added the lack of responsibility of those who have towards those who have not, at an organisational as well as at a societal level. Greed was suggested to be the driving force for both. At the same time there is an idea that something, which is kept hidden, suddenly comes to the open. Julian Assange and Edward Snowden were seen as the heroes, the modern Robinhoods, who steal from those who have to give to those who have not. In this case, what gets stolen and rendered open to everyone who needs it is information. Those who dare to do the stealing/ the returning of what was felt to be stolen, become scapegoated and marginalised. Those who receive it become overwhelmed by it. A member of the group highlighted popular practices like meditation. Meditation and marginalisation both have in common the withdrawal from those shameful events and the feelings they evoke. One is voluntary, while the other is not. However, these acts at a societal level appear to be reactions to the realisation of inequalities and our inability to stop them.

Further discussion revealed two important aspects related to the above thoughts; The replacement of internal goodness by possessions and the equation of possessions with love. Not having possessions therefore means that one is not valued or loved. Having too much out of greed for possessions also implies a constant effort of acquiring, which leads not to satisfaction. A need for love is not met and an act of stealing leads to persecutory

guilt. In this case reaching out for love is equated with the act of stealing. A member of the group described the acts of the rich as an act of depletion. The image of a woman screaming in the street emerged, so accurately depicting the feelings of despair in our society.

The second aspect that was mentioned was related to those who do not have: a rummaging-in-rubbish picture of the homeless people. When a member of the group offered a salmon sandwich to a homeless person, the sandwich was rejected, together with the act of giving. Someone who has gives to someone who does not have, but the offer was not welcomed. This paradox was linked to identities that different populations carry and with the particular values attached to them. Working class food is supposed to be plastic food said a member of the group. The notion of “injured identities” was mentioned. Shame appears at the moment when one’s injured pride is met with an offer of what one does not feel is for them. Salmon sandwiches are not for the poor. High streets, a member of the group observed, are full of underprivileged people. High streets gifts, contrary to the offered salmon sandwich, are for anyone. No one gives them. One just obtains them.

Something similar with obtaining possessions is expressed with obtaining information. What is the right food? What is the right amount of food? In the meantime food is being wasted. What is the right amount of information that people can manage and digest? How can one know what they need? How can one make choices? What is it that parents need to feed their children with? Longer and longer books? Longer and longer films? High street gifts? The anger of demonstrations? The theme of anger was avoided. It was the issue raised just before a member of the group talked about meditation. Shame overtakes feelings of anger. What do we do with our anger then? The whole issue of food becomes confused; is it quality or noise?

When a member of the group talked positively about her good experience at a job centre, the responses were interesting. Initially they were around the negative aspects of job centres, such as the ugly buildings that do not seem to value jobless people, or the lack of properly trained staff. There was something difficult around thinking about shame. A member of the group who talked about working with those who do not have was clear that part of her role was to manage shame.

Theme 3: Loss. Being left behind.

There were a few occasions on which members of the group had different views. This had to do with the negativity relating to several topics. One of them was global leadership, as discussed in theme one. A second issue around which different views emerged was the quality of interactions. A member of the group talked about young people’s retreat from reality. It was thought that relationships through texting were used instead of a painful and real encounter. Another member of the group suggested that encounters through texting could also be painful. A member talked about the realisation that we could do something big through technology, which we had done. One’s social circle was much different: all over the world. Emails could carry very important content that could link up people creatively. At the same time there was a need for boundaries.

There was a question around how children and adolescents will be able to find their boundaries in this chaos. Perhaps chaos has always existed, but now in a different form.

The other one was the symbol of poppies supporting the families of those lost in the war. A member of the group questioned what the point was of carrying around this symbol. Another member agreed that it feels that we do very little for peace. She talked, however, about a contradictory experience in the family. She was born on poppy day, while her mother was grieving. The poppy became, in our discussion, a symbol of birth and grievance, remembrance and mourning. A flower had lost its value in a culture where history does not live in the present, as a member of the group put it. There are things to be forgotten, things to be remembered and things to be reinvented. Children must wear their poppies said a member of the group. In other words, they must wear their memory. Perhaps she meant that knowing where one comes from can help them know where it is that they are going. Interestingly, when talking about loss and hope the topic of China as the new leader re-emerged. What kind of leadership would that be? Where would it take us?

Lack of time was linked to loss of time. The discussion about China returned when a member suggested the fixation with this country as being an alternative to the fixation with the here and now. Perhaps what was mourned and needed re-inventing was the role of leadership and citizenship. Can we be awake to the changes and be part of them? Can we claim our role and responsibility as citizens so that we can contribute to those changes and process them, with the view of finding meaning for our lives in this changing world?

Part 3. Analysis and hypothesis formation

Analysis and Hypothesis 1. In search of what feels missing

Analysis: There is a sense of lack of time being linked to time lost. Members of society live with time passing them by without them living it. They have an experience of life living them, rather than them living their life. This leads to a chasing of the time that feels lost, but in the wrong way. Members of society are seeking omnipresence. This is demonstrated by phenomena such as identification with the impersonalised, busy, powerful group that appears to have everything; conversations with someone who is not there; and fear of the jobless one, who is possibly seen as wasting their time. There seems to be a distortion regarding the finding of what feels lost. Instead of connecting with time and with who we spend it with, members of society disconnect from who they are and who they are with and convince themselves that something more important is happening elsewhere, that someone else has something better and enjoys life more. The effort goes into seeking what feels missing, rather than enjoying more what is there. The result is that people buy products that they feel belong to other people's identities; to people they feel are happier. The bombardment of consumerism contributes to this, making members of the society less able to defend the boundaries around a sense of an ordinary self, whose life is imperfect.

Hypothesis: Because of the rapid changes globalisation introduces, members of our society feel less in control of their lives and more unable to process the losses they feel they are going through in order to find meaning in their new way of living. This leads to frustration and despair and to a constant feeling of being left out and left behind, which members of our society then try to battle by manically trying to hold on to what they feel is important in a very concrete way; and which in turn leaves them isolated and in further despair.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2: On defending one's separateness

Analysis: Because of the replacement of the maternal function in our society by the market, which is felt to be the bad nanny, people's values and needs become shaped into the need to keep the market going. As a result, people who are loved by the market-nanny are those who can contribute to the financial exchange system. These are the favourite children, the successful siblings that members of the society envy, but also look up to. The least favourite siblings walk away from that rejecting mother that cannot see value in them; they marginalise themselves in an effort to display their lack of love towards her. As there is no alternative model of success proposed by the market-mother, people confuse their needs for connectedness and genuine exchanges with a chasing of goods, rather than meaningful interactions. This leaves people dissatisfied, despairing and alienated. People need to resort to meditation, home occupation or violent marginalisation in their need to form boundaries around themselves in order to know where they stand.

Globalisation intensifies this: The extension of social networks and the establishment of global markets brings in a need for members of our society to process their differences at an increased speed. Differences in opinions, culture, generations at times feel unbridgeable. There is an unformed and un-forming other in a capitalist society, but also an unformed and un-forming other across societies.

Hypothesis: Because of the absence of a longed-for maternal function in our society and immense focus on the global market, members of our society feel that they are at the mercy of a combined parental object (a nanny providing bad care and a father too preoccupied with money) that narcissistically forms citizens' needs into the market's needs, which feels threatening. Consequently, members of our society do not feel that they are seen as individuals with separate needs and cannot see the rest of the citizens like that either. They react to this situation by either giving up their boundaries and complying to the consumerist culture of oneness, or fighting it by creating very rigid boundaries to define their difference. In this panic it is very difficult for members of our society to re-invent their internal leadership, so as to navigate themselves together with others through this transition.