

Burn down the free market

By Tom Loewy January 30, 2013

Before I embark on the topic of this blog, I want to take a moment to say I've returned to spending part of Wednesday afternoons in Q's Cafe on Main Street.

I go for the food, which is awesome. Only at Q's can customers get something called Mexican Bangers and Mash — Walt's take on blending the traditional "bangers and mash" from across the pond with a chorizo-like sausage.

It was delicious.

And at Q's I get a chance to catch-up with people like Dave and Debbie Clague — both of whom are kind and generous and help me feel like I'm part of Galesburg's greater community.

What I like most of all about Q's is the fact it's one of Galesburg's perfect places to have a quiet conversation, or — full disclosure here — listen to what others are talking about.

I spent part of Wednesday afternoon listen to a pair of people talk about death — an old man accepting the end and a middle-aged mother battling cancer so her children could see that she didn't give up.

Death should always be personal. Even if we don't know the deceased, almost all of us have been touched by a life ended. The conversation started me thinking about my father, dead now for over a year.

As some readers know, Dr. Erich H. Loewy was a physician and medical ethicist. He spent his life passionately advocating for universal healthcare. That advocacy made him less than popular at some of the places he taught and more than once put him in the crosshairs of politicians who were happy to carry water for the health insurance industry.

The list of things I don't understand is long. Some of the items on it are whimsical — like why Dwight Evans isn't in baseball's Hall of Fame. Andre Dawson is enshrined. And deserves the honor. Evans should be.

At any rate, why the United States doesn't have the world's best system of universal care is No. 1 on that list. It is the ultimate anathema. No other question, serious or light-hearted, is close.

There are those progressives who pat me on the back and tell me Obamacare is the first step. And I try to take heart in the legislation — even though it mandates people buy private health insurance. It does fund health centers and mandate record-keeping and tries to encourage regular visits to physicians and dentists.

It is, my liberal friends tell me, one way to at least insure 30 or 40 million more Americans.

If the critics of Obamacare are many, those who decry any suggestion of universal healthcare are legion. Like, Biblical legion.

It has long been my contention in these blogs that the distinctly American brand of Ayn Rand-influenced, Heritage Foundation- and Cato Institute-advocated free-market ethos has done little to improve capitalism or the economy for the vast majority of Americans.

Here we are in the 21st Century and we face crushingly high, prolonged unemployment, stagnant and falling wages, and a wealth disparity that rivals the numbers seen in developing nations.

The wealthiest individuals and corporations in this country do not compete. Those entities have set about the process of legislating and codifying their economic standing. The economic elite in this country have succeeded in this enterprise with what is best recognized as hearty support from a large portion of the rank-and-file in this country.

And therein lies the true success of free-market ideology as preached from the pulpits of honored economists, politicians, radio demagogues, and hard-working Americans who are members of groups like the Tea Party, call themselves libertarians or have adopted a Grover Norquist-esque hatred of taxation.

We — and I mean the overwhelming majority of Americans, conservative or liberal, religious or secular — have assimilated the message that we should compete. And we are left with a society where we compete for the very services and social institutions that could — if there was a sense of the common good — make us stronger, more free and better able to compete in a capitalist system that recognizes the importance of social justice.

We are, in point of fact, slouching toward a kind of economic fascism. It's a phrase I've been loathe to type. I've danced around the notion for the better part of two years and throughout countless columns and blogs.

Fascism is a word unthinkable to most Americans. It conjures images of Hitler and Stalin and Mussolini. History buffs will point to Franco or, maybe, Pol Pot.

Most us, with great justification, wrap fascism up with the whole cult-of-personality thing and dismiss it as a possibility in the United States.

A few sharp readers have pointed out — in our comments section — the close ties between fascism and corporate structures. I think a few have even pointed out Mussolini preferred the term “corporatism” to “fascism.”

I'm sure a few readers will squabble over the definition of fascism, take me task over the freedoms present in this country, or even argue that “more government” in the form of things like universal healthcare put us closer to fascism than anything Norquist or Limbaugh or Beck suggest.

For me, the filmmaker Guillermo del Toro defined fascism in a way that has haunted me since I heard it. The director of films like “Cronos,” “The Devil's Backbone,” “Hellboy,” and “Pan's Labyrinth” said fascism, in the end, is that which seeks to kill our imaginations.

Think of that truth.

A society without universal healthcare — and, for that matter, universal education — breeds a culture where those with the most stand the chance of getting the best care. Throw in elements — clearly present in our current culture — like high unemployment, shrinking resources, a lack of available comprehensive care — and it is clear more and more people will spend their lives slaves competing for their family's healthcare and education.

A society consumed by those basic needs — and constantly threatened by personal financial collapse, as well as reminded of the danger of imminent system-wide fiscal collapse — has little or no time to think about art. Or to read a book. Or wonder why 90 percent of our films today feature gun violence.

Moreover, very few people will have the time or access to governance on the national level. Those scrambling to survive will accept a two-party system, consume the debate of the day and understandably feel like they have devoted a least a little of their precious time to being informed.

As bought out as President Barack Obama appears to be, his election and re-election stirred something deep and old in this country. The fascist-like forces in this country gerrymandered districts, restricted voting, disenfranchised thousands and still poor and formerly middle-class people of every color stood in long lines, endured blatant stereotyping and ignored the forces that derided them as “low-information voters” to cast a ballot for the one man who showed just a glimmer of difference from the long line of puppets that have passed as our presidents.

The economic elite in this country are scared. Still very, very powerful. But scared.

A mass movement like a drive for universal healthcare — where every single American is committed to the health of every single other American — is an imaginary leap that would shake the elite's very foundation of power.

Imagine 90 or 95 percent of all Americans calling for a system of healthcare that aims for complete access, equal treatment, the best preventative medicine in the world and demands medical innovation based on clinical need and not profit.

Imagine a world where everyday people are not bound to jobs because of healthcare needs, or die because they don't have the access to care afforded the more affluent.

The quest for universal healthcare isn't a battle aimed at pitting "us" against the "very rich" or the "haves" against the "have nots." It's a leap of imagination that says we may have rich and poor, but we have a sense of equality. We have, in the end, a sense of the common good.

The last time a movement like that formed was in 1967 and early 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. started to plan the Poor People's march. He saw a synthesis of the plight of the poor, the change advocated by the civil rights and labor movements, and demands of the anti-war movement as a force that could unite and change this country in a profound and positive way for every single American.

U.S. Army Intelligence estimated as many as two million might march on Washington. The power elite in this country trembled. Dr. King's leadership legitimized all those movements, made them hard to discredit and — perhaps — harder to undermine.

In the end, those powerful few feared Dr. King's imagination — the sheer audacity of his ability to see the common bonds between seemingly different social and political movements. He, like few Americans before him, envisioned not just change, but the way to force that change.

In the end, we can debate guns and abortion and debt ceilings and drones and torture and taxes and even the framer's intentions when writing the Constitution.

But until we appraise what exactly the embrace of the free-market ideology has done to us as individuals, communities and a country, none of that — Constitution included — matters. We might as well be T.S. Eliot's "Hollow Men" — our dry voices, even when we whisper together, will never be anything more than wind through weeds or rats' feet scurrying over broken glass.

That's a poem, like del Toro's film "Pan's Labyrinth," about the forces that would kill our imaginations.

Perhaps, in the still-dawn of this new year, we can imagine a better country. A better world. Perhaps we can see how healthcare and education for all would give all a chance to participate, compete, consume and imagine the next step for the common good. To create a truly free market, of ideas and economies, we must throw away that which perpetuates a system of exploitation and vast inequality.

Universal healthcare, in the final analysis, isn't about more government or more regulation or rationing or death panels. That's not imagining the common good. That's fascist-fed fear.

Universal healthcare is about people. The importance of every single person in this vast and diverse country.