

Frank Conversations

by Margaret Seidler and Jennifer Holladay

She stood at the microphone, clad in a tank top with sunglasses perched atop her head. Shoulders and chin down, the woman glared up at the elected official before her.

Shaking a poster of President Obama as Hitler, she asked, “Why are you supporting this Nazi policy?”

Like other members of Congress, U.S. Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) had called a town hall meeting on health care. Unlike [his](#) Congressional peers, Frank sniped back at this constituent with a contrarian view.

“On what planet do you spend most of your time?” he retorted, ultimately concluding, “Trying to have a conversation with you would be like arguing with a dining room table.”

Despite their differences, these citizens share some things in common: they both care about the future of our country and want health care that works. Apathetic people don’t show up for town hall meetings, and one doesn’t run for Congress without a deep commitment to our democracy.

So, why were these two passionate Americans exchanging verbal blows? Had they simply come down with a bout of bad manners — her talking about Nazis and waving a Hitler-ized picture of President Obama at her elected official, while he equated his own constituent to a piece of dead wood?

Perhaps.

And something deeper, too. There’s a conflict unfolding in town halls, living rooms and bars all across this country: a conflict between our nation’s values of freedom and equality.

What if Frank and his constituent had a chance to replay their exchange? What if they assumed the best about each other, rather than the worst? What if they approached the conflict with a genuine sense of inquiry for the other’s point of view, rather than with an either/or approach where one must be “right” and the other “wrong”? Maybe, the conversation would have unfolded like this:

WOMAN: “Why are you supporting socialized medicine?”

FRANK: “I don’t think I am, ma’am. Still, I’m curious: Why do you support today’s health care system?”

WOMAN: "I get to make the decisions about my care, and I pay my own way, take care of myself."

FRANK: "Choice and personal control are incredibly important. So, what bothers you about the proposed changes?"

WOMAN: "Well, socialized health care feels un-American."

FRANK: "How so?"

WOMAN: "I don't want a government bureaucrat dictating my health care. And socialized medicine opens the door for people to freeload on people like me who *do* pay their own way — not to mention the fact that the country will go bankrupt trying to pay for all of them."

FRANK: "I don't support creating a system that's easy to abuse, and I certainly don't want the country to go bankrupt. I just worry that what we have now is not as effective as it could be. For example, many uninsured Americans use the ER for primary care and face unimaginable debt as a result. Those costs are sometimes passed along to taxpayers, too."

WOMAN: "So, this new government program won't run up the deficit?"

FRANK: "I'm not interested in exchanging personal bankruptcy for national bankruptcy. I'm afraid that millions of Americans don't have a choice. They want a choice just like you and me."

WOMAN: "How so?"

FRANK: "Millions lack insurance, not because they don't want it, but because they can't afford it. Millions more are at risk of losing coverage because of job loss. Others can't secure quality coverage because they've been sick before ..."

WOMAN: "... Yeah, when my aunt started her own business, the insurance company wouldn't cover her for like five years because she'd had breast cancer ..."

FRANK: "And, what a terrible choice for her to have to make — follow her heart, or stay in a job she might not enjoy to keep the health benefits she must have ..."

WOMAN: "... Right ..."

FRANK: "... What we're missing in this country is a safety net and a way to foster new competition within the insurance market, increasing affordability and accessibility for everyone."

WOMAN: “OK, so, you don’t want to dictate my choices — you want to expand and improve my options? And, you’ll do this only if it’s financially responsible?”

FRANK: “Yes ... And, you agree there’s room for improvement in the system we have now?”

WOMAN: “I do. So, where do we go from here, Congressman?”

FRANK: “I’m not sure. What I do know is that, at the end of the day, we both want a health care system that works.”

This imagined exchange may seem idealistic, yet the actual conversation between Barney Frank and his constituent that day mirrors many national conversations on this subject. We seem stuck in an either/or mindset, where being right is the end game, and we’re missing a vital opportunity.

If we want the most robust solution possible, we must approach this complicated issue from a both/and perspective, one that acknowledges the merits hidden within our opposing viewpoints. In matters of life and death, the very essence of health care, let us rise to a higher purpose, ferreting out health care that works — for all of us.

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