

AUSTRALIA AND THE WORLD AT DAWN 2016: REPORT ON NEW YEAR'S LISTENING POST

held 13 January 2015 in Melbourne, Australia

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Introduction

A Listening Post is structured into three parts:

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.*

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.*

14 participants attended this year's Listening Post in addition to the three convenors – 4 men and 13 women in all. It was an extremely hot day – around the city the temperature ranged from 42-47 Celsius. This may have influenced the ambiance of the meeting which was reflective and somewhat subdued in emotional tone. The material presented during Part 1 focused strongly on personal lives in relation to families, communities, environment, and to a lesser extent on the 'big picture'. While global and political issues were mentioned throughout the session, they did not spark much discussion. The 'bigger problems' felt 'overwhelming' and individuals expressed feeling powerless to do anything about them. A greater sense of agency was experienced when working on issues closer to home. In reviewing the transcript of Part 1, it is noticeable that no one subject dominated the discussion; the contributions have a fragmented feel to them as a consequence.

Major themes

We identify themes of:

- Pace of change
- Existing and emerging models
- Institutional failure and community action
- A move away from materialism
- Personal agency
- Institutions vis-à-vis the family

1. Pace of change

The meeting opened with a focus on climate change, then moved onto changes related to technology, workplace, and growth of Melbourne city. Positive and negative impacts were noted:

Positive impact

‘Internet, goes back in history, goldmine, opportunity to dig into history and see it alongside of what’s happening now.’

‘Digitised papers from long ago. Accessible in your own home’

Negative impact

‘Increasingly aware of size of Melbourne as a city. Growing and not feeling comfortable’

‘I took a photo and thought “I don’t know this city any more” ’

‘loss of many people knowing how to grow food, reliance on processed food as part of our culture’

2. Existing and emerging models

The group spoke of shifts in ways of doing things – old ways of organising society are making way for alternative solutions to institutional systems and ways of connecting. Examples were given of innovative solution to conundrum of an increasing aged population and unaffordable housing for young people, of the ‘shared economy’, of community connections. There is a sense of society making the shift from an old order to a newer order. Again, negative and positive impacts were noted:

Negative impact:

‘Uber driver – a woman with no impulse control, has never lasted in a job for two months, going out in a car...there’s going to be a tragedy.’

Positive impact:

‘Innovative solutions. Young people finding it difficult to find accommodation, share with an older person by providing help. Co-located aged care facility and kindergarten. Part of the day, they do shared activities.’

‘I put out pot plants (in the lane) and wrote ‘enjoy’. My neighbour said they’ll be stolen, but instead people are donating plants.

‘Reminded of old model of working. Work till age 60 then stop. I’ve taken career breaks. I have a work portfolio, not one employer. There’s more of that. More ways for people to work. It’s exciting. The old way is crumbling’

‘There is a feeling of hope, hope for change. Backlash will be there, but consciousness raising will take place’

3. Institutional failure and community action

The discussion touched on failures in institutional systems – without particular reference to any organisation – to adequately care for people. In contrast to this, examples were given of personal care and compassion given from grassroots community and individuals. Interestingly, the family is not included in discussions of institutional care, and hence not examined in the same way. There was discussion about focus on institutional abuse as avoidance of looking at family abuse. Violence happens in families, but attention is on the institutional failure of care.

‘Lack of care that’s on offer as a community for those older people who are well. Their level of loneliness is increased, and quality of life is linked to it’

‘Aged care – what is happening to older people within our community. It is a lot of front in aged care – less and less care. Also happening in other organisations. Hospitals, we are downgrading the care in our public system. No care for aged people in public system. No psychiatric care.’

Community actions:

‘The extra effort people go to, to care for each other, as antidote to the horror, trauma, dispossession.’

‘Hundreds of people working collaboratively to support asylum seekers’

Family:

‘Forgetting of family as an institution’.

‘We were talking about abuse in families a few years ago, then attention diverted to institutions, catholic church, salvation army’

‘Working in an organisation picking up on sexual abuse. It seems we are better at picking up these things in institutions rather than in families.’

4. A move away from materialism

One of the shifts from the 'old order' deserving separate mention concerns rejection of traditional rituals and experimenting with creating ones more meaningful to the individual.

'I didn't celebrate Christmas. I stopped this year, and thought about what was sacred that I wanted to spend with my family.'

'Some of my new-agey friends, talking in terms of 'enough of god the father, what we need is more mother earth'

'Slowing down. I've got a family, got kids. Doing so many activities, can be consuming. How do we take the time to stop, slow down. Always on, the digital age. How do we switch off?'

5. Personal agency

Individuals expressed feeling overwhelmed by bigger problems of global terrorism, environmental catastrophes, climate change, bleak leadership in organisations and politically, and experiencing Melbourne city having become bigger and less comprehensible.

'We are becoming desensitised to catastrophes' (in reference to the daily news headlines of events such as current bushfires)

'What is my role in this as a citizen? People say you get what you deserve, but what can I do?'

'In Melbourne we don't think critically enough. Too politically correct. What is the other side saying? Too quick and ready to rush into a decision. We are not sitting back and reflecting.'

'I don't know what to do.'

In contrast, people are holding onto hope: for purposeful work, hearing about innovative solutions to local problems, knowing that people do help and care for each other, belonging to a community.

'The good in the world. The extra effort people go to, to care for each, as an antidote to the horror, trauma and dispossession.'

'If you have a family or belong to a community, the opportunities are great. I wonder about outsiders.'

'Hundreds of people working collaboratively to support asylum seekers.'

6. Institutions vis-à-vis the family

Institutional abuse happens in both, and it has become okay to talk about abuse in public institutions, but within families it can be very very difficult. Families bear the shame, and can't, or won't and don't talk about it.

'We've decided it's okay to talk about institutional abuse, but not abuse in families.'

'We were talking about abuse in families a few years ago, then attention diverted to institutions, catholic church, salvation army.'

'Secrets in families. The anger I felt, at the shame this child was made to feel.'

Many personal stories were shared in the group about family relations, illnesses, caring for another, and the crumbling of institutions.

‘Reminded of old model of working. Work till age 60 then stop. I’ve taken career breaks. I have a work portfolio, not one employer. There’s more of that. More ways for people to work. It’s exciting. The old way is crumbling.’

‘Stereotype, patriarchal expectations. Coming to consciousness now. Exciting. Our call is out to men, to join the female voices. We’ll share the load, enough of the trauma, enough of the violence, we’ll take personal responsibility.’

Working Hypotheses

1. Overwhelmed by the global, retreat to the local

a) Because of the overwhelming nature of big global and national issues (e.g. climate change, refugees, family violence) and the disillusionment/lack of faith in the big institutions (e.g. family, government, church, corporations) to deal with this, members in society are constructing and/or retreating to supportive communities formed around shared values, needs and concerns resulting in people being able to take up their personal responsibility and feel empowered to affect change. This focus on community action deflects focus from institutional issues that remain hidden and unavailable for exploration.

b) Because members of society feel overwhelmed by bigger global problems, such as terrorism, climate change, mass movement of refugees, they seek to make more personal connections and to find solutions to local problems. Positive connections and innovative solutions to problems engenders hope. Holding onto hope is one way of keeping the fear of being overwhelmed at bay.

c) Because of unprecedented access to information and new perspectives through uncontrolled mechanisms such as the internet, members of society take up responsibility and consequently act, resulting in the old ‘king’ being killed off and for a new collaborative process to emerge in an organic way.

2. Projecting private shame into public institutions

Because of a renewed, intense focus on abuse of children, gender relations and domestic violence, members of society demand accountability of the institutions that failed to protect those more vulnerable. The recognition of destructive impulses is being projected into institutions while family shame and guilt is made private and unspoken.