



AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

South Africa and the World at the Dawn of 2017
Report of a OPUS Listening Post®
held in port Elizabeth on 28th November 2016

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS & 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, 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

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

Seven members had indicated that they would attend. A message was received from one member just before the starting time that she felt abused by the university system and angry at what was happening, as she had been handed 10 assignments only about an hour earlier, the marks of which had to be handed in the next day. So six members were present

Because the members had not met for some time we chose to combine a sharing of joining and talking about what had been preoccupying experiences.

The first member then spoke about her adult children – her son had become engaged and her daughter, who has a degree in drama, is in a new play which opened the previous night. The entire cast and production team represent SA's rainbow nation and her daughter plays the role of a white woman who is expelled.

She went on to talk about her church which is one of the traditional Afrikaans churches and considered to be somewhat conservative. A year ago at the National Synod meeting this church accepted gay relationships, gay marriage and that a gay person could also become a minister in the church. Less than a year later a backlash occurred and the church organized provincial Synod meetings and a National Meeting at which those decisions were reversed. This was a "surprising" decision as there seemed to be a sincerity and firm belief in the first decision. It was then remarked that there have been several "surprising" decisions world wide of late for e.g. Brexit and Trump being elected.

It was wondered how the church might be using the gay issues to work out issues about Church disunity. The bible is also being used in a selective way for example to interpret what is said in Leviticus literally which complicates then how Genesis can be interpreted. Being true to the script in the bible is what is being emphasized.

A comparison was made to what happened in the USA election where the result could be understood to be reverting back to Nationalism and Fundamentalism.

The next member then spoke about her children and grandchildren who are at present in transit from a one nearby city to another much larger and more popular city. The daughter moved before the husband and at first the two little girls were left behind with their dad. In terms of how she grew up, this is a break with the traditional and “a new reality” which is hard for “our generation” to “buy in” to. (The ages in the group range from about 38 to 78). When she talks to her children about how it was in SA before 1994 when there were separate entrances, toilets etc for people of colour they think she is joking.

She then went on to talk about her experience as a staff member at the local university during the unrest. She was unable to gain access to her office but her ethic was that she still needed to work to earn her cheque. This was not consistent for all staff members and some seemed to consider the unrest as an opportunity for an 8 week holiday. She was preoccupied during this time with how to hold together, being sensitive to what was going on but at the same time, not to collude with the irrationality of what was happening as well as the philosophy the “it will all be ok.” She also now finds herself thinking about being prepared for 3 protests a year, February, June and September and that feels a bit crazy!

She has thoughts about whether she has the energy and or whether it would help to turn the internet off and when some sanity returns to turn it back on again. During the unrest it was really hard not knowing what was really going on and at times she had to rely on making a judgment and then acting on it and she quoted an example of a day when she went to an alternative university venue a little distance from the main campus where some work was being done. There were barriers to block the entrance on that day but she insisted that security removed a barrier so that she could get to her office. She was then permitted to go through. She also mentioned the different coping abilities of staff members and that it was wiser to send those who were panicking to work at home. She found the lack of communication from management of the university unhelpful as well as the mixed messages about “go in” – “no wait don’t go in” to “see if the students will let you go in and then go in”.

The third member began with his daughter who will write matric next year and so universities are being thought about and there is some anxiety around the choice and two possible choices include a university where there was little unrest and one where there was a lot of unrest. It is very important to him to witness his daughter’s progress through school but he struggles at the moment with how hard it is to tell people what he does. He is busy and takes up a professional role in activities but in a voluntary capacity and he is not earning.

He has a property which he is thinking of selling and investing the money differently

to get an income. He has a motorbike in the garage and he thinks of travelling but then he has dogs at home!

He was at the centre of the university unrest and entered via a Church Group where he has been active in programmes on leadership. He was literally in the centre of the crowd and experienced that the students were ambushed by the SAPS (SA Police Service). They moved in with Inyalas (Armoured police vehicles), flares and rubber bullets. He knew that he would not be targeted. He concedes that the police could not differentiate between protesting students and the observing students. Black students would get White students to walk with them because they knew that they would then not be targeted. He was with the Vice chancellor when she and the crowd of students met.

He spoke about the conflict being traditional vs. organic. There was movement but no organization. A woman who was imprisoned before 1994 for her activism against Apartheid is not even known to the current group of students. She maintained that not only black students were involved. Some white people and students were involved but it was not known who they are.

There were attempts in a multi racial church group to discover where all this unrest was coming from. The member realized that he was protesting his whiteness and saying he was not part of white attitudes which prolonged racialism but then he realized that he has to claim his whiteness.

The discussion then moved to racial incidents which have sprung up at several leading schools in the country around the hairstyles worn by black learners. At a local well known Girls' school in Port Elizabeth there was also an incident when a White girl made the comment that "she wished apartheid was still in force". The group member was part of the meetings between parents and teachers to discuss the hair issues and this incident. Parents and children presented a united force. Some conclusions were that these incidents were transformational in nature, that there was a lot of stereotyping going on with both Black and White learners. Assumptions fuelled the process and it was said that Management did not communicate appropriately. The question was raised about how hard it is to listen to someone who is seen as very different and holds different values. This has led to people feeling betrayed and as if they are losing their identity.

The next member started with saying that his defence against what is happening in the country is to focus on building self-esteem and developing entrepreneurial skills in his young son of 11 in order for him to become self-sufficient. He has also taken off one morning per week to focus on creative activities such as painting, music and his son's book which has just been published. This has been very exciting for him and he has developed his own skills in using social media. Later on he will try to develop entrepreneurial skills in his younger daughters.

His son had expressed a desire to write a book – his dad listened and suggested that he start. He did and wrote about a little mouse who was struggling at school – this developed a sentence or two at a time. It is called "Noodle flies through school", has been delightfully and beautifully illustrated. While it is appropriate for probably 3 to 9 year olds, the story has many latent messages for adults. As a result of this book the

son is now also receiving invitations to talk to various school audiences. The concept of giving was also introduced and a local NGO was visited which was delighted to be the beneficiary of 10% of the profit. The group member is also keen to write a book at some stage in the future.

He also gave another example of working with his objective and recently worked with a photographer whom he told that she had taken the ordinary and given it expression by the way she set up the photographs which was brilliant and did not just happen by con-incidence.

The next member, a retired medical doctor spoke about being in a different place from the other speakers and expressed feelings of disappointment and being cynical. When he thinks back to the days of Apartheid, which he does not want repeated, he was involved in the struggle e.g. “End Conscription Campaign”.

There was also a discussion then about the destruction of paintings at another university. Some of these paintings had been commissioned by the university to be done by the first Black student who had obtained a fine art degree at the university. This student had lived in the member’s home at the time as he could not afford the accommodation. Richard, the painter expressed sadness and not anger that the paintings had been destroyed. He saw it as part of the journey!

Major themes

- Unpredictability vs. the need for structure, dependability and reliability
- Chaos and feelings of betrayal and losing one’s identity
- Multiple realities and meanings about the same thing
- Communication missing and wanting / needing a preferred truth
- Unwillingness to listen / see and feelings that “I am right”
- Conflict / fight is wanted and it will solve the problem
- We (students) don’t know how to solve the problem
- Organic conflict can be creative but when uncoordinated it becomes overwhelming and gets worse

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3, the participants 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, participants 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.

Hypothesis 1: The less Black identity settles in terms of stability, the less society is able to listen to what the struggle actually is. This then results in some kind of a backlash which comes as a surprise.

Hypothesis 2: Because people in power have neglected to consult with all parties, the disenfranchised members of society have to act out (backlash, stripping naked, burning buildings and destroying art) which results in all parties being drawn back into dissonance about their values and what is right or wrong and what should be fought for.

Hypothesis 3: Because we have bought into the thesis of “one truth”, we establish what the truth is and then put a boundary around it which requires coercive power to resolve the competition or dissonant voices or gate-keep to control.

Hypothesis 4: Self-esteem and identity development can happen organically when the avenues are clear but cycle factors which constrain and form barriers will result increasingly in aggressive or creative ways.

Hypothesis 5: We have grown up in a society where identity was structured and today identity develops organically and will create unique boundaries but will also require some structure and holding by leaders and / or parents

Convener:

BACKGROUND TO PORT ELIZABETH

The country has been through turbulent times during the past year and particularly during the last 6 months. The call for President Zuma to step down or be replaced has increased in volume and chaos abounds in many of the structures in the country for e.g. Education, Health, the National Broadcaster, Eskom and the National Airlines amongst others. The country teeters on the last notch above Junk Status which has affected factors such as rising unemployment and costs.

Several members of the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ruling party expressed a vote of no confidence in the President and the committee has been meeting over the past few days to engage with this matter. This meeting is taking place as we meet to engage with the task of a listening post. The length of the NEC meeting, it is suggested is due to the membership being very divided over the issue. The results of the meeting were not known as we met. As more people add their voices in criticism of the ruling party and the President so his allies increase their support and fight for him to remain.

Over the past several months the “Fees Must Fall” riots and protests took place in most of the universities in South Africa and Port Elizabeth was included in that. Property was destroyed and buildings burnt at some campuses as well as art work destroyed. Studies were disrupted and examinations delayed. University staff members are under huge pressure as assignments and projects are handed in right on the final dead line.

BACKGROUND TO THE “SYSTEMS STUDY GROUP”

This group came into being in the early 1990's after a group of students had just completed their MA degree in Clinical Social Work. They wanted to deepen their knowledge of 'Systems Theory' and develop their skills in working with individuals, couples and families. The early meetings thus focused on theoretical study, doing clinical work which was observed in order to get feedback and improve skill. During the ensuing years the focus changed and the group engaged in discussions of agreed upon reading, arranged for trainers to work with the group in many different ways or present various theories or experiences to the group.

Membership has changed and this past year the group has not met regularly, however, the members have always enjoyed what we call “reflections” and we have used the Opus model as the structure for our discussions.