

# *A LARGER VIEW*

*A Commentary On How Current Events Reflect—  
Or Not—Our Spiritual Search*

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## **Rationing, Economics and Clarity**

The healthcare debate has hit many strident notes, and even more troubling is that the debate has been subject to distortion and misinformation. These erroneous pronouncements serve no one save the egos of those who originate them. Certainly they do not advance the cause of the public good. One of the underlying distortions is about the concept of rationing. Critics speak of rationing health care as if the idea was unheard of in the United States and probably unique to countries like the U.K. and their policies regarding the NHS. Is that really so? Is the idea of rationing health care something alien to the practice of healthcare in the U.S.? Some will be tempted to say yes. And yet, doesn't the market itself ration healthcare? Aren't the uninsured, anywhere from 44 to 47 million people, a manifestation of this rationing? Even factoring in that some among the uninsured could afford health care, the proportion is still significant enough to warrant notice. The market similarly rations many things by creating a discrepancy in the affordability of goods and services. It's not a question of those who can afford diamonds and those who can't or those who can buy Mercedes and those who can barely afford old clunkers. It's a question of econ 101 and the point whereby the supply and demand curves meet delineating where some can afford certain goods and some are automatically

excluded. That may explain why some can afford good health care plans and some have to do with high co-pays for little coverage, but it's still a form of rationing.

The problem is not about the dynamics of econ 101 or even about rationing. Unless we see through our games, and let go of our ignorance, fears and excuses, we won't be able to think clearly enough about health care to know a good plan when we hear it.

## **There's Water Footprints Too**

Now that we're familiar with the idea of carbon footprints, we can add another even more crucial item to our list, our water footprints. The idea is still new, proposed by a Dutch hydro-engineer, Arjen Hoekstra . At a recent conference in Sweden attended by some 2000 scientists, activists and political representatives, he tried to keep a low profile. Nevertheless his idea of "water footprint" became the center of debate. According to his formula, our water footprint is both the water we actually consume, and even more important our virtual footprint, or the water used to manufacture the products we use. Using his formula, a cup of coffee requires 140 liters of water, a hamburger 2400 liters and a pair of jeans 10,000. How far the idea will go is not yet known, but the fact that our consumerism has consequences for already scarce resources is becoming even more inescapable.

## **Sorry, No Praise**

If anyone of us were to encounter a dying person on a road and demand payment in order to help them, we would be the object of scorn and criticism. When pharmaceutical companies withhold medication to HIV/AIDS patients, which is certainly a parallel, most of us accept it.

Former president Clinton has announced a deal with major U.S. drug companies to supply much cheaper HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis meds to developing countries. The HIV/AIDS drugs will be packaged together and sold for \$425 a year starting in 2010, 28% lower than the current lower priced alternative. Another company will sell the tuberculosis drug rifabutin at \$1 per dose for a six months treatment.

We can hail the Clinton Foundation for working to equalize the effect of a wrong, but it's hard to praise the pharmaceutical companies for something they should have done long ago, done on their own, or done better.

## **An End of Life Example**

The nursing wing of a convent in Rochester, New York is giving us much to think about in terms of end of life decisions. Most of the sisters there face death openly by refusing certain type of treatments when those treatments would not necessarily improve their condition. "We approach our living and our dying in the same way, with discernment," the congregation's president says. Because a convent is a specialized environment, some of its conditions cannot always be replicated in the world at large. Still, the Sisters of St. Joseph can be an example since studies have shown many of the factors involved contribute to "successful aging and a gentle death." These include, a social network,

intellectual stimulation, continued engagement in life, spiritual beliefs, and health care that is guided by palliative care principles.

Some of the sisters do struggle and request surgeries which will not really help, but most in the nursing wing accept death with openness. "It's much easier to guide people to better choices here than in a hospital," says the doctor who treats the sisters, "and you don't get a lot of pushback when you suggest that more treatment is not better treatment." Perhaps as these ideas continue to move from the fringe to the mainstream, the sisters' example will be routine for more and more people.

## **Flagrant Stupidity**

Stupidity should be labeled for what it is, lest we not learn to leave it behind.

Omar Abu Ali is serving a 30-year sentence for having joined Al Qaeda and plotted to assassinate George W. Bush and is currently an inmate at a federal supermax prison in Florence, CO. Last year he requested President Obama's two books. The answer has now come denying the request. The prison's officials, citing FBI guidance, said that one page from "Dreams From My Father" and 22 from "The Audacity of Hope" could harm national security. They gave no specifics, but the passages are from chapters on foreign affairs.

The books, written before Mr. Obama ran for president and before he had access to the intelligence given the Chief of State, have been best sellers for many months. What they say is not only a matter of public record, but also, give or take a few people, public knowledge. Given the length of Mr. Abu Ali's sentence and the restrictions of a supermax prison, it is difficult to see how these pages could really harm national security. Not many details are known about this denial. Were they, it is conceivable they could be mitigating. If they were, would they mitigate an instance of stupidity?

## **Outraged Enough**

Twenty of the U.S.' 50 states allow some form of corporal punishment in their schools, Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Wyoming. A new report done by Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union reveals that more than 200,000 schoolchildren are subjected to some form of corporal punishment and that disabled students tend to be more often punished than others. The two organizations are urging lawmakers at the federal and state levels to ban nationwide physical punishment of students with disabilities.

We live in an era with more problems than we are able to solve. But this is one problem not only so egregious, it is one we can easily do something about. Spanking or physically punishing a child with autism, cerebral palsy or depression is something that ought to make us outraged enough to demand zero tolerance.

**Website of Interest:** [www.globalmajority.org](http://www.globalmajority.org)

We often talk about peace, but Global Majority is one of those organizations that shows us how to get there. Its purpose is to advance its mission of promoting nonviolent conflict resolution education, mediation, and advocacy. It divides its programs into several categories: education and training, research and analysis, advocacy, networking, and mediation and negotiation and conducts several seminars which people can travel to, each focused on a distinct conflict area such as the Middle East, and South Asia. In doing so Global Majority partners with various academic institutions around the globe and thus is able to share high-quality, dynamic, practical skills training in negotiation, mediation and conflict resolution with interested participants. The site offers links to each of the seminars offered.

**To Ponder On**

“We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”

*Albert Einstein*

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