



"According to my large and diverse group of FB friends, either the sky has just fallen or the kingdom has just come. It's still dark outside, so I can't be sure who's right."

This was my Facebook update the morning after last week's big healthcare reform vote. While plenty of my updates are met with resounding indifference, this one garnered a whopping 85 comments. Eighty-five! And lots of them weren't even made by *me*. I'm not sure who was more passionate that day – the fallen sky crowd or the kingdom comers. But lots of folks – and I count myself among them – were more circumspect, neither mourning nor rejoicing. Just curious, cautious... and confused.

I learned a lot that day, as FB friends posted articles, explained finer points of the bill as they understood it, shared their personal adventures in healthcare – both American and European – aired their fears and frustrations, and offered each other support and advice. The most remarkable fact about this long and winding FB thread was that, despite the strong and varied opinions represented, there were no angry attacks waged... no invective hurled. I repeat: *An extremely diverse group of people from various backgrounds and political affiliations managed to have a serious debate – about healthcare reform! – and for 85 whole comments, civility reigned.*

Facebook felt like a blessed space that day.

Oh, it wasn't perfect: One of my favorite FB friends – actually, one of my favorite friends, period – was particularly upset about the vote, and upset with me for *not* being upset, and... that upset me. My mother, who believes the Republic is now dead, was also disappointed in me for my failure to panic or despair. I hate letting down the people I love – people who count on me to think and feel like they do. But here's the thing: Try as I may, I just can't get worked up, one way or the other, about this healthcare bill. It is what it is – for better or worse (both, I suspect) – and I don't think anybody really knows what that means yet, or how it will all unfold. Oh, plenty of people *think* they know, but I'm not buying it. There are simply too many smart, decent people out there espousing too many

opposing “truths.” So I’m in wait-and-see mode. And you know what? It’s peaceful here.

The comment that best expressed my own frame of mind that day (and still does) was posted by a dear old friend who has shared much wisdom with me over the years:

“It was a day, like any other day, full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Another congress will come and go, another bill will change this one and another one will come that offers more or less. Presidents come and go as do Popes and Preachers and Walruses on flows of ice, which comes and goes as well....”

He went on in that poetical vein, then added a biblical flourish: “Set your sights on things above, not on earthly things.”

Spectacular advice, I thought. In fact, I was already following it. The Sunday night of the healthcare vote, while most people I knew were riveted to their TV sets, following the action in Congress with all the fervor, anxiety and competitiveness usually reserved for a major national sporting event – but little of the humor and good will toward the opposing team – I was off listening to a magnificent local choir perform Mozart and Handel under the masterful direction of Charles Frost. (Thanks for that, Charlie!) I came sailing home on a sea of inspiration, and, sure, the TV was on... and I heard the demagoguery... and I heard the anger... and I heard the profanity... and it just didn’t matter.

Listen, I’m not saying the healthcare vote didn’t matter. Of course it did. And it does. And it will. But the path leading up to that vote has been so very “earthly,” in the worst sense of the word, that trying to separate each party’s good intentions (which I believe they both have) from pure, power-grabbing politics (ditto) has become impossible for me. The same goes for separating truth from propaganda. So I’ve stopped trying. The poor ol’ Serenity Prayer has become a cliché in our sloganeering, 12 Step culture, but I think it bears repeating – *again* – because it’s actually quite profound:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”

At this point, the direction of healthcare reform seems to fall into that first category – *things I cannot change*.

And only time will tell if I’d even *want*

to. (I know.... I know... By then it might be too late. I hear ya, Mom. Really I do.)

Obviously, completely checking out on politics would be a lowdown, lazy thing to do. The shaping of public policy is crucial to the welfare of a nation, and as citizens, we all have a responsibility to stay informed about what's happening in Washington and, certainly, to exercise our influence at election time. Sometimes, if so compelled, we may even have a responsibility to take action beyond that.

But what we *don't* have to do – ever – is engage in this great national bickering contest, the one that has turned us into a country full of self-righteous, arrogant, rabble-rousing jerks. Myself included. A friend of mine recently threw out a colorful term I hadn't heard before: Thought Porn. He theorized that many of our political blogs, and especially our nighttime cable news shows, specialize in this Thought Porn, which, much like porn "classic," only serves to stroke our egos, stoke our basest instincts... and turn us into addicts.

(If you're feeling really angry at that characterization – or really defensive – you may have a problem. Try turning off Fox or MSNBC for a week. The first few nights will be painful, but you won't believe how much better you'll feel after the initial cold turkey. I speak from experience.)

I know that for some of you, this will seem like a very lightweight essay, unbefitting a serious topic like healthcare reform. I'll have disappointed you; you'll think me apathetic, or worse... cowardly. But y'all know I've always been willing to take my hits... that I put myself out there when the spirit moves me. In this case, it just ain't moving me. Not the way you want it to. I can assure you that I'm not avoiding conflict, here; I am, as always, saying exactly what I believe... and exactly what I believe is most worth saying.

It was an FB friend who encouraged me to write about the healthcare debate at all. (He was part of my 85-comment discussion thread.) "You should write about the healthcare stuff," he said. "And make it funny!"

Well, I'm not sure there's much that's funny about healthcare reform (though there's certainly been plenty of absurdist humor on display throughout). But, in the end, I suppose I do see this whole thing in *comic* terms – in the Greek sense of the word. As in "happy ending"... as in, "it'll all turn out okay." Not just healthcare reform... but all of it. Everything. How can I be so optimistic? Well, that's what happens when you start setting your sights on "things above." And ironically, I keep tripping over "earthly things" that fuel that

perspective, too. For instance: After playing hard-to-get for weeks, the azaleas are finally blooming... My beautiful baby niece, Ellie, is sitting up on her own (she was only born yesterday!)... My choir actually managed to learn Schubert's daunting Mass in G... in *Latin* (come hear us sing it Thursday night at First Pres!)... I participated in a *friendly* debate about healthcare reform...

Okay, so maybe I tend to spot semi-miraculous connections where others see random chaos. Do those connections exist only in my mind? It's quite possible. But as Easter comes again, with all its mystery and meaning and paradox, I can't help remembering the words of the late, great wizard Dumbledore in the final Harry Potter book: *"Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean it is not real?"*

Think about it. And while you're at it, try setting your sights on things above. It's good for your health.

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