More than 150 years ago an escaped slave, Frederick Douglass, said, "It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men." This observation is even more prescient today.

We in the United States have worse health status than people in the other rich nations. Besides living longer, scores of countries do better for almost any other health metric. If we rank countries by average length of life, known as life expectancy, people in thirty-four countries live longer lives than those in the US that are also healthier ones. These countries include all the other rich nations. Our most prestigious think tank, the Institute of Medicine, made this very clear in a 2013 report appropriately titled: *U.S. Health in International Perspective: Shorter Lives, Poorer Health*. They point out in the monograph that even those of us who have higher incomes, are white skinned, college educated, and practice all the right individual health behaviors have worse health than our counterparts in other rich nations.

For some indicators such as adult mortality (chance of a 15 year old dying before reaching age 60), not only do the other rich nations have considerably lower adult mortality, but men in a poor country like Tunisia have lower adult mortality, as do women in Sri Lanka. Our health inequities (meaning it is patently unfair that we die younger than people in so many other countries) begin before birth. Consider the deaths of infants, the proportion who die in the first year of life. If we had Sweden's infant mortality rate (a figure that represents something achievable), there would be 47 fewer babies dying every day in the U.S. We get justifiably upset with school shooting deaths, but they average less than 15 per year, which is one third of the number of babies dying every day. Trying to frame these ideas in meaningful ways for Americans is problematic. Trying to explain the reasons is even more difficult.

Why is our health status on a par with that of Slovenia, Costa Rica, Cuba, and other low or middle-income nations? We were one of the world's healthiest nations in the early 1950s. What happened to produce this change? To understand this phenomenon we need to critically evaluate many concepts held dear by people in the U.S.A.

Americans conflate health and health care. We say we “invest in health,” “access health,” “insure health” and pay for health, when we do nothing of the kind. Those
phrases refer to health care insurance. We embrace the idea that medical care is the way a society produces health. The US spent three trillion dollars in 2014 on health care, a sixth of our total economy, which was nearly half of all such expenditure worldwide. We have the most advanced medical care possible, yet the mortality statistics betray the folly of believing that health is produced by health care. Simple logic says it can't. While medical care can diagnose and treat illness and injury, the lack of medical care is not the cause of that illness and injury. If health care or its lack does not equate to health, what else might matter?

We believe that our health is under our control through our personal behaviors. Take smoking for example. The rates of men smoking in the USA are on a par with Sweden and close to the lowest rates in the world. Japan, the longest-lived country, has more than twice as many men smoking per capita as we do. That is not the reason, obviously, that Japan enjoys such good health, but it suggests that we have to look outside of individual behaviors for explanations of our being dead first among rich nations. Yes, personal behaviors do impact health, but not as much as we think.

Going back to Frederick Douglass’s exhortation, let's ask if we build strong children. No. We have worse outcomes for early life indicators than the other rich nations. We repair broken men because of our profit driven form of delivering medical care. There are many studies on how profit drives our medical system, and that may contribute to worse health. How to build strong children?

The key factor in building strong children is to have them grow up in a society without poverty. Pope Francis, in talking about capitalism and social justice, said that "this economy kills." Specifically, poverty in early life, beginning with that sensed by the fetus inside the mother, as well as in the first year or two afterwards, is linked to bad health outcomes later on. As one of my students put it, early life lasts a lifetime.

A fetus in poor mother's uterus today is exposed to a great deal of stress and that stress programs the fetus to be prepared for a tough world after being born. This “Womb with a View” perspective recognizes that we need to reproduce as a species. Our physiology in that early period makes compromises to successfully reproduce and then pay the price in later life. The chronic diseases of aging, high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney and lung disease, heart attacks and hormonal cancers are a consequence of stress in early life. Poverty is the stressor. One could call stress the 21st century equivalent of tobacco.

Most of us have considerable stress in our lives. Stress is life-saving if we have to get out of the way of an approaching train, or rescue a person buried in debris after an earthquake or get away from an attacker. But we turn on this vital system for non-important issues such as road rage, potential loss of a job or our house, and worry about how our children are doing. This occurs despite all the technological advances that have transformed our lives and supposedly made life easier. We have the most anxiety of all countries and report some of the highest stress levels.

The poor have it even worse. Our very unequal society creates a cascade of putting-down relationships. The boss, whether the patriarch or the one at work, tells others what
to do and those beneath him or her have to comply or face consequences. As employees or those lower on the ladder, we suppress our desire to redress the putdown yet it seethes within us. Those on the bottom rungs of society, the poor, get put down by everyone. Their stress hormone levels are the highest. No wonder poorer people have poorer outcomes. At least those with moderate incomes can pay for a little stress relief. They can join a gym and exercise, have their nails done, or go on an adventure vacation. Others practice yoga and meditation. These options are not available for the poor.

How much poverty do we have? UNICEF, the United Nations children's organization, calculates that among OECD countries only Romania has more child poverty. In many school districts a significant numbers of students are homeless. This was unheard of fifty years ago. In some US counties families try to survive on less than $10,000 a year! To be poor in a wealthy society is the worst kind of poverty, a result of the huge economic inequality in the US. Many studies link economic inequality to worse health outcomes. This leads us to invest less in our children, and the adults they become have worse health.

Our inequality is difficult to calculate although most of us sense it has increased profoundly. Many believe that inequality is what drives competition and the productivity that benefits all of us. But consider the top income earners, who happen to be hedge fund managers. The combined income of the 25 highest compensated hedge fund managers is more than the incomes of all the kindergarten teachers, more than half a million of them, in this country. Kindergarten teachers do very important work. Hedge fund managers only increase the wealth of those who already have too much.

But building strong children begins before they get into kindergarten. We begin life in our maternal grandmother's womb, since the ovum that was fertilized by your father was produced by your mother while she was inside her own mother. Health is transmitted from one generation to the next through epigenetic means. Epigenetics refers to the expression of genetic material. Do genes speak loudly or do they whisper? This is how environmental factors impact you and future generations. Mother nature (our genetic and epigenetic material) and mother nurture (the social, physical and emotional environment) work together.

A girl is a mother from the time of her own conception (and possibly before her own conception, as above). Once a woman gets pregnant, she is given much advice on having a good outcome, even though studies of pre-natal care demonstrate that it can only have a very limited impact. Evolutionarily, if what women did while they were pregnant mattered most for their fetus's outcomes, it wouldn't be sufficient for our species to have endured. Investment during those 9 months is important but her life course since that woman came into being, before she was born, that is most important. Hunger, wars and calamities have impacts during pregnancy but we are programmed to survive them. How do we get out of our early death spiral?

Parenting. Parenting matters immensely and parenting takes time. Since we have discussed comparisons of our health status with that in other countries (what I call the Health Olympics), how might we be doing in Parenting Olympics? UNICEF, mentioned
above on child poverty, has produced a series of report cards on children's issues in rich nations. The USA ranks near or at the bottom in measures such as: child well-being (an index composed of material well-being, health & safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, among others); child maltreatment deaths; and child deaths by injury. We won't get any medals for Parenting Olympics.

Arguments can be made that U.S. parents hate parenting, as pointed out in an article in the magazine New York in 2010. Why might this be? Economic and political issues are likely to blame. U.S. studies suggest that having children doesn't make you happy. Mothers are less happy than fathers, single parents less happy than those partnered, and likely the poor parents are the least happy. Not true in other countries. Recall that this nation was founded on the pursuit of happiness, not its attainment. Like our health status, happiness has been slowly declining in the US for the last half century. We are raising fewer children, so larger families are not likely the answer for declining happiness.

Parenting costs money or its surrogate, time. Time, unburdened by other pressing needs, is required to attend to an infant, toddler, or school age child. In the US we live to work; paid work gives our lives meaning. Not true in other rich countries where people work to live. Living in other rich nations includes raising a family. We can't afford to support that in the USA. Only two countries worldwide do not grant a working woman paid time off once she has her baby, the United States of America and Papua New Guinea. Therein lies a key factor that can and must be changed.

The median (middle) two-parent, two-child family in 1970 had one parent working outside the home and one inside. When Elizabeth Warren looked at that family's financial situation and compared it with the median 2000 two-child family with both parents working outside the home, she found the 1970 family had more money left over after paying for all the necessary expenses. Families were not so strapped financially then, so there was less stress over trying to be a good parent. Today the mother also has to be a devoted wife having the looks of a super model, the physique of a jock and be a porn star. An impossibility. Other nations offer much more support for parenting, especially with paid leave policies, and strong income support that comes from a smaller gap between rich and poor.

Studies in the US show that parenting in poorer households is more compromised than in richer ones. Just as most health outcomes are worse in poorer people, so it is with child rearing. This disparity begins before birth, since we in the US also have higher rates of premature deliveries and low birth weight babies. Children with such birth outcomes have compromised brain development and don't do well in school. Poor school performance increases parenting stress among the poor as well. Most families now outsource parenting, so infants spend time in nurseries without their mothers, as toddlers in day care, and for those who can afford it, in pre-school. Our proportion of 3-4 year olds enrolled in preschool is half that of the best countries. It is the overall stress, rising from inequality, which we feel especially living in the USA that has transformed our lives and ability to parent. In other rich countries families have much more economic support. There, parents report greater happiness and life satisfaction.
Here we blame ourselves for not being perfect parents instead of pushing for political change that would make family life better.

What kind of changes are necessary? Several mentioned above need attention. Let's not be the rich country with the most child poverty. Let only Papua New Guinea be the country with a paid parental leave policy. Let's increase the economic security for those who aren't in the top 10% or 1% or 0.01% in the USA. Why not pay kindergarten teachers what they are worth to society.

We could go back to the income tax policies we had when we were one of the world's healthiest countries. The top marginal income tax rate is now below 40%, and at one time it was 96%. After curbing our obscene inequality, we can use the revenue gained to pay for at least six months of parental leave, to be split between mother and father -- since studies show that fathers who take leave are more invested in parenting.

We need to institute a guaranteed income policy in the United States; right now only Alaska has this through its Permanent Fund. Richard Nixon proposed such legislation in 1969 with his Family Assistance Plan; it almost became law, but as Nixon got embroiled in Watergate he lost interest in advancing its passage in the Senate. Basic income guarantees are now being considered in Europe. There is talk today of a Universal Basic Income that could be a reality in the U.S.

Sweden spends more government money on the first year of life than in any subsequent year. They recognize the need to support early life and build strong children so they don't have to repair broken men. Our priorities are different because we have a profit-care medical system and thus repair broken men and women. We spent enormous amounts on medical care in the last years of life compared to other countries yet die younger. Such is the paradox of health in the US.

The IOM report’s recommendations are to first inform US population that they and their children are dead first. The second recommendation is to look at healthier countries to see what they do that might be useful here. The considerably healthier European Union nations comprise about the same proportion of the world’s population as we do (5-7%), but they spend over half of all social spending in the world. And it produces results: studies demonstrate that social spending affects health outcomes much more than health care spending.

How do we begin? Let’s create awareness of the importance of early life. Then we need to look at healthier nations to gauge their policies, and seed them here. There is discussion at the national political level on the importance of paid parental leave; the time is ripe to push these concepts. Only then can we build strong children, and live long enough to enjoy their company when they become healthy adults.

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http://depts.washington.edu/eqhlth/pages/resources.html