

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Ireland and the World at the Dawn of 2016 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post, members were invited to share, identify, contribute and explore their experiences and preoccupations in their various roles as citizens.

The first member to speak said that he was in a quandary about the forthcoming Irish General Election. He did not know who to vote for because "What is being communicated leaves me cold."

This was followed by another member's concern that people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities were being moved into "the community" when "we don't know how to manage difference and diversity".

Another member then named her pre-occupation with the movement of more and more money into fewer and fewer hands. She wondered if this signified the beginning of the collapse of our civilisation as we know it. "Is it now our turn to collapse?" she asked, and continued "In Ireland we hold onto our money and don't let it filter down to the weak and the needy."

The next member brought the image of an inland salt water lake, stagnant and unmoving. "Are we coming out of a recession or going back in? You can read all the indicators what ever way you need."

This was followed by a comment about a pair of "c" words: conflict and compassion. The member spoke about how conflict can be seen and can start anywhere in the world: Islamic State, Saudi Arabia, Syria. Impossible situations. Closer to home the same information is used to illustrate different perspectives and the purpose seems to be to unseat the other side rather than reaching for any truth. "We seem to be invested in conflict," he continued, "and non-settlement of disputes. We are in a high conflict society with little consideration for "the other" or forgiveness. The very recently published report from the Banking Inquiry is about nailing someone," he continued. "Where is the compassion?" he asked. "Conflict produces migrants and so many countries have been so niggardly in receiving them. Ireland has not been generous. Rather than saying we should do better, the Irish

Government wants to hold onto the Dublin Agreement that keeps the migrants in Greece or Italy. Why aren't the Irish Government ashamed? Where is the compassion? Despite Ireland's identification with Christianity there doesn't seem to be much "love thy enemy" at the moment" he said.

The next member who spoke talked about an interview they heard on radio with the President of Trinity College Students' Union. Lynn Ruane is from a working class background. She became a single mother at 15. But what she talked about in her interview, the member said, was how she's more aware of the connections in Trinity and not class differences and class hatreds. The member said how the interview reminded her of Patrick de Mare's Koinonia - using dialogue in large group to work with and transform rather than harbour violence and hatred.

Another member associated to the dialogue, the national conversation, that took place during the recent marriage equality referendum in Ireland. It has been argued that it was the conversations that took place among family members that changed minds and moved people to vote. She talked of a strong anti-authority vote in the referendum and said that her preoccupation now was the need for the repeal of the 8th Amendment to the Constitution (which outlaws abortion in Ireland). She wondered if Ireland is ready for that dialogue and national conversation.

This was followed by a member who spoke of her experience that working in large organisations makes us passive and dependent. "Organisations are concerned with profit and customers and there is little room for the employees". she said. "If you stay a long time in such organisations you begin to behave differently in other places where you don't have to serve." The member spoke of concern with an increased identification with our work organisation and less around our human selves.

Another member spoke of feeling consumed rather than being a consumer. "Is there something happening for staff, a masochistic feeling about needing to solve society's problems? A pleasure in being unhappy? An ability to channel the disappointment of not being able to solve problems? An unconscious desire for everyone to be unhappy and owning all the problems? A merging into unhappiness and inability rather than being able to acknowledge difference?"

A member talked of a pre-occupation with structure and being occupied when they were unemployed and once employed or occupied, the preoccupation has turned to how to rekindle desire. The mention of occupation raised the comment that of course Ireland had been occupied for a long time. The question of whether Ireland was ever pre-occupied was asked. A member said they found it interesting

to listen to the commentary of the Irish rebellion of 1916 (The Easter Rising) which proclaimed an Irish Republic but was crushed by the British. (An event currently being commemorated on its 100th anniversary). This member went on to say that they had been brought up as an Irish Republican and had been taught to hate. "Politics were very insular and singular and I feel angry looking back. Change takes such a long time". The member was curious why there has been so much criticism in Ireland of centenary productions which have focussed on the role of women.

This was followed by a comment on the recent Banking Enquiry and how it was announced today that Apple Inc might have to pay €8 billion to the Irish economy. "Mismanagement has been going on a long time" he said. He named the vision of inclusion, equality and social justice written in the Proclamation of 1916 and asked what the leaders including James Connolly and Padraic Pearse would make of this.

A member said that she didn't trust the given narrative, didn't trust what has been written on the tin of business or revolution. "I've worked in development roles, alongside the desire for liberation, alongside oppression. But now I find myself pre-occupied with finding my own family background and the part my family has played. Part of my family background were oppressors, another part were the oppressed. I find myself wanting some sense of integration".

"Just this week", she continued, "Irish Travellers living on a halting site in Drogheda were evicted for health and safety reasons and so have ended up living in cars where is the health and safety in that. There is a tyranny of standards, we need not to just believe what it says on the tin. We use health and safety, equality assurance as if we are going to get it. How do we balance things, how difficult it is to speak, to hear, to be tolerated?"

A member said how difficult it felt to speak at this gathering. This member had a feeling of stagnation and not much movement. 1916 had held idealism and hope. "It held a higher vision and was valuable in itself. It feels like a struggle to not get consumed by the level of destructiveness and passivity of organisations, a struggle to find some dialogue in groups. It feels hard to keep hold of something noble - the 1916 Proclamation was about equality and justice. There is a flatness, a disappointment now. It is hard to find another vision that would feel real. The vision of 1916 held people together in difficult economic times. I'm trying to find a vision in the absence of religion and political vision."

A member wondered what has been lost with the loss of the Catholic Church. "We used to be Catholic, now we're "whatever". What are we

now? Maybe the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. Sunday used to be a day not to be a consumer. I'm consumed by the loss of Sunday."

Referring back to the forthcoming General Election, a member told the group that their first canvasser called a month ago. The canvasser had been all about local issues such as peat bogs and transport issues and wasn't able to discuss global issues at all. The member felt that we can be consumed by what we need locally and forget that we are part of a bigger whole.

One member wondered if idealism has given way to power and control. Who has power makes the decisions she said yet in the Divorce Referendum the last vote counted to win. In the Marriage Equality Referendum, each conversation had an impact.

"I admire those people who put themselves forward to run for political office", one member said. "I remember once trying to explain to an Italian that Irish police do not carry guns. There is something comforting in that," she said, "it says something about us as a nation".

This was followed by the following comment: "Fear! That is what stands between compassion and conflict. We are being manipulated by fear. My daughter is working in London and has been told where to go if ISIS attacks; we are told not to go to Marrakesh; we are pushed into nasty, aggressive responses. Fear touches us at a primitive level but it is now global and out of control. I find myself resisting being frightened because it will polarise me and I want to stay in a place of compassion."

A member responded saying that as a British Israeli, she has had much experience of fear, an experience which, she feels, is ignored in Ireland. "Now Ireland knows what it feels like to be fearful" she said. "It is only when we experience fear that we protect ourselves. I feel isolated and alienated with my fear in Ireland."

The next member spoke about trust and identify and how our trust in institutions connects us. The previous member then spoke again to say that the hurt and anger she had expressed hadn't been responded to by the group. This, she said, had been her experience of her years in Ireland. "Being different in Ireland is uncomfortable", she continued. Another member reflected that all our differences can be hard to include and explore.

The session finished with a mixed sense of upset, hurt, exclusion and fear of a nuclear fall out and also a sense of enquiry and curiosity.

Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

The large group broke into three smaller groups and came up with themes under the following three headings:

Conflict, Fear, Disconnection

Conflict - exclusion - migrants
Collapse of civilisation
Fear and the capacity to split and avoid
Splitting: Self and society; power and control and powerlessness
Disillusion and disappointment
Leaderless and visionless
Disconnected
Manipulated
Conflict
Who can connect the split, who can lead without control
Displacement of rage
Projection of powerfulness into others including our disappointing leaders

Stagnant and Unmoving, Holding On

Investment in conflict and opportunities to exclude rather than opportunities for reflection and inclusion - where has Sunday gone?
Unconscious desire to be unhappy, ineffective, powerless, dependent and colonised
Stagnant and unmoving
Holding onto old, out of date visions
A dependent identification with work organisations rather than our own selves
A dependent identification with powerlessness
Merging as a way of avoiding difference and conflict.
Leave the control and leadership to the leaders and powerful in order to blame
Hold onto Dublin Agreement and our money
Pre-occupation with minutia and local

Reality, Difference, Dialogue, Integration, Compassion

Seeking some Integration rather than merging or splitting.
Wish for dialogue and discourse and thinking in group
A wish to find a way to trust and integrate and deal with truths.
A wish to own our disillusion and disappointment
A wish to own our capacity to be oppressors and colonisers
Comfort in having values and conscience like the Proclamation
A wish to be connected globally
Connecting to the whole of 1916 Ireland
Finding a vision, meaningful values that can hold the conflict, the fear and compassion

Finding ways to hear the discordant voices out there/in here.
A wish to be able to transform hate, rage and fear through acceptance and dialogue rather than blame and splitting

Part 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members are working with the information resulting from Parts 1 and 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 are 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.

1. Rebirth, Recovery, Re-creating and Remembering

This year Ireland is commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising and the Proclamation of 1916. While this rebellion was defeated in its idealistic attempt to claim an Irish Republic from the British. It triggered the beginning of significant change to decolonisation and an important part in the creation of an Irish Republic. That moment in time is reflected today. We are disillusioned and disappointed with where we are and with the leaders we have. We feel that the political narrative that we have been listening to is untrustworthy at best and manipulative at worst. It seems valueless, split and without authenticity and integration. As in 1916 we wish for new birth, new beginnings. However, our revolution is not a violent one. The recent marriage referendum gave us an indication of how, as citizens, we are connected and can be authentic and we can dialogue meaningfully and really to change minds. Can we seek to trust discerningly rather than blindly, or not at all? Can we seek an ethical authority externally and internally?

A society without values is programmed to disintegrate. Through coming out of economic recession, through the marriage equality referendum and our remembrance of 100 years ago, we have glimpsed again how a society with values can be, how we can find new forums, citizen's forums, for dialogue, how we can find ways to integrate our differences in self and other and claim back the notion of power by authorising ourselves and others to make use of our own power, ethically.

2. Conflict, Fear, Compassion

Ireland is emerging from a eight year recession but we find that we have limited capacity for a compassionate response to the pain of others caused by displacement and historical trauma. As a result we avoid the pain and displace the rage leaving us disconnected from our own power or authenticity. We understand that there is a deep social disconnection not just of territories but of mind - the disintegration of the certain. People are afraid and that fear splits us off to a place where we are more identified with conflict than with a wish to settle disputes, more identified with powerlessness than with our own power, more inclined to react primitively than respond with compassion. Trust and vision are threatened, dependency is encouraged, leaving a lack of forms of identification that encourage the voicing of difference, compassion and connection in a conflicted world.

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