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The Elephant Returns! Being Sick Around the World

Last year, I wrote about retraining the elephants in the room (Yoder-Wise, 2016). My point then was about trying to take on the issues we don’t want to talk about so those issues don’t just sit there and slowly (or quickly) fester into something we can no longer deal with. I had in mind issues such as civility in the workplace—something we don’t address in a manner that resolves the issue. Then, I read William Falk’s editorial in *The Week* (March 17, 2017).

Mr. Falk has been the Editor-in-Chief of *The Week* since its inception in 2001. His editorials are well written, issue based, humorous, and sometimes uncomfortable. In this particular editorial, he addressed health care. He cited various statistics, the most dramatic of which was acknowledging that 34% of the cost of health care in the United States is wasted. He went on to compare costs throughout the world for different procedures and medications. For example, Lipitor costs $6 in New Zealand—the cost in the U.S. is $124—and that is the cost per month. A colleague who lives in France identified the low costs of care and the proactive support for low-tech, least invasive approaches to care—and she has the equivalent of concierge service.

Most poignantly, however, Falk pointed out the crux of our issue: we cannot decide whether health care is more like education and police protection (something everyone is entitled to have) or if it is more like a commodity, where we can buy a product at Walmart or at Neiman Marcus, depending on our financial resources. This year’s vote in Congress to repeal and replace the PPACA (*Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act*) showed the difficulty of thinking about what we believe. As a country, we don’t seem to be wild about the current approach to health care, but we don’t dislike it enough—or have a clear enough vision of what could be—to replace it. And so, we continue to increase the cost of care, shut out some of the population to enter into care, and, perhaps most regretfully, have outcomes that would not win any medals if we were in the health care Olympics.

We can’t pick up a newspaper or magazine (or our tablets or computers) without reading something about the complexities of health care. What we don’t read about is people gathering around this elephant to figure out how to tame it, put it on a diet, or make it healthier. Many people and businesses benefit from our current approach to health care. Some of them want changes in the system. Many business owners express concerns about the cost of health care in terms of the large percentage of their operating expenses. Further, all of us are concerned about being able to access care when we need it and not wanting to first worry whether we can afford whatever is likely needed.

Perhaps we need to change our conversations about this issue. Rather than being focused inwardly, we need to expand the conversation to learn what other countries do and why. I know we had that discussion before we adopted the PPACA. Now, we have experience with our adopted plan. So, we can either continue to live with the elephant, or we can figure out how we will live with it well.

REFERENCES

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