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Your Money Or Your Life

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As if we didn't have enough to make us crazy, along comes Michael Moore's Sicko, to remind us of yet another way in which corrupt U.S. politics of the last 40 years have failed to deliver on the once-cherished American Dream. You remember the American Dream; it used to be in all the movies. Land of the Free, Home of the Brave, Liberty and Justice for All. Baseball, apple pie, and a chicken in every pot. (Not to be confused with pot in every chick: that was the Aquarian Dream, but that's another story.)

The current administration likes to bandy about words like "freedom" and "justice" as if it actually understood what they meant. (As in Operation Iraqi Freedom, code name for war of aggression, a grim piece of Newspeak that would flummox Noah Webster.) In our

Constitution, a document ignored at best, but more often subverted by the present regime, laws are enacted to secure the access of we, the people, to what our Founding Fathers considered inalienable rights, among them the right to life and liberty. It's this primary right, life, that underlies Sicko, the basic condition without which all other rights are moot.

Life can only be sustained by reasonably good health. But the health and welfare of hard-working citizens whose labor fuels the national economy and whose taxes keep politicians in Hummers and junkets to Cancun, the continuing health of we, the people, is not a high priority to our leaders. The health care system is left to privately owned drug companies, hospitals, and so-called health insurers. Their business is profits, not actual care, and nobody needs Moore to tell us what a big, thriving business it is. If you don't believe it, just try getting sick.

Better yet, don't get sick. It's daunting enough trying to arrange basic coverage when you're perfectly healthy, especially if, like Art Boy and me, you are self-employed and pay for your own insurance. Every year, we go through the same danse macabre. Our insurance company arbitrarily raises its rates. Art Boy sits down with the rate sheet and switches us to whatever plan offers the lowest rate increase, for the least heinous sacrifice of benefits. The company gets wise to our little game (or figures we're wise to theirs), and, within six months, arbitrarily raises our rates again.

American health care only works as long as you stay healthy. (By "works," I mean maintains the illusion that the person paying into the system may one day receive quality care and/or financial coverage for the

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exorbitant sums paid in every month.) Should you be unwise enough to suffer an actual illness or injury, you'll find out just how uncovered you really are. Moore's film is full of horror stories about Americans who paid for health insurance all their working lives, only to be denied payment for critical services as soon as they had the nerve to actually need them. How often do you read about fundraisers held for people stricken with catastrophic illness or injury whose families can't otherwise afford the treatment to keep them alive? Like the bandidos of a thousand westerns, the system demands you choose between your money or your life.

And where is the U. S. government while the health/drug/ medical industry is cheerfully fleecing its citizens? Right where it always is, lining up for its share of the profits. (The present administration just can't say "no" to a tall, rich and handsome corporation with a big portfolio.) There's something alarmingly wrong with the moral compass of a government that makes health care a luxury for the few and punishes its own people for getting sick, treating them like guilty schoolchildren trying to get away with something. Maybe they expect us to practice faith-based health care. Or maybe they just don't give a damn. It's a big country, so what if a few thousand of us kick off now and then? There's always more where we came from.

Once upon a time, we Americans were the plucky idealists who invited other, less compassionate nations to send us their tired, their poor, their huddled masses. Now we lag behind the many western nations (Canada, Britain, France, to name a few) that already provide universal health care to their citizens as a matter of common sense: freed from fear of crippling medical debts, people have a chance to fuel the economy with busier, more creative, and longer working lives.

No wonder the whole world is laughing at us. Our politics are ridiculous, our leaders are scoundrels, and we do nothing about it. Maybe we don't even notice. We live in a culture that keeps us too doped up on American Idol, too plugged in to our iPhones, too paralyzed by crushing debt, and too terrified of everything else to ever poke our collective head out of the foxhole and sneak a peek at the rest of the world. That's the way our leaders like us: scared, barefoot and ignorant.

Universal health care is possible if we pay attention and demand it: in the media, in the voting booth, in the streets. Until then, other, more enlightened countries will keep sniggering at us behind our backs. If laughter really was the best medicine, we'd all be cured.

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