

From the 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter, 2007 issue of *Health Planning TODAY*:

## None So Blind As Those Who Will Not See

It seems obvious that we have closed minds about American health care, a condition that has been ascribed to American education as well. Twenty years ago, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1987) took a radically unorthodox view of American education much as the documentary *Sicko* is now doing for health care. His philosopher's observation on an insidious political process at work in our society provides insight into the real barrier we face in policy reform, not just in health care: "The most successful tyranny is not the one that uses force to assure uniformity but the one that removes the awareness of other possibilities, that makes it seem inconceivable that other ways are viable, that removes the sense that there is an outside." (p.249)

### Doublethink

In my President's Message in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter issue, I wrote about the bizarre views of health care held by many conservative economists, including a quote from the National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA). On September 24<sup>th</sup>, John Goodman, NCPA President, issued an e-mail "Health Alert" announcing that he was establishing "the Mondrian Award for Ineffectiveness in Health Policy." Thinking he may have been reading my President's Messages, I read on only to learn that "the award will go to the program, agency or proposal that promises the least health outcome for the most dollars spent," and that he had given it the name "Mondrian" to signify the *minimalist* nature of the health policy thus selected. Well, okay, he had my attention, I was eager to find out which among all the Republican policies he had in mind, but he hadn't yet selected one. Instead, he just wished to discuss the award's potential to identify so much waste; then I came across this paragraph:

Were he alive today, Lyndon Johnson would surely qualify for a Lifetime Achievement Mondrian for giving us Medicare. This program has an unfunded liability six times the size of Social Security's. Yet according to MIT economist Amy Finkelstein, it has improved the health care of the elderly not one whit.

I'll refrain from the temptation to endnote this with more about Amy Finkelstein's "thinking." If this doesn't look to you like a distorted view of our social and political reality, nothing I could write will reveal it to you. I just wonder how much of the distortion is economic, how much is political, and how much is *moral*.

There is a moral blindness in our nation, evident in national politics ever since Ronald Reagan said in a speech in 1964: "We were told four years ago that 17 million people in America go to bed hungry every night.... Well, that was probably true. They were all on a diet." And now, due to our political blindness, the nation has been put on such a diet for the last seven years.

The President's explanations about why he would veto the expansion of SCHIP proposed by Congress led him to assert that the uninsured "have access to health care in America. After all, you just go to an emergency room." This can have some credence only for those who have no concept of what a health care system is or any appreciation of the proper role of public health and prevention in it. If they did, they

would see the need to use emergency rooms for any but true emergencies as failures that ought to be obviated by a health care system that places public health on top and values personal medicine for providing a medical home for health education and preventive care. And it is the lack of such care leading to the misuse of ERs that causes people to descend into bankruptcy and poverty. Here we see the promulgation of the same distortion “that removes the awareness of other possibilities,” and through it, “removes the sense that there is an outside,” in the fateful words of Allan Bloom. I hope the time has come for us to see what lies outside such a treasonable lack of governance.

And we should see that even for those of us with private insurance, effective, appropriate care is often outside of our reach due to the corruption of such “insurance” into something hardly worth having. Might we decide to do something about uninsurance when we realize that we’re all uninsured? Above all by a lack of good government, for, in the words of Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Director-General of the WHO, “the careful and responsible management of the well-being of the population – stewardship – is the very essence of government.” And in the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt speaking to the New York State Legislature in 1931:

The success or failure of any government in the final analysis must be measured by the well-being of its citizens. Nothing can be more important to a state than its public health. The state’s paramount concern should be the health of its people.

### **The Price of Everything; the Value of Nothing**

Finally, there came a time when everything that men had considered inalienable became an object of exchange, of traffic, and could be alienated. This is the time when the very things which till then had been communicated, but never exchanged; given, but never sold; acquired, but never bought – virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc. – when everything, in short, passed into commerce. It is the time of general corruption, of universal venality, or, to speak in terms of political economy, the time when everything, moral or physical, having become a marketable value, is brought to the market to be assessed at its truest value.

-- Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847, p.33.

What I think to be the most egregious blind spot shared by conservative economists is their failure to see caregivers’ ethos of devotion to their patients as **priceless**. As I wrote in my previous President’s Message, it is “ironic then for us to see profit-driven, high-cost medicine as the price we pay for incentivizing physicians to perform well, instead of as a measure of the depreciation of professional life, the corruption of medicine.” In a recent Op-Ed column in *The New York Times*, Barry Schwartz, professor of psychology at Swarthmore College and author of *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life* (W.W. Norton & Co, 1994), writes about the stupidity of incentivizing ballplayers and school teachers. Not only are bonuses insulting to teachers, he notes that “beyond the insult, such an incentive scheme is an effort to fix a structural problem on the cheap.” He concludes that “the more society embraces the idea that nobody will do anything right unless it pays, the more true it will become that nobody does anything right unless it pays. And this is no way to run a ballclub, a school system, or a country.”<sup>1</sup> In his book, he wrote that

the “continued spread of economic objectives and tactics into domains of life that people have traditionally regarded as governed by other goals and rules are turning social life into a jungle,” labeling this “economic imperialism.”

A cable television system is a good example of that jungle – a thousand available channels with few having programs worth watching, and we no longer know how to find those few. By making economic wealth the sole value for society, the currency of life is devalued for everyone.

The almost total ascendancy of libertarian values over communitarian ones – too much freedom – exacts a serious moral, social, and emotional price. The orthodoxy of neoclassical economic theory elevated to a sort of secular religion has managed to redefine “the cost of living” in terms of the alienation of those who follow it, alienation from our authentic self and from our obligations to each other. We manage to think we love our individualism without realizing how misguided our ways of expressing it have become. All these blind spots should be seen for what they are: symptoms of how we have come to live our everyday lives without a sense of the values implicit in living a mindful life *intentionally*. We no longer seem to see that the meaning of life consists of giving life meaning.

And so, Bloom’s insight is that the most successful tyranny is the blindness that results in our living out the sort of impoverished lives that match the conception of human nature contained in orthodox neoclassical economics. Health care is just one of the important social institutions needing to be reformed. The success of that will be determined by how well we are able to see through the smokescreen of societal myths far upstream from it. We must see that there is an outside and redeem our original values in that clearer light that restores a truer vision of the good life.

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<sup>1</sup> “Bonus Babies,” October 24, 2007.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/24/opinion/24schwartz.html>.

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