

Health Care as a Civil Right

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By Rev. Chip Wright

As a nation we have disconnected logic circuits in our brains when it comes to the idea of single payer health care. We have no problem with it when it comes to our single payer government operated pentagon, the veterans administrations medical and hospital care, and even Medicare, all single payer systems, so why not health care? These all address the same issue -- the security or 'safety' and happiness of our citizens as articulated in our Declaration of Independence. But it is rare to hear anyone speaking of these traditional founding values, life liberty and the pursuit of happiness in the nation's daily conversation around health care.

Instead we hear the words 'unsustainable economics,' 'threat to free enterprise and our capitalist system,' 'unfair competition,' the dreaded 'Socialism' and all the rest of the spin used to frighten folks into compliance. These topics are driven in many ways by the media whose eyes seem to be on the same bottom line, as the health care industry, money. In the end we not only have deceptive well organized and extremely well financed campaign of

disinformation but also a loss of balanced free and accurate information.

I hold the medical industrial complex culpable for this campaign as it manipulates us into thinking they are working in our interests. Thankfully this myth has come to a head in our ongoing deliberations around health care, and even those who would continue unabated in this tactic are being forced to look at ways to either pull back a little or somehow re-convince the public that they are here for them.

But for many of us we still seem to be fighting a losing battle when we attempt to carry it on in the fields of reason and good information. The medical industry has rolled out fear on its shining operating gurney, in the same way sex is paraded for the fashion industry. Ultimately they are protecting their profit line by exploiting illness, not by supporting health. What we call health care in this country is a for profit business which has become so complex and strategy driven that health has no more meaning to it than a single tree to the Board of Directors of a paper mill. The system looks only at what drives the profits, and that is illness, real or perceived. The system also looks at what can secure the profits—only those privileged who can afford to pay for it.

This is not to deny the very real correlation between the market and health care—it is just handled differently in other countries. In most of the developed world and much of what we call the undeveloped too, health care is understood as a vital and important piece of a strong and productive population and economy. This is the primary argument for why all developed countries have one form or another of universal health care; with the one glaring exception us, spelled US.

Canada, England, Holland, Denmark, France and numbers of other nations with arguably equal or better life styles than ours have forms of universal health care for all their citizens, and generally visitors as well. They do not understand health care as a privilege. In England once I had the need to visit the hospital in London for some emergency outpatient surgery then eight return visits. At the end I asked who I should pay. The intake nurse smiled, “There is no place to put any money. We don’t deal with it.” She said. No system for taking money or identifying national affiliations for health care.

With this kind of experience coupled with my being an unabashed religious liberal and a progressive at that, I believe that health care

is not just a political or economic debate, but an ethical, moral and justice issue. It is simply **unjust** to deliver health care to the privileged only.

Health care as a civil right is not a new idea for many of us who have repeatedly called for it. But this conversation, based on moral and ethical values has been lost in the distraction strategy of money mythology carried out by those who have the big money, and in turn power and control.

However if ethical/moral responsibility were openly discussed we might see a dramatic change in the support of health care as a civil right. And we have this chance. Now that health care is in the nation's daily conversation it seems that there will be some movement towards change in this, though we won't see universal coverage any time soon. But I do see the possibility of some positive shifts in the way we allot health care. I see a twinkle of hope that we might some day come to understand the values of supporting health care.

What many people do not understand is that promoting health care as a civil right is not only right from an ethical perspective and a moral one, but it is essential for this nation to continue.

As an American who has a deep appreciation for the ideas enshrined within the Declaration of Independence and Our Bill of Rights, I am an resolute and committed proponent for universal health care in the United States. I believe this nation has a responsibility and a historical calling to proclaim health care as an inalienable right along with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We have come to know that integration, freedom of thought and discourse; women's right to vote are all such inalienable rights so why not health care?

We can't have life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness if we continue to promote a market of illness which we have come to call our health care system. It is a simple step of logic to see how good health care supports and connects to these values.

We all have stories or know of someone where these rights were curtailed because of this disaster we call a health care system. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is dependent on access to the best health care we can maintain.

We are historically a radical nation, willing to put the people first and so should be excited to follow that rich tradition. In my and

many people's opinions more and more people each day understand health care as a civil right. It is the only honest conclusion one can come to is unless you are willing to institutionalize, privilege, access, class, status, and undermine the words of our Declaration of Independence and the guidance of our Constitution. But don't doubt that there are politicians out there who would do just that if they had the ability. In fact I can point to 43 or more of our elected senators with such predisposition.

This idea that health (and all it takes to maintain) might be a civil right just by its nature, also flies in the face of the medical industry and all its offshoots. And with the obscene amounts of money generated by managing illness, and creating syndromes and anxiety, significant change in this system is not anything these folks will be interested in any time soon. So rather than the pursuit of happiness we have created a pursuit of new ways to feel unhealthy, in turn demanding even more from the medical industrial complex and giving more control and power to them, which we all know translates into more money and influence to put into perpetuating this broken system.

But the bottom line is that we have done ourselves terrible harm when we have ignored the health of the whole. Like a vicious

circle we have perpetuated a nation which now has some of the unhealthiest people in the world, with more cancers, more depression, more obesity, more heart attacks, more strokes and on and on... We are also the most likely to spend money and resources on useless treatments. . And that is just the tip of the iceberg. There are layers and layers of insurance, liability and pharmacology that drip down obscene amounts of dollars to the CEO's and executives who market this largely inadequate and unnecessary treatment system foisted on a patient population.

Yet even if we start to look at the health in our nation as sustainable and improvable we would need a whole different set of values than the medical industrial complex works with. This is why it is such a very big issue. In the end it is not only about values and what drives them, but about an understanding that by nature the population is healthy, not ill, and the task is to support maintaining health, not marketing illness.

For this nation to understand health care as a right it will take lots of education and clear communication around the smoke screens and blatant lies circulated by the medical lobbyists. I believe most folks think medical care should not be only a privilege afforded to those with resources to offer in exchange. Like having the right to

use the same water fountain in a public forum, we should all be able to access health care.

And as religious liberals we also have a very significant role to play in educating people about the ethics and morals which create the values of care and compassion in the human spirit. We should be addressing this question of health care from understanding ourselves and why we care and help not only our children but our friends and people whom we have never met. To care is a piece of who we are as a human species. As a community we survive by caring for our children, and one another. It is our nature.

Therefore we, as well as our leadership, should be mandating health care for everyone and not dancing around this issue. But we will never get there unless we start the journey. And as difficult as it is for a long time supporter of a universal government run health care system, I must recognize finishing the marathon means that I must first start the race, and travel the distance. I don't get to just like the idea of running and get to the end by some miracle (even though I am a clergyman). I would like that but... If we look deep enough we must step up to the race and start to run at the gun. And the gun has sounded.

These next couple of weeks will be crucial for our voice declaring health care as one of our national inalienable rights to be heard. It seems apparent that most politicians who have concerns about health care think using this language of ‘civil rights’ is problematic, losing before you start. But we need to rise above the typical sad dialogue that has been called health care reform that is simply a process of trying to get the slightest of regulation into a broken system we have allowed to run free, and now seems to control us. We cannot be willing to allow the wealthy and greedy to mandate how we are going to have access to the rights of life, liberty and our pursuit of happiness.

Therefore this Wednesday afternoon I will be heading over to Diane Feinstein’s office with what I hope to be a BIG passel of letters, and some fellow advocates urging her to support a public option in the upcoming senate bill on health care. If you wish there will be writing tables and support to help you write a letter in the foyer right after the service. I will deliver personally your letters to Senator Feinstein’s office. And I invite any of you who would like to join me on my visit to do so. Jeff Melcher, of the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry, who many of you know, will be joining us as well.

It is time to let our political leaders know that we have not forgotten the concept of unalienable rights. Thomas Jefferson, a good Unitarian, articulated so clearly in the Declaration of Independence the timeless truth of the rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as characteristics of a great nation. These rights are still here, in place. It is we who are charged with not only recognizing them but acting in accord. I am grateful for all of you who have furthered this task by working in the fields of care, compassion and justice, and still find a place for your principles in the political field. Because ultimately these higher values which you carry into the world will, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, “institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” Let us not forsake this national heritage, our values or our current obligations to change ourselves for the better. It’s time to recapture our health, for the good of one and for the good of all.

So be it.