

## AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

### USA 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 participants are invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles. This part is concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that relates to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants. Participants are invited to share their preoccupations and experiences as citizens of Australia, and to explore these from their various social roles, be these in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities.

*For the first hour the participants shared their preoccupations and concerns: people have become more dependent on leaders for solutions, pessimism about change, sexism- negative feelings about Obama projected onto female leader Hillary Clinton, massive denial of climate changes and global warning and water in Flint Michigan, unchecked capitalism, devaluation of human life, fixed class system, limited ability to transcend, dehumanizing other members of society that are deemed as other, broken justice system, competition for scarce resources, breakdown of family system and communities, technology negatively impacts connection, majority of people in survival mode, fragmentation and disconnection for our society, broken justice system, student debt and limited jobs has handicapped our youth, lack of morality and ethics with elected officials, lobbyists, media, and corporate America, unsustainable waste and consumption, limited regard for value of natural resources, feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, ostracizing and persecuting whistle-blowers, fears for safety to protect children, out of control gang violence, depleted confidence in the police and their ability to corrupt, no gun control, homelessness, rape and sexual trafficking of youth on the rise, no critical thinking among masses, preoccupation with Facebook and media as escapist, virtual contact better than isolation, fear in the air due to the ISIS bombings in Paris and elsewhere, massive debt accruing in our state and country, concern about the direction of corporations as they are not giving pensions and moving out of state and country as save money but take away jobs, increased oppression for minorities and immigrants, people elated or fearful*

*about elections and choice of candidate, dismantling of safe communities, unions and protections for citizens, increasing anger at politicians, government and corporate America and capitalism.*

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

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

## **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.*

In Part 2 we divided the group into three smaller groups and stated that the task was for them to further develop the themes for sharing with the larger group. They were allowed to find separate space to meet with their group in close proximity to the group room. 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:

### **1) Powerlessness and despair**

- **Predatory entities** – “the gang violence and escalating numbers of violence for the innocent is on the rise. Stray bullets are killing innocent bystanders including children. I worry each day about my grandchildren who live in the city and near an area of high violence.”
- **Fear and loss of hope** - “ it is hard to imagine change as we are fearful of moving out of our safe areas and have lost hope that we can re-establish safe communities again.”
- “Feeling vulnerable in many areas of the city” and “fearful that the government does not have interest to effect change and bring back safety in our communities”
- **Powerlessness/victimization/ fear** - “I was leaving work and parked in my car when a man knocked on my window. I assumed he wanted to ask for directions and when I opened it he shoved a gun in my face and told me to open the door and he robbed me. Between the crime rate here and the fear of going to a large gathering and being attack by the terrorists, I stay home. We live in a victimization/powerlessness/fear mentality and feel that our leaders will not keep us safe.”

### **2) Racism and devaluation for human life**

- “There was a recent case in our city of the McDonald youth who got shot 16 times by a police officer. The police cover-up was disclosed when the sealed video was released to the public. McDonald was a Black ward of the State. The video confirmed much of what has gone on in other cities and the police lies and corruption. The release of the video of the shooting caused a chain reaction around the country. I think it was disturbing to the American public that so many people at levels beyond their comprehension were silenced and as they were fearful to come forth.”
- “There is a growing lack of tolerance and mistrust of ethnic diversity growing at this time and feeling like an unfinished civil war in our country. Immigrants are experiencing discrimination.”
- “I am African American, and feel like I am experiencing more racism than ever before. I am also more aware of the white privilege. The ‘I have a dream’ speech given by Martin Luther King is farther away than ever before.”
- “I can’t help the color of my skin and I belong here and there is a growing sentiment to throw anyone not white out and for us to go back to where we can from. We have just as much a right to be in this country than others and Africa will not accept us.”
- “There appears to be a growing intolerance and mistrust of anyone we perceive as different and the potential for violence seems to be increasing.”
- “We don’t give each other respect and dignity and the sense of being devalued is growing”
- “There are a number of groups that are becoming marginalized: the elderly, the aging, homeless, disabled, mentally ill, abused and neglected children and also animals.”
- “The increasing use of American children for sexual trafficking is the modern slavery of our time. Human lives are a commodity.”
- “Flint, Michigan hit the front page and parents of the thousands of poor and mostly Black children were being poisoned by water with lead, causing brain. This would not happen to rich, white children.”
- “Racism is in the air and the water that we drink! We can no longer deny our complicity with it! Minorities are placed in the prison pipeline in school and are 4-5 times more often than whites to go to prison and with disproportionate sentencing.”

### **3) Inequity/ Rich and the poor**

- “Government has cut provisions for Education, Mental Health services, housing and quality of care is grossly inadequate.”
- “There are gross inequities in societies here. “ I know people that are very well off but we are two different societies living side by side.”
- “There has been massive accumulation of wealth by a smaller

- group.”
- “The rich has access to the best schools and their children will make very close to what their parents make and have access to the jobs and special relationships, the poor struggle with poor quality of public education offered in our city and if they make it to college, the costs of education is crippling. A few lucky ones will get scholarships but the majority will need to start out in community colleges and work to support themselves and the cost of an education.”
  - “I started out in community college and had to take part time classes as I had to work to support myself and then transferred to the state university to finish my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I am 65 and still paying student loans and will be one of the 200 thousand Americans who will have my social security check reduced as my student loan will be deducted first.”

#### 4) **Technology/ Waste of Resources**

- “There is a tremendous wastefulness in our country and a total lack of awareness of what the rest of the world lives on. If we visit other third world countries and look at the quality of life and appreciation for the resources the earth provides – we are becoming increasingly disconnected to our unmonitored consumption, entitlement and waste.”
- “ We appear to be developing an increasing preference for connecting on virtual connection on screens vs. in person.”
- “What has technology done to our foods? There is a significant increase in child obesity, adult obesity and diabetes in our country. We continue to lack knowledge of the importance of nutrition.”
- “We have enough food in the world to feed everyone now we just need to distribute it.”
- “We have a population of 5% that consumes 25 % of the resources.”
- “ We continue to lag behind other countries in the world in the development of alternative sources of energy.”

#### 5) **Youth today**

- “Youth have been seen as the seeds of change or leading a revolution to bring about change. We who are parents are seeing a generation crippled with mounting student debt and lack of job opportunities.”
- “ The youth today are difficult to engage in the work force- they are millennials and don't have the stick-to-it-ness to stay in one job.”
- “ Youth today have attitudes toward sex, drugs are without consequences that generations before felt – they are hard to

reach across to.”

- “ I am in school and I find it difficult to make money to survive and do school and work. I have given up the idea of owning house, car and there is a lot of uncertainty about the future. I want to move beyond where my mom is but it is a challenge! Most days it is feeling like the ‘dream’ is just an illusion.”

## **6) Transcendence**

- “To attempt to grasp a corrupt government and corporate structure and has special interests and a government that punishes critical thinking and is corrupt is too frightening. I have to believe that there is a God out there and there will be divine Retribution.”
- “We need to find a connection that is outside of ourselves /and understand the deeper meaning to life.”
- “We need to come together and transcend our level of thinking and look to the a higher level and believe that there is more to life than this.”
- “There is a spirituality that binds us together. 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?”

## **7) Leadership /lack of leadership**

- “Government policies favor special interests groups and not for the common good of the people. The politicians are controlled by Wall street, lobbyists and corporate interests.”
- “The realization that institutions have placed our country in debt and hide behind smokescreens results in feelings powerlessness, distrust and fear that our elected officials are protecting our best interests.”
- “It feels like our leaders have lost sight and sold out the needs of their constituents and are controlled by the lobbyists.”
- “Corporations no longer reward the loyal employee with a pension or benefits and are moving out of the country or across state lines where unemployment rates are cheaper with total disregard for their employees. The insensitivity to the destruction of communities for financial gain is disturbing.”

## **8) Connection**

- “ It feels like we rarely stop to reflect and ponder about the greater good and seeking out others’ needs”
- “Complacency has set in and with an upcoming election there is beginning to be stirrings of change. Feelings of powerlessness to

change things can be temporarily relieved in an election by the candidates as they bring illusions of change.”

- “We still have a need to be connected to families and our communities.”
- “We continue to be faced with a feeling of being disconnected as well as difficulties in trying to connect on a deep and meaningful level.”
- “We are becoming increasingly disconnected and losing focus on the larger picture in our society.”
- “The rapid changes and disruptions in our life make it’s pace and complexity difficult! We need to slow down and think and simplify so that we can create meaningful relationships and communities.”

### **Part 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION**

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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.

- a. Because of Capitalism there are two classes – the rich and the poor, we have decreasing resources to care of the middle and lower class resulting in lack of health services, low cost medication, education, housing, resulting in devaluation of life, disconnection and split for people between nostalgic past and unknown future.
- b. Technological advancements and instant communication results in precedence over deep, solid and real communication making authentic face to face contact more infrequent and difficult and contributing to feelings of isolation.
- c. The rise in technology contributes to the process of industrialization, this along with the rapidity and flux of change that makes connectedness in communities more difficult
- d. Because of the rapidity of change, communities cannot hold boundaries or roles and are struggling to become a “we,” resulting in society becoming increasingly fragmented in spite of our deep need for community and connection and the resultant feelings are fragmentation.
- e. Due the fact that of the increasing realization that we don't

- monitor our limited resources, we are experiencing increasing amounts of fear, paranoia and pessimism, which contributes to our feelings of depression, immobilization and complacency.
- f. Because of increasing technology and virtual connection and increasing isolation, members of society feel disconnected , isolated, resulting in replacing attachments to people with chemical (alcohol and drugs) and process addictions including food, internet, sex, work, gambling...."
  - g. 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.
  - h. Because of depressive states in modern society, we are vulnerable to charismatic leadership in our presidential election and merging with the candidate that provides us with the illusion of power in a vulnerable time when we feel powerlessness and loss of hope is at an all time high. This may impact the objectivity that is needed to choose an ethical leader to navigate us through this turbulent time of uncertainty in our global community.

## **Analysis**

There were three main underlying threads that came through in all the discussions.

**Theme 1: 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, are we 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. This being a presidential year is a year where competencies of power may be projected onto the new presidential candidates. We are looking for the savior or "Messiah" who will us in this current society. Thus merging with a group and joining in the power for a candidate is a way of protecting us from the deep feelings of helplessness. Caution needs to be made as the merging with the power of a group and movement defends us against our more painful

feelings of powerlessness and the search for ethical leadership with an elected official who will serve the country and citizens best interest in a complex bewildering global community needs to be examined closely.

**Theme 2: disappointments we experience in trying to connect with each other in our communities.**

We have a need for meaningful connectedness that has been eroded by the loss of a meaning society that we once knew and have nostalgia for. Given the choices of social virtual networking in a time of unprecedented change and uncertainty there exists a challenge to find and develop meaningful relationships. We need to work together collaboratively in our global community to create opportunities to connect.

**Theme 3: the loss of trust in our elected officials as they are seen as serving the best interests of lobbyists, corporations and not reflective in their votes in representing the voice of their constituency.**

We live in a complex world and uncertainty has become has become the new them of this century. With increasing natural disasters and ISIS bombings increasing we are now contending with constant turbulence and members may feel polarized.

In our country the distribution of wealth to a 1% while a majority experience face day-to-day struggles managing to create some sense of stability. Wall street and lobbyists who control much of the outcome of our country is a new force to reckon with. As we may begin to take up either leadership or followership we may be in touch of sadness for the world that we left behind

When these three threads are put together, we become aware of the underlying uncertainty and turbulence in our time. 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, needing to turn our focus to our life, children and work and find and create community for nourishment and security, we are faced with the fact that a number of Americans have been split, torn between the nostalgia of the past and frozen in the complexity of the future, along with being on the brink of uncertain forms of disaster in the present. These splits can stimulate isolation and everyone-for-him/herself dynamic, which can permeate our micro level of our existence.

There was an expressed need in the group for connection, hope, choice and empowerment and coming together for the common good. The country is in the midst of change as they are electing a new President this year. With a change in administration for a country and

voting in a new president there can be emerging feelings of hope, and repressed aspirations and lost dreams. The need to reach a new level of understanding for our society is needed, and as the candidates roll out, there is an opportunity for members of society to step up and be part of the change. The voice and opportunity to take up action in our country always exist. The imminent task of choosing our next President is forcing many of the issues and themes addressed in this Listening Post to the surface. How will we as citizens shift, adapt and take up our power in this next year is unfolding each day in this next year.

**Convenor:** Janet Chandler