

Health care - the great ideological divide

There is little place for constructive criticism and suggestions upon the ideological health reform debate battlefield. There *really* is no need to read proposed legislation or insist upon facts, evidence, and analysis. The rift – hardly confined to the issue of health care but also including energy, economy, education, and so forth – involves a huge divide over the roles of the individual and government in contemporary society. Until one extreme pummels the other and establishes totalitarian control – or somehow we regain our sense of propriety and civility – substantive engagement is of little value.

Although pundits and pollsters tend to describe the basis of the divide in partisan political and demographic terms, such descriptions miss the essence of the chasm. Such depictions are but probability statistics revealing the percentage of various groups likely to embrace either side of the divide.

The divide, well described by human development experts like Erik Erickson, involves the crucial balance of “autonomy” and “mutuality” as each of us – as an individual - matures to become a productive member of society - or not. In literature, Defoe well describes the struggle in Robinson Crusoe, where, alone and shipwrecked, Crusoe weighs his possible “societal” relationship with another upon Friday’s appearance.

There is no *right* answer. Each individual and society decides differently and the balance changes over time. The change can be healthy, ending individual or government exploitation and discrimination, or destructive, fueling such intolerance and oppression. Currently, we are engaged in an ugly, nasty, shouting match over needed change, including what ill it will cure or cause.

One extreme, fueled by a strong recognition and respect for the crucial role of individual autonomy and responsibility, believes government has grown out of control, stifling the incentives for industry, growth, and prosperity, as well as creating a culture of government entitlement and dependency. The other believes certain groups (especially whites, males, capitalists, and heterosexuals) have manipulated and corrupted the concept of autonomy to unfairly retain riches and control others by exploitation and oppression. The former advocates reducing government control to promote future prosperity. The other advocates government expansion to correct and control inequities and promote a more egalitarian society.

From the first society, this debate has been ongoing. What is currently different is the intransigent nature and acrimony of the debate. Public displays of apparent - or feigned – naïveté and egotistical arrogance by both sides shock those who have followed the debate over the years. Discourse does not aim at constructive solution but attributing blame. At times, it reaches the point of absurdity.

A recent example is a September 20, 2009, *Washington Post* book review By Roger Atwood entitled “Looking for Something To Blame?” that critiques “Flat Broke in the Free Market” by Jon Jeter. Jeter’s book attributes any and every economic and social weakness or failure within all countries of the North American continent to capitalism or some other policy embraced by the

United States. Atwood notes that it is difficult to analyze the book's propositions, despite numerous factual errors and contradictions, because of the "elastic" nature, source, and definition of the alleged causative agent(s) of blame. The freshman congressional representative, who recently accepted blame and apologized to those he had killed by acquiescing to the US health care Holocaust, was another.

On the other side, some deny any American is disadvantaged because of genetic, environmental, social, demographic, and economic factors; they assert all have an equal chance for health and well-being if each just took advantage of the opportunity afforded all of us. They usually provide an outlier story of an amazing individual who overcame great odds to prove the point. Every society, except theoretical utopias, witnessed various groups at different levels of the socioeconomic ladder.

The majority of us embrace neither extreme. We believe our country, better than any other, does offer opportunities to all individuals, but shamefully we also have allowed certain practices and policies to exploit and discriminate against some. We are willing to address these transgressions and inequities. However, we are not willing to cede a free hand to a small group of elected and appointed "elite" to indoctrinate us as to the allowable degree and type of rewards we can enjoy personally from the fruits of our autonomy and industry, as long as we are not harming others. We support societal sanctions to preserve and promote individual responsibility, initiative, and accountability with the expectation that the advantages of mutuality will result in this investment contributing to collective well being.

However, both extremes tell us to "shut up" and stop asking questions, unless we cede our autonomy and declare blind allegiance to the naïve and egotistical arrogance and ranting of one end of the ideological spectrum or the other. The polarization has never been greater, nor our opportunity for consensus, compromise and constructive solutions.

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