

Letter from America Autumn 2009

If you've been watching the news, you've seen the coverage of the healthcare debate here in the US. Having lived in the UK for five years, I can only imagine how bewildering this debate must seem from your vantage point. It's bewildering to me, and I'm American; I'm living here. Why would anyone *not* want there to be universal healthcare? What's so bad about the idea of practicing medicine in a way that's essentially – gasp – *socialist*? For Pete's sake, *libraries* are socialist. But maybe I better not say that too loud! The way that adults have behaved in public forums about this issue makes me think it's no wonder teachers struggle so much – these *parents* and *grandparents* of our nation's children think it's okay shout down those with whom they disagree.

Sheesh. Thankfully, I read in the AWP News that Americans for the Arts, a leading nonprofit for advancing the arts, has joined in the debate. They've partnered with the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture, the Arts & Business Council, and with AWP itself (Association of Writers & Writing Programs). Together these groups are calling on Congress to support a comprehensive healthcare reform bill. Robert L. Lynch, president and CEO of Americans for the Arts was quoted as saying, "Now is the time for those in the arts community to join together... More than two million arts workers are calling on Congress to pass legislation that will provide all Americans and its cultural workforce with guaranteed universal health insurance coverage. We have solutions, Congress must listen." The coalition has banded together because the skyrocketing costs of healthcare are exhausting the budgets of nonprofit groups whose finances are already at the breaking point.

It's one thing to hear about the 47 million people who don't have any healthcare at all -- the number is so large and abstract as to be difficult to comprehend. Or to hear about the small businesses and nonprofits (as above) that are struggling to stay afloat. But it's quite another thing when the situation hits close to home. The recession is aggravating an already acute healthcare crisis. Even my own university, attended by affluent students who pay \$40,000 a year for tuition fees, has felt the pinch. First, they froze our salaries. Then they reduced contributions to employee retirement funds by 75%. And just this week, they announced that our healthcare premiums are likely to go up by around 20%. It doesn't take an economics genius to comprehend that 20% is waaay more than the rate of inflation. The management of the university gets numerous quotes each year from a variety of private insurance companies, and it gets harder each year for them to secure a contract that the faculty and staff can afford. This truly is a healthcare *crisis*.

One of the side effects of our insane healthcare system is that most writers really, really want to get full-time work at universities. According to data from AWP, only twenty percent of the writers who want full-time, tenure-track university jobs actually have them. There aren't very many half-time positions that extend healthcare services to the employee. It wasn't until I lived in the UK and met so many writers who were working in permanent half-time positions that I ever stopped and thought about all of this. I thought, "Hey, that's great. You could spend a lot of time writing. Why don't we have that back in

the US?” And then I realized why. You couldn’t afford to do it. Buying health insurance on your own, without an employer, would be prohibitively expensive. It’s funny how the circumstances of your world can be invisible to you. If I hadn’t lived in the UK, I don’t know if I ever would have understood how the US system had shaped my desires; it was the only system I had ever known. When I lived in the UK, I was required to work full-time as a condition of my work permit. And while I was at the office, I would think enviously about my half-time colleagues who were at home writing. And now that I’m back and I’ve grabbed the brass ring of full-time, tenure-track employment? No half-time jobs in my future. Not if I want to keep my house and my healthcare. It’s funny that our rugged US individualism has afforded us so little individual choice. We *have* to be rugged to endure the system we’ve set up for ourselves! Well, here’s hoping that reform will follow on the heels of the chaos and noise of this summer’s debates. Wish us luck and send us some socialist karma....

Kathy Flann