

After the Revolution: a Fantasied Model of Health Care

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The following article was stimulated by a conversation with Matt Anderson and a close reading of the editorial he wrote with Lanny Smith and Victor Sidel for the March, 2010 issue of Social Medicine.

What is left of the left in America has been decimated by a disempowered labor movement, a paranoid state apparatus governed by corporate interests commanding enormous technologies of social control, and, most importantly, its own fragmentation. The latter is, in part, our failure to develop a shared model of what it is we really want as a functional social system other than some vague and unspecified notion of socialism, a term that has been rendered taboo by the corporate controlled media.

A radical model of health care cannot be visualized in a vacuum, it can only be one among compatible institutional models but one which we should be able to articulate even now as it may serve as a template for those other models.

I prefer the term health care to the use of the word "medicine" as what needs the "restructuring" called for in the editorial. "Medicine" suggests the ancient deference of the god Hygeia and to the more aggressive deities of healing whose haunting mantle we have never been able to cast off. Physicians have remained the priests of the enterprise however sullied by corruption, stupefied by technology, and ostensibly democratized by the presence of clinical nurse practitioners and physician assistants. Medical

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education above all teaches arrogance and a command of esoteric knowledge which implies a passive and essentially ignorant clientele despite the contrived sophistication of blogged bits of verbiage. That essentially authoritative relationship may contain the germ of all the other hierarchies in society and is at odds with our fundamental values.

Now the fantasy: medical schools and all other professional schools of health care are eliminated. The information about health care presumably taught in those schools is no longer a specialized and "higher" educational project. It becomes as basic, mandatory, and universal as reading and writing. It begins and continues as a curricular stream from pre-school and throughout life. It grows in depth and sophistication with each passing year so that by the time a person becomes a parent he or she knows the difference between a group A beta-hemolytic strep infection and a viral one. Everyone will know how to visualize an ear drum, check a blood pressure, listen to heart sounds, examine a retina. The essentials of physical and mental status examinations will be learned as skills no more difficult than tying one's shoelaces. When to "watch and wait" rather than "cut or radiate" will be as common knowledge as how to brush one's teeth. The ultimate guide for such a curriculum will be what we now call "Public Health."

What we now call "psychotherapy" will be among the first things to be learned by every student; how to listen and try to understand another, how not to interrupt, how to be less judgmental, how to be patient, how to be curious. Critically, everyone will know what to look for and ask about when another appears so unhappy that they might be thinking about suicide.

I know people are different and even under socialism will have different inclinations and proficiencies. Some, more dexterous, may be drawn more to surgery than those with a philosophical or holistic slant. So be it, but just as we can all learn something about carpentry, plumbing and electrical repair, we can all learn the essentials of what has remained a guild of doctors, a thing to be laughed at in the future as we now laugh at the robes and crow's head masks of the past. Once the role and rigamarole of the doctor is cast off, all social existence will be a matter of the reciprocal sharing and refining of knowledge.

Some will argue that the "educational period" of life is not long enough for everyone to know

everything. I agree, though think about the useless crap we did have to learn and can be sacrificed. With all due respect to mathematics, I had to learn trigonometry and calculus neither of which I ever understood and certainly never used. In addition, why should there be an "educational period" of life any shorter than life itself?

At the very least, if such an educational revolution is attempted, the gap between the provider and the recipient of health care will be replaced by a praxis of participation more substantial than the more or less condescending "discussions" that currently go on in its name. So, after the revolution; health care for all and by all.

