



Report of a Listening Post on the Grenfell Tower tragedy conducted at a meeting of the Birkbeck Counselling Association at The Tavistock Clinic on 4th December 2017

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences of the Grenfell Tower tragedy in the various citizen roles they occupy in society and its impact on their lives.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

Theme 1: caring and not caring, shocking but not shocking

The attendance is low compared to a similar event held on Brexit earlier in the year. Perhaps Grenfell is too shocking to think about even now, or have we moved on from it already?

My head is about to burst thinking about it. Even so, I found myself stepping back and doing nothing about it.

I remember the local headmaster talking about all the children at his school who had died in the Grenfell fire, and how heartbreaking it was for everyone.

I feel we sometimes retain a sense of empathy without knowing how to help.

I was working in a school and met a girl who was friends with someone who died in the Grenfell fire. Even among young people, the strength of feeling was immense; they seemed to see the world as a hopeless place in which to live.

When Jeremy Corbyn came down and talked to the survivors and community members, and Theresa May stayed away, it felt as if they both represented a different part of us. We care deeply about their loss but we also don't see how we can help. There is the loss of the good self when we as bystanders see bad things happening to others and yet don't stop to do anything. We experience shame at our own inaction; and we know that feelings of compassion are no help unless we act on them.

I feel angry about this more than sad.

I still find driving past it shocking.

I remember the fire being one of a sequence of major incidents – Westminster Bridge, London Bridge, Manchester, Paris, the mass shootings in America... like a plague of frogs after a plague of locusts. It's as if crazy is the new normal.

I'm still in shock from Twin Towers. I visited the museum there in August and it felt like being in a cemetery; it was heart-breaking.

Why is the world so messed up? How can we be told that London is the greatest city on earth if things like this happen here?

Theme 2: Community as a container for the good, the bad and the in-between

I can remember clearly how I felt, I remember the image of the baby thrown out of the window. I wonder who's going to catch me when I'm falling? I was homeless myself in 1994 and was thrown out of the window. The associations are too close to home – the experience of destructiveness and ejection.

Part of the reason I moved here from Israel was to feel more secure. And yet I was only 2 minutes away from the London Bridge attack. I am used to sirens and police and explosions but it seems there is no escape from it, wherever you are. On the plus side, there is a definite sense of community in the way people tried to help – I remember people, including a policeman, running towards the victims to help them, as well as people running in the opposite direction, to save themselves.

Some of the survivors are undocumented illegals, others are gifted and successful artists – we can't pigeonhole them as we want to. We feel compassion for North African Muslims who are victims of the Grenfell tragedy but these are the same people we usually fear as possible terrorists so we don't know what to think.

I know in the my own community there are Asian immigrants hiding away to escape from their own backgrounds.

This is like the armies of psychotherapists who apparently offered their services to the survivors, and had to be turned away. Some were altruistic and caring, others perhaps jumping on a bandwagon or hoping to make money but they all overlooked the reality that the survivors' first need wasn't for counselling, it was for a bed and some food.

Who do we mean by community anyway? The community includes the angry mob, the skinheads, the looters and the profiteers. It's not a simple construct; it's multi-layered and complicated. Some individuals in Grenfell Tower were doing very well in their lives; not all were living in grinding poverty or were

undocumented aliens. We can't generalise about a richly diverse community of people.

Theme 3: Class division: poverty of care over poverty of means

It seemed as though the residents were told they had no right to expect better safety. This seemed to be the Government's attitude towards the poor. The whole thing was badly handled from start to finish. Everywhere in London it seems as though the lowest rates are paid by the richest people and vice versa.

I remember the Tory ministers being so dismissive of the survivors' problems, as if they really couldn't put themselves in the shoes of those who had nothing.

Because there were illegal and legal immigrants living there, it felt like all the focus was on ethnicity but they ignored the class element.

I used to rent a garage at the bottom of Grenfell Tower but had to stop when the rent went up steeply.

The cladding was chosen simply to save money. The system doesn't want to look at the problem. By the way, there was just one staircase in that tower block, before we look elsewhere for people to blame.

It seems social mobility is not happening. There is a widening income differential between the richest and poorest. Poverty is a difficult concept to understand – people can have mobile phones and still be hungry and cold.

I saw the exhibition on the Fire of London at the Museum of London and its theme was on all the advances in fire safety made since 1666. But only six people died in it compared to 70 at Grenfell, so what progress is there really?

There is a long history of local authorities failing in their duties towards underprivileged communities. In the 1980s, it was those in mental institutions released into the community under a sensible sounding policy that actually wasn't properly funded. Behind the appearance of a caring policy lay the dismantling of the welfare state. Since then, things have got even worse. The welfare state is now predicated on a hatred of vulnerability and dependency.

Having Trump as President is like having the Mafia in the White House; his tweets encourage hateful thinking based on lies. He wins office offering protection against our worst fantasies but ends up extorting us and holding us to ransom.

The aftermath of Brexit has provoked enormous hostility towards particular ethnic groups, based on lies about immigration. We are being exploited by leaders appealing to our worst selves, playing on our selfishness, greed, dishonesty and prejudice. We are encouraged by leaders to turn a blind eye to our own destructiveness of each other and our planet in pursuit of narrow self-interest.

Society has become impoverished not just in financial terms but in the way we look after each other and who we care enough about to help.

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3, the information from Parts 1 & 2 is , 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.

Analysis 1: caring and not caring, shocking but not shocking

We are riding on a seemingly unending rollercoaster of painful events at international, national and local level, being both overwhelmed with troubling emotions and at the same time becoming increasingly inured and accustomed to them. There are too many terrible events for us to process and 'disaster fatigue' is setting in.

With each unfolding tragedy, we are increasingly protecting ourselves by treating them as if they are just another fire drill. This maintains our equilibrium but ensnares us in a social ritual of grief and surprise – a public demonstration of our empathic credentials as human beings – whether or not the events or causes affect us personally or are things we can do anything about.

This leaves us feeling ashamed at our own passivity and inauthenticity. We feel uncomfortable at our paralysis in the face of an escalating terror because we know that the next disaster may strike us personally and the same paralysis in others means that there would be no one to catch us as we fall.

Hypothesis 1: Citizens are responding to tragic events on autopilot because they are too frequent and overwhelming, creating a split between a public self who feels emotion and a private self who does not. This split identity causes citizens to fear that they are not maintaining the reciprocal bonds of community that may leave them without anyone to rely on when it is their turn to need help.

Action: can we renew our commitment to society by 'paying it forward' – acknowledging our good fortune and mutual inter-dependence in society by putting the needs of others ahead of ourselves while we are in a position to do so?

Analysis 2: Community as a container for the good, the bad and the in-between

Tragic events can bring citizens from different social groupings together in compassion, suffering or understanding, making it possible for them to see each other in a new light and retreat from some of their entrenched and polarised perspectives.

The concept of 'community' is useful as an empty container for projections, enabling us to think of feared or hated stereotypes as representative of entire ethnic, religious or social groupings: the Muslims, the rich, the poor, the Brexiteers, the immigrants, the Tories, the Asians and so on. Equally, the concept of 'local community' often serves as a container for more benign projections of neighbourliness, mutual support and social responsibility that help us to feel safe and secure - among friends.

With all these artificial groupings, we find on closer acquaintance that they comprise many different individuals each with their own set of desirable and undesirable qualities. This undermines the utility of the concept as a simplistic model and forces us to reengage with the complexity of human existence, enabling us in turn to reach a depressive view of ourselves, like others, as a mixture of the good and the bad qualities we project onto others.

Hypothesis 2: Citizens are responding to tragic events by putting themselves in the shoes of victims, creating an internal conflict in the way they feel about themselves and others. The recognition that no one is wholly good or wholly bad makes it harder for citizens to be judgmental; it becomes impossible to divide humanity into those deserving to be loved and cared for, and those deserving to be hated and excluded.

Action: can we suspend our judgement of what we think we know about others and, at the same, ask more searching questions of ourselves?

Analysis 3: Class division: poverty of care over poverty of means

There is much made of poverty in the media, alongside statistics about benefit cuts, food banks, homelessness and austerity, yet the threshold of poverty in hard financial terms is opaque and uncertain. Politicians use it as a relative measure of average income calculated as 60% of media household income, and this shows poverty falling due to the stagnation in wages of those who are not poor. This simply doesn't chime with the experience of those in frontline services.

Absolute measures of poverty around the world address deprivation on several fronts that don't correlate with wealth: lack of basic needs such as clean water, food, shelter and clothing. This recognises cases where basic needs are not met due to poor choices rather than lack of income. Relevant factors also include health problems (including mental health), poor literacy and language skills, social isolation, alcohol and drug dependency, poor hygiene and low life expectancy. Another correlate is low participation in elections.

There is a growing sense of dissatisfaction with austerity policies that impoverish people by reducing the availability of public services to them and by making their access to basic rights more precarious, even in cases where there is no overall reduction in income. This seem to represent a kind of class warfare – through an obliviousness or indifference on the part of leaders – propagating the idea that savings should be made from those who are a burden on the state, thereby disregarding the vulnerable and encouraging the better off to accept cuts falling on others rather than on themselves. The better off can insulate themselves from hardship through debt and family support. This contributes to a kind of austerity that deprives people of security and social inclusion as much as of money. In the process, the whole of society is impoverished by allowing ourselves to be guided by our basest instincts – selfishness, greed, envy, prejudice and self-deception.

Hypothesis 3: Citizens are responding to tragic events by questioning their own right to be happy when it comes at the expense of others. The idea that citizens' own prosperity and privilege makes them complicit in the poverty of others is unbearable for many; they wish to turn a blind eye to their own responsibility, repressing the shame and guilt they feel that their 'good self' is silent and projecting all sense of responsibility onto their leaders for pandering to their 'worst selves'.

Action: can we accept responsibility to use our own resources of time, skill and money to improve the lives of others, including by going without ourselves so that others don't have to?

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