

# Ways of Listening



*We have two ears and one tongue that we may listen more than we speak.*

*- Diogenes*

*It takes two to tell the truth – one to speak and another to hear.*

*- Henry David Thoreau*



Listen and what do you hear? Over almost two years, a group of artists explored inter-cultural dialogue in local communities in England, Bulgaria, Poland and Crete. In their own voices, these communities spoke of their distinctive traditions, of where they feel they belong, of their unique experiences and of their authentic hopes for the future.

Yet beneath these different voices, behind the expressions of distinctiveness or separateness, we can also hear the deeper resonance of common values, of shared humanity and of universal aspirations. A 70 year old in Bela Rechka spoke of the childhood that shaped her choices and her life. Young people in Yorkshire talked of the defining beliefs and traditions their families brought with them when they came here to live. Members of a long established faith community in Hania talked of how their values today, as much as their history, now shape their aims for the future. Some of these voices can be found in the pages of this book, gathered from a series of ‘creative laboratories’ – spaces for interaction and dialogue, using the basic tools of the artist.



Roots, memory, family and beliefs – these are the deeper values we all draw on, especially in times of uncertainty or stress. That may be when we move to an unfamiliar place, or when a familiar place is confronted with change. It may be when we encounter those with other traditions, or when others don’t understand what we hold most dear. At such times, how we respond depends on the faculties we

use. If we only see, we see difference. If we only speak, we defend. But if we also truly listen, we allow ourselves to learn and connect.

This project has been a conversation. Open workshops, round table debates, public exhibitions, community celebrations and online discussions have all been shaped both by what needs to be said and by the opportunity to reply. Those who found new ways to speak have also sought new ways to listen. Those who came to hear have also contributed directly to what has been said. It has been a conversation across cultures, across generations and across faiths. The quotes you will find in this book are deliberately unattributed. They may equally have been said by members of the community creating a celebration in Sejny or by young people making a video in Birmingham as by an audience member in a gallery or by a visitor to the web page.

Dialogue – to be heard and to listen – reaches beyond difference to affinity. It enables us to discover the shared value we all attach to the roots of our identity, to our family ties and friendships and to our most deeply held beliefs. But more than that, in entering the world of another, dialogue enables us to re-examine and question our own versions of these longstanding convictions and so to begin to grow beyond the confines of our habitual ideas, assumptions and prejudices. This questioning mode has been the starting point at all stages of the project – with each community, with all age groups and in all locations. Simple questions such as “What does home mean to you?” or “What makes you feel you belong?” have prompted immediate and often profound responses. In subsequent workshops or ‘creative laboratories’, participants have then examined these immediate responses in depth. As prompts for deeper dialogue these ideas have led to shared exploration both of differing assumptions and of common ground. As the project has gone on, the dialogue in one place has then become the starting point in the next. In text, in images and online, each community has thus contributed to a continuing conversation. The voices accumulate, they speak in many languages and they have continued to speak to each other.

We talk much about accepting and celebrating diversity. But dialogue needs more. It requires humility, openness and effort. Importantly it demands imagination. To imagine how another might feel, to mould a relationship of genuine trust, and to open yourself to discovery are acts of creative risk. A key aim of this project was therefore to explore how inter-cultural dialogue might be more readily stimulated and facilitated by an artist-led approach. The creative practitioners involved have included those with long experience in participatory arts and others who are relatively new to work with communities. The groups they have worked with have conducted their conversations in a variety of forms and media – in visual and digital arts, in written and spoken forms, in performances, exhibitions and celebrations – enabling maximum flexibility of response to the particular



interests, needs and abilities of participants and to the varying specialisms and experience of both well-established and new practitioners.

Throughout the project, the techniques of creative engagement, creative development and creative presentation have been applied inventively and non-directively as the means to invite dialogue, to deepen dialogue and to extend dialogue. In inviting dialogue, initial involvement has varied from the carefully negotiated creative engagement of specific groups of young people, community groups or schools to direct encounters and participatory activities with the general public on the street or in shopping areas. In deepening dialogue, subsequent creative workshops have enabled participants to explore imaginatively and in depth both their own and other cultures, to make discoveries and to learn to listen as well as to speak. And in extending dialogue, the creative work produced and the presentation, exhibition and celebratory events have been structured to stimulate reciprocating creative responses from wider audiences among peer groups, in communities, or online.



Creativity sharpens all of our faculties and releases the imagination; it opens us to new ways of seeing and understanding. When creativity is participatory and collaborative it also allows for new possibilities in our relationships with others and requires new ways of truly listening. When we see, we see in front of us; when we hear, we hear all around. Hearing is more powerful a faculty than seeing, and listening is more distinctively human. To see is to encounter, to hear is more deeply to know.



Steve Trow

***It is the province of knowledge to speak  
and the privilege of wisdom to listen.***

*- Oliver Wendell Holmes.*