Our Constitution offers us "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", but we can't pursue anything if we are unhealthy. Yet, health disparities in the United States are a fact of life. African American people have shorter lives than whites for three reasons. One has to do with income and poverty. Poor people (and 27 percent of African Americans are poor, compared to about 10 percent of whites) have less money and less access, often having to make a choice between medical treatment and food to eat, prescription drugs and rent. The second barrier to health equality is proximity and access. In other words, African Americans are more likely to be located a distance from hospitals. There are fewer hospitals and clinics in the hood than in wealthier areas, and some preventative clinics (such as a diabetes clinic in Harlem) have been eliminated because of money. Another barrier to health access is simply attitudes. Those health providers who have racial and other attitudes choose to treat patients differently. According to a study by the Institutes of Medicine (IOM), an African American or Latino man who goes to an emergency room with a broken bone is less likely to get painkillers than a white man.

Part of this year's Presidential debate revolves around the issue of health care. Mitt Romney, the architect of Massachusetts health care system, which resembles the Obama health plan, is now jogging (at least that's healthy) away from himself, rejecting plans he once championed. Or is he? Recently, he said he would preserve some aspects of Obamacare, not others. I am sure you have been asked to name three people, living or dead you'd like to dine with. I'd like to dine with Mitt Romney and the truth!

Those who understand health care challenges understand that the world won't be the way it was and our health care system needs to be revised. President Obama, offering the first tweak in the social insurance contract in 80 years, has done so by passing health care legislation that pushes the envelope. It's not enough, but it is better than it has ever been. Still, the system will be strained by the aging of the baby boom, and challenged by the need to offer patient education and preventative services to prevent costly interventions. The uncoupling of

employment and health insurance allows more people the opportunity to deal with their health. Thus, the health care industry will be pushed to absorb people who are newly empowered to deal with their health.

Too many folks ignore their health because they have few options. I spent last weekend in the Mississippi Delta, in Cleveland, Mound Bayou and Ruleville, Mississippi. I traveled there with members of the Sojourner Truth Statue Committee, under the direction of Dr. Pat Reid-Merritt, the Richard Stockton University Distinguished Professor who led the national committee. We had the pleasure of offering a statue of Fannie Lou Hamer to the Ruleville community in the peaceful garden where Fannie Lou Hamer and her husband "Pap" are buried. There are so many reasons that the moment was moving, especially the presence of hundreds of children who joined the celebration.

Fannie Lou Hamer, an international treasure, a tribute to audacity, a woman who endured a brutal beating because she exercised her right to register and vote, died at 60 from untreated breast cancer. This woman climbed every mountain, cleared every hurdle, stood down the biggest and the baddest, in the majority community and in her own. Still, she did not have access to the health care that might have saved her life. She could stare down the Democratic National Committee, but she could not stare down the breast cancer that killed her because she neither had the dollars or the access to treatment.

Fannie Lou Hamer died in 1977, at 60. Imagine what we might be as a community had she been able to live to 80, or to 90. She might have been able to shape and influence our movements, offer advice and influence, keep the Democratic Party accountable, and perhaps, also, explore independent politics and the ways Republicans might be engaged in the struggle for freedom.

We don’t know what she might have done, but we know that she died too early. That’s why I believe that health care is a civil right. If we have the right to a life with liberty and the pursuit of happiness, we have the right to be healthy enough to pursue happiness. The fight for the presidency is partly a fight for the pursuit of health and happiness. Which candidate supports the 47 percent in this fight?

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