

Healthcare Is Making Us Sick

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It seems that healthcare has been a key issue in every election in the past fifteen or twenty years. One of the things you always hear from candidates is stories of people who are in dire need or distress around healthcare. This is good for two reasons. First, it is an issue that effects real people and not just the fiscal bottom line. Second, these stories put a human face on an impersonal and abstract issue. So in keeping with this venerable tradition, I want to share some of the stories I encountered over the past six weeks or so.

Healthcare costs have become astronomical, especially for people who cannot afford insurance. One person I read about would take his prescription pills every other day in order to make them last longer. His choice was to either dilute the effect of the medicine or not eat that day. Some people have to choose whether or not the rent or mortgage gets paid that month if they have expensive medicine to buy.

One of the most moving stories I heard was of a woman in Delaware with two young kids named Doris. Doris was a single mom

who worked hard to provide for her family after her divorce. One day she got sick; not deathly ill but enough to keep her home for a few days. This was a woman who NEVER stayed home if she had a cold or flu, but this was different. Doris could hardly get out of bed. She went to the doctor and got a prescription. The pharmacist gave her the white paper bag that held the medicine she desperately needed along with the receipt stapled to the top. When she saw the price printed on the bottom of the receipt she panicked. She simply could not pay that much. Doris was as sick as she could ever remember being, and without health insurance there was simply not enough money to cover the cost of her medicine. And so she did the only thing she could do; she sat down in the lobby of Happy Harry's drugstore and cried. Doris cried out of frustration, humiliation and confusion that comes from being stuck between a rock and a hard place. It is sadly an all too familiar place when talking about healthcare.

This is the same place I start when thinking about healthcare in this country. The broader political rhetoric that has come to us since congress passed the new healthcare bill on March 23rd. That rhetoric is sadly typical of American politics today. It is highly polarizing with both sides demonizing the other. One of the truisms of conflict mediation is that there is three sides to every story: his side, her side, and the truth. Obviously these games, and unfortunately these are political games, will not be replicated here this morning by me. We are going to

try to rise above this fray, ironically by going deeper into the heart or essence of the healthcare issue.

First a couple of assumptions. I am not assuming that everyone here is a Democrat or on the left of the political spectrum. I know that this is not true. More importantly, I am not assuming that all of you actually have healthcare or sufficient healthcare. This too I happen to know is not true. It is important to be honest about these things, I think. Believe it or not we really mean it at the beginning of the service when we welcome everyone regardless of their political affiliation or their economic situation. We will be looking at the ethical and theological foundations of Unitarian Universalism rather than political talking points and spin.

In our reading this morning we see Thomas Jefferson wrestling with himself. He is sharing a debate in his mind with his friend James Madison. On the one hand there is his firm belief in natural law. This is the idea that, as Jefferson himself put it, "we are endowed by the creator with certain inalienable rights." These rights are not earned, they are a given from a rather hands off-ish creator God who sets the world in motion. One of the early drafts of the Declaration of Independence kept John Locke's famous triad of life, liberty and property as the inalienable rights. This was changed to "pursuit of happiness" of course, but access to property was a firmly established right according to the Enlightenment philosophers.

Yet on the other hand, Jefferson is also the one who proclaimed that "All men are created equal." And I believe it is this latter belief in equality that caused him to be so disturbed by his interaction with the woman who wept when he gave her money. Although he was speaking of property in general, and not healthcare specifically, I believe his reflections are relevant. He asks, "How could so few have so much, and how could so many have so little, all at the same time?" His answer to this conundrum was a political one. Legislatures cannot do enough to subdivide property to make it fair for everyone. He concludes, "Therefore the descent of property of every kind to all the children, or to all the brothers and sisters, or other relations in equal degree is a political measure, and a practicable one." In the context of healthcare, this latter point sounds more than a little Pollyanna.

In the early days of both America, and Unitarian Universalism, such naive faith in the results the political system can produce were pretty common. For Jefferson, politics was a high-minded affair based on reason and intelligent debate. As we know now, politics, and life in general for that matter, is a much messier process. Probably my favorite observation about politics famous comes to us from Otto Von Bismarck who quipped, "People who love sausages and the law, should not watch either of them being made." Nothing proves this true more than the recent passage of the healthcare bill. It was messy, with compromises on the right and on the left so that no one gets 100% of what they want

or what they think should be in the bill. This also gives everyone, liberal and conservative alike, a reason for hating and trashing whatever comes along.

Stephen Davidson, writing about the new healthcare bill, notes that no one would say it is their ideal bill or their first choice. We do not do politics as the champions of reason, like Jefferson, would have us do it: by laying out the problems and then the most rational a pragmatic solutions to those problems, and then choosing one. By that standard the healthcare bill would probably not be anyone's first choice. But you get the bill you can pass, not the one that you ideally want. In real life laws must go through 50% of the House, 60% of the Senate, and the President. That is according to those School House Rock cartoons I used to watch on Saturday mornings. Along the way there are competing interests, lobbying, and political minefields to be navigated. Real life is never as perfect as our dreams of what should be. I have found that if you hold out for perfect then you get nothing. But if you make one or two imperfect steps toward your vision, then you start to get somewhere.

Our cultural ambiguity around healthcare goes back to Thomas Jefferson's original struggle. Like all great problems of our society it comes down to a conflict of dearly held values. In the abortion debate the two sides are pro-choice or pro-life: two very good things to value which in that instance are in conflict in highly complicated and highly

emotional ways. Here in the healthcare debate there are two different values that Americans hold dear that are rubbing up against each other. The first value is what Jefferson called natural rights. We would probably not use that eighteenth century language for it. We would call it something like "reward for your merits" or more succinctly "individualism." This is the sense we have that if you are a talented, smart person, then you should receive some reward for your talent and intelligence. If you earn more money, then you can get the nice car rather than the junker. Sometimes this value is called the American Dream or a Horatio Alger rags-to-riches story. It is the belief that in America, perhaps unlike any other country, that if you are creative enough and industrious enough, you can make it and improve your life. Hence Jefferson's wondering why people could not cultivate untouched land to improve their life.

The other value is of course equality; that everyone is treated the same regardless of who they are. It is the idea that everyone is created equal and has equal access and protection under the law. It is our sense that things should be equal for everyone regardless of their race or gender or sexual orientation that creates a sense of outrage when we hear the stories such as the town hall meeting in the Bronx. The New York healthcare system has become a throwback to Jim Crow with one system for whites and another lesser system for racial minorities and people with Medicare. It is not unlike the outrage that Jefferson struggles with

when he encounters the woman in Paris begging for money. We are all the same, and it isn't right that so few have so much and so many have so little.

Individualism and equality; these two quintessentially American values rub up against each other in the debate over healthcare. Both of them need to be held in balance with each other; neither can ever be the sole victor over the other once and for all. In fact, both of these values, individualism and equality, exist in Unitarian Universalism too, and we have emphasized one or the other at various points in history when the circumstances called for it. The free religionists and Humanists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were mavericks who settled the Midwest and the frontier. They felt that they were not beholden to the out molded traditions of the past, but were instead called to a brand new vision of the future. They lived and breathed Emersonian individualism.

Then there are the quintessential proponents of equality: the Universalists. In many ways, the American value of equality had no greater champion than them. They preached that whether you were a saint or a sinner, you were destined to the same place: heaven. We are all equal in that regard because it isn't about what we do or fail to do. For the Universalists, the real issue is not our sin, but God's infinite love that determines our ultimate place in the afterlife. We are all God's children and according to the Universalists we are all loved equally by the divine.

For Unitarian Universalism to be relevant throughout history and in different ages and circumstances, we need to be able to proclaim the good news of both individualism and equality. The trick is not which is better or which should win, but rather the question to ask ourselves is which of our competing values is out of balance with the other. In the case of healthcare, it is clear that individualism has had a field day at the expense of equality. If Jefferson was disturbed by the woman who was begging for money, he would have his mind blown away by the folks in the Bronx or Doris crying on the floor of the Happy Harry's.

For modern Unitarian Universalism we proclaim the first principle, "The inherent worth and dignity of every person." You can smell a trace of that "endowed by their creator" language there can't you? "Inherent worth" is a very Enlightenment idea; almost like "natural rights." But the idea that this worth and dignity applies to *every* person; that is a uniquely Unitarian Universalist message. That is where equality comes in. Regardless of your race, or class, or sexual orientation; you have worth. Regardless of where you come from, be it the Bronx or Brooklyn, Wilmington or West Chester, you deserve dignity and respect. That is where the shift needs to take place: to valuing everyone and providing equal access to all.

As many of you know, I lived in Japan for almost a year in between my undergraduate life and seminary. While I was a student I had health insurance, but for this year in between I didn't. Now I was 22

years old at the time, so it didn't seem like much of an issue most days. But one day I got really sick. I didn't have the strength to get out of bed. My friends and dorm mates took pity on me and would bring me traditional Japanese home cures like eating rice gruel for every meal. And you know what, it worked. After a couple of days of eating rice gruel I got out of bed--I needed a cheeseburger! There was no way I was going to eat that stuff anymore. It was a unique motivation to get out of bed and try to get better.

A friend took me to a clinic and translated for me. I was in the waiting room filling out papers, as we all do when we go to a doctor's office. One of the questions on the form was, "How much money did you make last year?" Since I didn't live in Japan the year before, the answer was zero. The way the Japanese health system worked, and maybe still does, is that the amount you pay depends on how much you make. In my case I made nothing; and I paid nothing that day as I left the doctor's office. Granted, I did not require some exotic or invasive procedure; just some medicine. But contrast that experience to Doris' shock, horror and panic in the middle of Happy Harry's.

The cafes in Italy have an interesting tradition. If you are a person of some means, and you go in to your favorite coffee shop for an espresso, you can pay for two. Then if, later in the day, a stranger comes along who cannot pay for their coffee, the cafe gives them one for free. Everyone gets a little pick me up in the morning and the cafe still makes

money. Japan's health system operates on the same principle only on a much larger scale. It is an interesting resolution between individualism and equality. Yes it favors the latter over the former, but hasn't individualism had its day in the sun for a very long time? The resulting inequality between healthcare resources has now crossed over into the unjust; as the people in the Bronx would tell us. A little dose of the first principle equality, that everyone has inherent worth and dignity, is precisely the kind of balance needed right now.

May we live in the creative tension between our dearly held values. Let us seek to balance them in ways that create a just society. And may we be generous in both mind, spirit and resources. Amen Blessed Be.