

AFFLUENZA DISCUSSION GUIDE

For Classrooms, Book Groups, and Church Discussion Groups

Chapter 1, Shopping Fever

** How often do you shop? Is it recreation for you? Do you bring a list of what you need and follow it or do you shop by impulse?

** Do you believe in "spaving"? Why or why not?

** Do you prefer to shop in small local stores or in the mall? Why?

Chapter 2, A Rash of Bankruptcies

** Congress recently made it harder to declare personal bankruptcy. Do you think that's a good idea? Why or why not?

** Have you ever been seriously in debt? What did you do about it? Do you know people who are deep in debt?

** How much of your income do you save each month? What could you do to save more?

Chapter 3, Swollen Expectations

** Why do you think American houses keep getting bigger? How would you make the case for living in smaller houses?

** What kind of car do you drive and why did you choose it? Would you like to have a Hummer if you could afford it? Why or why not? How would you make the case for driving smaller cars?

** Do you read the nutrition labels on things you eat?

** How do you think new technologies are affecting your life? Do you feel you need to keep up with faster computers and other technologies? Why or why not?

Chapter 4, Chronic Congestion

** Do an inventory in your house. What percentage of the stuff you store actually gets used?

** Choose a product that you use regularly, and do a "life-cycle analysis" of it – that is, research where it comes from, what it's made of; how long you will use it; and where it will end up.

** How does traffic congestion affect your life? What are the alternatives to the automobile in your region?

Chapter 5, The Stress of Excess

** Are you working longer hours than you used to? If you are, why have you done so?

** Do you often feel stress at work/school from overwork?

** Americans chose to trade productivity increases for goods and services while Europeans traded them for more time. Who do you think got the better deal, and why?

Chapter 6, Family Convulsions

** Are arguments about money common in your home? What causes them?

** Does your family regularly eat dinner together? If not, why not?

** The authors of AFFLUENZA argue that there is a contradiction between conservatives' support for the free market and their support for family values. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Chapter 7, Dilated Pupils

** Do you think schools should allow advertising and partnerships with commercial enterprises to make money? Why or why not?

** In Sweden and Quebec, laws prohibit advertising targeting children under 12. Do you think the US should adopt such laws?

** Have you played violent video games? Do you think we can keep violent video games away from children and still protect free speech? If you do, how can we do it?

Chapter 8, Community Chills,

** What social and environmental problems occur when people "retreat" into their houses, don't know their neighbors, and get in the car to obtain everything they need?

** How can existing communities be made more livable, providing a greater sense of security, support, and trust?

Chapter 9, An Ache for Meaning

** What activities give your life meaning? Do you need to spend money on them?

** Would you prefer a job where you made a lot of money or one where you made a lot of difference in the world?

** Mother Teresa once said that the United States was the poorest nation in the world. What did she mean by that? Do you agree with her?

Chapter 10, Social Scars

** The average American CEO in Fortune 500 companies earns several hundred times as much as an average worker. Do you think this is a good thing? If not, how would you change it?

** The minimum wage has remained stagnant for many years. Should we raise it, and if so, by how much? Should anyone who works 40 hours a week live in poverty?

** Currently, the United States provides only 0.13% of its GDP in foreign development assistance, the lowest amount of any industrial nation. How much do you think we should give in foreign aid and how should it be given?

Chapter 11, Resource Exhaustion

** Global peak production of oil and natural gas is a perfect example of resource exhaustion. As prices continue to escalate for fossil fuels, what other commodities that rely on cheap oil will go up in price?

** Explain the difference between price (at the store) and true cost (in nature and society).

Chapter 12, Industrial Diarrhea

** Give three examples of "green" products that perform perfectly well without requiring toxic chemicals in their manufacture or use (Note: e.g., cleaners, enzyme-based detergents, soybean ink, biodiesel fuel, plant-based personal care products, organic food, etc.).

** Do you know people with severe allergies to chemicals? What are they allergic to? Are they the "canaries in the coal mines?" (A reference to pet canaries who were taken into mines and observed, to make sure the air was safe to breathe).

Chapter 13, The Addictive Virus

** What is the definition of an addiction? How does compulsive shopping fit that definition?

** How can a compulsive shopper break the addiction?

Chapter 14, Dissatisfaction Guaranteed

** How does the U.S. economy "guarantee" dissatisfaction?

** What's the potential correlation between the striving for wealth and personal insecurity?

Chapter 15, Original Sin

** Some anthropologists call hunter-gatherers "the original affluent society." What do they mean?

** What do you think your religious faith (if you have one) has to say about affluenza?

** Do you agree with Cal De Witt that American society has turned Judeo/Christian spiritual teachings “on their head?” Why or why not?

Chapter 16, An Ounce of Prevention

** What is the holiday of St. Monday? Do you think we should celebrate it now?

** Is Marx right that free time is the highest form of wealth? Why or why not?

** Americans learn a lot about Thoreau in school. Do you think Thoreau would be a Democrat, a Republican, a Libertarian or a Green Party member? Why? Do you think his ideas are popular today?

Chapter 17, The Road Not Taken

** What does “The road not taken” mean in the book AFFLUENZA? Would we be better off if we’d take the other road? Why or why not?

** In 1933, Congress almost passed a 30-hour workweek. Would that be a good idea today? What do you think would happen if we did that?

** Are human needs for goods and services unlimited or should we live more simply and use our time for other things besides adding to our material wealth?

Chapter 18, An Emerging Epidemic

** The authors of AFFLUENZA use a virus and epidemic as a metaphor for consumerism. Do you think the metaphor works? Why or why not?

** How does television affect your spending habits?

** The US measures economic progress by the growth of the Gross Domestic (or National) Product. Bobby Kennedy had a problem with that. Do you?

Chapter 19, The Age of Affluenza

** How many logos can you recognize? How many native plants do you know the names of? Does it matter and why or why not?

** Count the number of commercials/advertisements you see in the next hour. Do you think you are affected by them? Why or why not?

** Conservative economist Wilhelm Ropke warned that extreme commercialization of life could eventually destroy the free market system. Do you think he was right? Why?

Chapter 20, Is There a (Real) Doctor in the House?

** What’s the difference between advertising and public relations?

** How does public relations prevent our society from taking action on key issues like global warming?

Chapter 21, The Road to Recovery

** What are the common themes and most frequently used words in the Affluenza Self-Diagnosis Test?

** Name three actions you can take in your everyday life to significantly improve your score on the test.

Chapter 22, Bed Rest

** Try keeping track of all you spend during the next week. How much of it could you have saved? What items did you buy that you really didn't need?

** Do you think you could live on less income? What would you need to do?

Chapter 23, Aspirin and Chicken Soup

** Do you have friends who are interested in simplifying their lives? Why not organize a study circle with them?

** Cecile Andrews says simple living is a "subversive" activity. Do you agree? Is subversive always a bad word? Might the American revolutionaries have been seen as subversive by the British? When is subversion justified?

** See how many simplicity organizations you can find on the World Wide Web. Which ones appeal most to you and why?

Chapter 24, Fresh Air

** What is the importance of the extinction of species (at 1,000 times the "normal" level)? If we allow the current mass extinction to continue, will this affect human health and well-being?

** Conduct an experiment similar to Bill McKibben's, reported in this chapter: take an hour walk in a natural setting and compare what you observe with an hour's worth of TV.

Notice if you feel like more of a participant and less of an observer on the walk, compared with the TV viewing.

Chapter 25, The Right Medicine

** Compare the value of a large home in an "anonymous" neighborhood with a small home in a great neighborhood.

** Every year, hundreds of millions of electronic devices (cell phones, TVs, computers, etc.) are discarded. What's the "right medicine" for making sure these devices are recycled?

Chapter 26, Back to Work

** What actions can citizens take to make regulations and everyday behavior less “affluenza-friendly?”

** What role should institutions like churches and workplaces play in wiping out affluenza? Can you find more examples of success in these institutions?

Chapter 27, Vaccinations and Vitamins

** See if you can create an anti-ad. Find a product you dislike and create an ad that mocks it successfully.

** Plan an event for Buy Nothing Day; create your own Credit Card Condoms to pass out. Analyze how people reacted to the event and whether any minds were changed.

** Analyze an ad using media literacy techniques. How is it trying to manipulate you? What techniques is it using? How does it make you feel? Are the claims it makes true, false or unmeasurable?

Chapter 28, Political Prescriptions

** What policies would be most effectively to make America more “simplicity-friendly?”

** Analyze the political prescriptions offered in this chapter. Which ones do you think are realistic and why?

** Ask yourself the question: What is the economy for? Does our current economy efficiently bring us the things you think an economy should provide? Why or why not?

Chapter 29, Annual Check-ups

** The Asian country Bhutan measures Gross Domestic Happiness rather than Gross Domestic Product. If you were King of Bhutan, what indicators would you suggest for national happiness?

** In capitalism as currently practiced, we are encouraged to view others as competitors. Does this limit our inclination to wish them success – both as individuals and economic entities? If so, what adjustments can we make to have a more compassionate economy?

Chapter 30, Healthy Again

** What evidence do you see that affluenza can be beaten? Once a greater percentage of the afflicted are cured, how can we prevent affluenza from coming back?

** Discuss the meaning of the phrase, “Quality is to affluenza what garlic is to vampires.” What would happen if the industrial economies of the world adopted a policy of “fewer things but better”?

