
Of course, the scene is an imaginary one, but the epidemic is real. A powerful virus has infected American society, threatening our wallets, our friendships, our families, our communities, and our environment. We call the virus affluenza. And
because the United States has become the economic model for most of the world, the virus is now loose on every continent.

Affluenza’s costs and consequences are immense, though often concealed. Untreated, the disease can cause permanent discontent. Were you to find it in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition might be something like the following:

*affluenza*, *n.* a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of over-load, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.

**EARTH IN THE BALANCE**

Quietly, like some sort of unseen mind-snatcher, the virus has consumed the American political dialogue. Consider Al Gore. In 1992, while still a senator, he wrote a popular book called *Earth in the Balance*. America, Gore noted then,

is holding ever more tightly to its habit of consuming larger and larger quantities every year of coal, oil, fresh air and water, trees, topsoil, and the thousand other substances we rip from the crust of the earth, transforming them into not just the sustenance and shelter we need but much more that we don’t need. . . . The accumulation of material goods is at an all-time high, but so is the number of people who feel an emptiness in their lives.¹

Americans, Gore suggested, had become addicted to stuff. Our civilization, he wrote, promises happiness through “the consumption of an endless stream of shiny new products. . . . But the promise is always false.” A year later, Al Gore was inaugurated as vice president of the United States. During the ceremony, a soprano sang the beautiful old Shaker hymn, “Simple Gifts” (*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free . . .*). During the song, Gore nodded in agreement. Then, in the next couple of years, something happened. The mind-snatcher came and took Al Gore.

In the 1996 vice presidential debate, Gore’s opponent, Jack Kemp, vowed to “double the size of the U.S. economy in the next fifteen years.” Gore never questioned whether it would be a good thing for Americans to consume twice as much. By the 2000 election, the transformation of Al Gore into an agent of affluenza was complete. In a presidential debate, he vowed to increase the size of the U.S. economy by 30 percent in ten years. And what happened to Al Gore seems to be happening to all of us.

“Who wants to be a millionaire?” asks the ABC show. Apparently, nearly everyone. Of course, there’s a downside to this obsession, and in our hearts most of us know it. Pollster Richard Harwood found that out back in 1995, when he conducted a survey for the Merck Family Fund about American attitudes concerning consumption.
“People are saying that we spend and buy far more than we need. That our children are becoming very materialistic and that we’re spending for what we want today at the expense of future generations and our own future,” Harwood explains. “It crosses religious lines, age lines, race, income, and education. There is a universal feeling in this nation that we’ve become too materialistic, too greedy, too self-absorbed, too selfish, and that we need to bring back into balance the enduring values that have guided this country over generations: values of faith, family, responsibility, generosity, friendship.”

NEEDING MORE PLANETS

In our view, the affluenza epidemic is rooted in the obsessive, almost religious quest for economic expansion that has become the core principle of what is called the American dream. It’s rooted in the fact that the supreme measure of national progress is that quarterly ring of the cash register called the gross domestic product. It’s rooted in the idea that every generation will be materially wealthier than its predecessor and that, somehow, each of us can pursue that single-minded end without damaging the countless other things we hold dear.

It doesn’t work that way. The contention of this book is that if we don’t begin to reject our culture’s incessant demands to “buy now,” we will “pay later” in ways we can scarcely imagine. The bill is already coming due. At its most extreme, affluenza threatens to exhaust the earth itself. “We human beings have been producing and consuming at a rate that far exceeds the ability of the planet to absorb our pollution or replenish the stock,” says corporate critic Jeremy Rifkin. Scientists say we’d need several more planets if everyone on earth were to suddenly adopt the American standard of living.

CONNECTIONS

Consider the following scenario, as reported in a 1998 article in Parade magazine:

The US economy defied experts’ predictions and stayed healthy despite a global financial crisis and the threat of presidential impeachment, thanks to the resilience and stamina of the American consumer. . . . There was plenty of bad news. . . . Much of the nation’s weather was awful. Torrential rains in California, a devastating flood on the Ohio River, weeks of triple-digit heat in Texas, lethal ice storms in Virginia and the worst Atlantic hurricane season in 200 years. The 1997 poverty rate was still higher than in the early ’70s. And although the federal deficit is gone, Americans are deeper in debt than ever. . . . But nothing distracted us
from the good news: high employment, low inflation, real wage increases and the best mortgage rates and gasoline prices in decades. . . . Consumer spending remained strong throughout the year, guaranteeing continued economic growth.

The best gasoline prices, awful weather; continued economic growth, persistent poverty; consumer confidence, spiraling debt. Are they all somehow connected? We think so.

In each of the past eight years more Americans have declared personal bankruptcy than graduated from college. Our annual production of solid waste would fill a convoy of garbage trucks stretching halfway to the moon. We have twice as many shopping centers as high schools. We now work more hours each year than do the citizens of any other industrial country, including Japan. Though we constitute only 4.7 percent of the earth’s people, we account for 25 percent of its global-warming greenhouse gas emissions. Ninety-five percent of our workers say they wish they could spend more time with their families. Forty percent of our lakes and streams are too polluted for swimming or fishing. A CEO now earns 475 times as much as the average worker, a tenfold increase since 1980. Since 1950, we Americans have used up more resources than everyone who ever lived on earth before then.

However unrelated they may seem, all of these facts—the diverse symptoms of affluenza—are also connected. Much of this book focuses on the United States because its citizens are the world’s most profligate consumers. But what is happening in the United States is clearly beginning to happen elsewhere as the American lifestyle becomes the model for nearly all of the rest of the world. But other countries may have more choice than the United States does. Those in countries where affluenza is not so full-blown an epidemic can keep themselves from greater infection and preserve more balanced lifestyles. We believe there are lessons for every country and every person, rich and poor, to be found in America’s mistakes. The global economy means that all of us are in this together and need to understand and control this disease.

**SYMPTOMS**

We have divided the book into three sections. The first explores many of the symptoms of affluenza, each—only half whimsically—compared to a real flu symptom. Think of how you feel when you’ve got a bug. You’re likely to be running a temperature. You’re congested. Your body is achy. You may have chills. Your stomach is upset. You’re weak. You might have swollen glands, even a rash.
In the Age of Affluenza, America as a society shows all of these symptoms, metaphorically at least. We present each as a chapter. We start with individual symptoms, then move to the social conditions, and finally turn to the environmental impacts of affluenza.

Some chapters may greet you with the shock of self-recognition—“Honey, that’s me!” You might have noticed the conditions discussed in other chapters taking hold of your friends. You might find some symptoms more troubling than others, because you worry more about your children than about your Mother Earth. You might be well off materially but feel continually stressed out or as though your life lacks purpose or meaning. Or you might be poor, and angry at your inability to give your children what marketers say they “gotta have” to fit in. You might have just felt the sting of insults from another driver, red-faced with road rage. Or watched bulldozers destroy the only open space left around your community—to make room for row upon row of identical tract homes with three-car garages. If you’re elderly, you may have noticed your children’s inability to balance their checkbooks, and you may worry for their children. If you’re young, you may be anxious about your own future.

Wherever you’re coming from, we believe you’ll clearly recognize that at least some of the symptoms of affluenza affect you. Then, as you read on, you’ll begin to see how they’re connected to others less obvious from your vantage point.

**GENESIS OF THE DISEASE**

In part 2 of this book, we look beneath the symptoms to search for causes. Is affluenza simply human nature, as some would suggest? What was the genesis of this powerful virus? How has it mutated through history and when did it begin to reach epidemic proportions? What choices did we make as a society (between free time and “stuff,” for example) that deepened our infection? We look carefully at warnings from across time and cultures, and at early efforts to eradicate the disease with controls and quarantines.

Then we discover how the spread of the disease has become not only socially acceptable, but encouraged by all the powerful electronic carriers our technological civilization keeps perfecting. We suggest that affluenza promises to meet our needs in inefficient and destructive ways. And we contend that an entire industry of pseudo-physicians, handsomely rewarded by those with a huge stake in the perpetuation of affluenza, conspires to keep the diagnosis of the disease and the extent of its symptoms from reaching the general public.
Curing Affluenza

But far be it from our intent to leave you permanently depressed. Affluenza can be treated, and millions of ordinary Americans are already taking steps in that direction. A 2004 poll by the Center for a New American Dream (www.newdream.org) found that 48 percent of Americans claim to have cut back on their spending.

The same poll also revealed that 85 percent of Americans think our priorities as a society are out of whack. Of the respondents, 93 percent feel Americans are too focused on working and making money, 91 percent believe we buy and consume far more than we need, 81 percent think we'll need to make major changes in the way we live to protect the environment, more than half say they have too much debt, and 87 percent feel our current consumer culture makes it hard to instill positive values in our children. The poll conducted by Widmeyer Communications, a national polling firm, surveyed nearly 1,300 American adults and had a margin of error of 3 percent.

Our increasingly harried lifestyles continue to produce rat-race refugees. Enough to make corporate marketers salivate over millions of potential new customers. Hence, companies urge us to “simplify” our lives by buying their products, and new publications, like Time Warner’s Real Simple (it would be more aptly called Real Cynical, as most of it is devoted to ads for expensive products), build an audience of 400,000 subscribers before printing their first issue.

What that says to us is that a lot of people are looking for answers to affluenza. Part 3 of this book is devoted to offering some answers we’ve found.

As with symptoms, we look at treatments starting with the personal and advancing to the social and political. Our treatments, too, employ the medical metaphor. We start as you do when you’ve got the flu, with bed rest, aspirin, and chicken soup—individual prescriptions popularized by the “new frugality” and “voluntary simplicity” movements.

We encourage a restored interest in the natural world outdoors, with its remarkable healing powers. We agree with futurist Gerald Celente, the author of Trends, 2000. “There’s this commercial out,” he says, “and it shows this middle-aged man walking through the woods pumping his arms, and all of a sudden in the next cut, there he is on the back porch, woods in the background, walking on this treadmill that must have cost a fortune. It doesn’t make sense. It was so much nicer walking through the woods and it cost nothing at all.”

We suggest strategies for rebuilding families and communities and for respecting and restoring the earth and its biological rules. We offer “political prescriptions,” with the belief that some well-considered legislation—like that suggested by the
Take Back Your Time campaign (www.timeday.org) to allow us to choose time instead of more money—can help create a less affluenza-friendly social environment and make it easier for individuals to get well and stay that way.

We also present preventive approaches, including vaccines and vitamins, to strengthen our personal and social immune systems. And we suggest an annual checkup. Ours comes in three phases:

1. You can test how you’re doing personally in staying well.
2. You can help your community assess its own true health, using indices of sustainability developed by several American cities.
3. And finally, as a people, Americans can find a truly useful substitute for the current outmoded measure of national health, the gross domestic product (GDP).

We recommend an index called the genuine progress indicator (GPI), being fine-tuned by Redefining Progress, an Oakland, California, think tank. Using multiple indices to discover how Americans are doing, the GPI paints a different picture of our real success as a society. While GDP has risen steadily throughout history, the GPI has been falling since 1973.
Then, for fun, we’ve added a new measure in this edition of the book—a fever thermometer that measures whether the collective illness is getting worse or better.

**LET’S BEGIN A DIALOGUE**

Little in this book is truly new information, yet the issue in this “information age” isn’t more information. It’s how to make sense of what we already know. We offer a way of understanding seemingly disconnected personal, social, and environmental problems that makes sense to us—as symptoms of a perilous epidemic that threatens your future and that of generations to come. We don’t expect you to agree with everything in these chapters, nor do we even expect to immediately convince you that affluenza is a real disease. Our intention is to encourage a national dialogue about the American consumer dream so that whatever choices you make about consumption are made with a clearer understanding of their possible consequences.

The message of this book isn’t to stop buying; it’s to buy carefully and consciously with full attention to the real benefits and costs of your purchases, remembering, always, that the best things in life aren’t things.