

## **THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF HEALTHCARE AND THE FUNDAMENTAL SOCIAL LAW : (June 2010)**

In early summer, while reading the NY Times Magazine section, I noticed a multi-page supplement for the Cleveland Clinic touting the health virtues of diet, exercise, not smoking and the quality of the clinic's care as well as the expertise of its Doctors. I couldn't help but remember the increasing evidence suggesting that for a country as a whole none of these factors is as important for physical and psychological health or for the longevity of its citizens as income inequalities. The United States and Britain, the champions of free market capitalism, have the highest income inequalities in the Western world and rank quite poorly in terms of longevity and general health. This despite the fact that in the U.S. per- capita expenditure on health-care is double that of other western nations. The U.S., the U.K. and Portugal have higher levels of crime, more juvenile delinquency, more psychological and physical disease and lower social mobility than their more egalitarian counterparts, such as Japan, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands. As the detailed research of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett shows in The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger, (Bloomsbury Press), and the previous book by Wilkinson, The Impact of Inequality. (New Press) demonstrates, it is not per capita income that matters for health and longevity (assuming that it is above a very basic level of about \$5000. a year), nor education, nor the quality of the medical system but the income gap between rich and poor. The greater the spread between the wealthy and the poor the worse the range of social, psychological and physical illness in society, The same is true for individual states in the U.S. and the Canadian provinces and for individual cities on the North American Continent. The states with the highest income inequalities and the highest morbidity rates are Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas, and those with the lowest and the best health statistics are New Hampshire, South Dakota, and Minnesota. Now you may say this is race or education related but Wilkinson shows convincingly that this is not the case, income inequalities are the primary cause of lowered longevity and increased disease.

Inequality appears to be corrosive, undermining society at multiple levels, through "Rankism", the experience described in such detail by Robert Fuller in his , Somebodies and Nobodies, through the stress and anxiety of not having enough money to pay the rent, the mortgage or the medical bills. The loss of self worth erodes families, communities and ultimately the immune system of individuals.

The recent economic crisis has only compounded previously existing inequalities. According to a recent Pew Center study, 92 percent of Americans give the current economy a negative rating, 70 percent say they have suffered job-related and financial problems in the last year, and 26 percent said they had difficulty paying their mortgage and 24 percent, affording medical care. Little wonder that 65 percent of Americans perceive the government in a negative light and banks and large corporations as untrustworthy and corrupt ,(67 percent and 64 percent respectively).

It is interesting to note that the research of Wilkinson and his colleagues also empirically proves the validity of Rudolf Steiner's Fundamental Social Law, a law which he suggested was as binding as a law of nature. The Law states " The welfare of a group of people who work together is the greater the less the individual claims for himself the proceeds of his labor. This means that the more of his proceeds he renders to others, and the more his own needs are covered by the labor of others and not his own work ." Put more generally " Want ,misery and suffering are nothing but the result of egotism ." The fact that the two nations most committed to free market capitalism, the United States and Britain, are also those western nations with the greatest income inequalities as well as being the primary sources of the present global economic crisis based on the unfettered run of egotism in our

financial and economic systems, is telling.(1)

Solutions to the growing global problem of income inequalities are not easy to come by in our free market economy and many of those proposed push our ideological and political buttons. We can support the Living Wage Movement or develop an interest in a basic or guaranteed income for all citizens, presently being debated in some European countries, support a more progressive tax system, or simply establish an income law limiting the income differentials in all organizations to 10, 30 or 50 to 1, between the highest paid worker and an entry level employee. Any of these measures would offer improved health and longevity to the nation and to local communities.

However these are all partial solutions when what is really needed is a rethinking of how our society could function more equitably and effectively. Questions which need to be asked include what is the true nature of economic life, what is the appropriate role of local, regional and national governments and how can the capacities of individuals be most effectively developed in a free and creative cultural life? Such rethinking was offered by Rudolf Steiner at the end of World War I, often described as a three-folding of society. Recently a remarkable book has been published by Martin Large, called Common Wealth: For a free, equal, mutual and sustainable society, (Hawthorne Press,2010) In it he describes in some detail the development of Civil Society, the movements toward limiting the unholy alliance between big business and government as well as the local and regional initiatives in England and to some degree in the United States to create a more equitable and sustainable associative economy. It is a clear and thoroughly modern restatement of Steiner's central ideas and a blueprint for meaningful societal reform. Something more than banking reform or government stimulus is clearly needed if the present crisis is to serve the need for fundamental reform and if we are to recapture the dreams of our founding fathers, of liberty, equality and justice for all. The tri-polar approach which Martin Large describes in detail provides a compelling case for such common sense but fundamental societal reform. Read Wilkinson to understand the health and income inequality dilemma and then read Large to be encouraged and to focus your will.