

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

Affluenza: a human-created disease with profound consequences

Chances are that you haven't come across the disease known as affluenza, even if you have been an avid reader of newspapers and listener of news broadcasts. It is possibly the least discussed of the more debilitating diseases of our time. Strangeness characterizes this disease in many other ways too. Almost every one of us actively carries it. Its effects impact not only the immediate carrier but also society at large. Its symptoms are so commonplace that few people make a connection between the disease and the discomfort that it breeds. It infects rich and poor alike, and is beginning to imbed itself in younger and younger carriers. Oddly, those that do recognize the scourge that it sometimes brings are disparagingly referred to as hypocrites, elitists, party-poopers, or catastrophists. And most confusing, it is a disease that is socially acceptable among many of us. Wow, what a bizarre disease, huh? Yet, fortunately, known cures exist for this disorder but they require our dedication and perseverance to eradicate this pernicious malady.

Defined by authors of a book with the same title, *Affluenza* is "a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more" (de Graaf et al.). In simple terms, affluenza is a disease that many of us suffer because we are too fixated on buying and consuming more and more. Do you think you or others you know might have it? But how would you know if you have it? What are the signs of this disease?

According to some, affluenza is so encompassing in its effects on our psyches and our bodies that many symptoms of it do not appear different other more common disorders. Other symptoms are more easily distinguishable.

Rather than spell out each symptom one by one, let's determine the extent to which you might have this disease through a series of questions. Answer the following questions with yes or no answers:

- (1) When you find yourself in a depressed mood, do you often get an impulse to buy something to soothe yourself?;
- (2) Do you often pay close to the minimum payment on your credit cards because of lack of available funds?;
- (3) Do you work a job (either a 2nd job or an additional job to your spouse's) in order to afford the "luxuries" in life?;
- (4) Do you spend holidays with family members in facilities designated for consuming products—e.g., malls, shopping centers, & flea markets?;
- (5) Do you purchase "new" household and transportation devices when "old" items are still fully functional—such as televisions, furniture, and automobiles?;
- (6) Do you spend significant amounts of time flipping through product catalogs and popular magazines searching for the latest gadget or fashion?;
- (7) Do you have a room, closet, or house full of collectibles, such as thimbles, comic books, or stuffed animals, that serve you and your family far less than the monetary expenditure required to obtain them?; and,
- (8) Do you consider the amount of money spent on a gift that you receive more important than the function that it serves?;

Of these eight questions, how many did you answer in the affirmative?

How many of the others could you, without hesitation, answer "no"? If you are anything like me and my extended family, answers of "yes" ring true much too often. Unfortunately, even one "yes" indicates that you have affluenza, and the more "yes" answers, the greater its hold on you.

As gloomy as this dose of self-recognition appears, maybe, just maybe, "yes" answers

represent desirable states. Many people tell us that we should spend our money on things in abundance; our President gave most of us either \$300 or \$600 last year to do just this. The receipt of a \$100 gift certificate to a department store shows a greater amount of love or appreciation than does a \$50 one, doesn't it? Since catalogs are full of beautiful people or breakthroughs in technology, why wouldn't we relish the opportunity to explore them endlessly? Collections that people assemble often represent years of searching for objects that make us feel good and at the same time tell others something important about ourselves. If we didn't have a collection to show others, wouldn't people wonder what we've been doing with all our time these past many years? And aren't credit cards necessary today, especially when we don't have cash to buy the things we need or want?

Well, perhaps these responses justify our insatiable interest in consumer products. However, the more we look closely and honestly at them, the more we have to conclude that they are mere rationalizations—that is, explanations offered solely to make our decisions appear rational or logical. This denial of our affliction, i.e., affluenza, is analogous to individual denial of other physical or mental disorders. How many of us have abused alcohol or drugs but don't fully appreciate the harm that we caused as a result? How many of us avoid seeing the doctor for fear that our poor diets and lack of exercise might finally get the better of us? Put in this and similar light, all of us are likely guilty of rationalizing. Yet, while alcoholism has its well-known side effects (domestic violence, familial neglect, etc.), affluenza doesn't appear so scary. What is the worst that can happen? A stuffed closet of designer toy trucks? Perhaps it is a disease that we can live with. Not. At least not for long and not for most of us.

So why should we be so worried about affluenza? Why does it deserve as much as or more attention than we spend on other more well-known afflictions, such as tuberculosis or arthritis? In a nutshell, it is a disease that not only has the potential to destroy much of our planet but, more immediately, day-by-day it disrupts family and societal structures and further separates the haves and the have-nots.

Our current addiction to material accumulation puts most of us at financial risk. There is such a desire to be (or play) "rich" that many people living in poverty make an extra effort to buy flashy items, such as name-brand sneakers, shiny jewelry or woofers, sometimes at great sacrifice, in terms of other more necessary things, such as food, health care, or economic security. This compulsion to live well-beyond one's means has been getting worse as observed in a recent poll that shows the income that people feel they need in order to "fulfill all their dreams" approximately doubled from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990's (Schor). Notice how commonplace it is for advertisers to promote exclusive products, such as glitzy watches and high-flying sports cars that are well beyond the average person's ability to purchase, without tremendous sacrifice. Years ago, a middle-class lifestyle might have been the "goal" of many, however, today, the things that we strive to obtain are often beyond our ability to have them.

Our addiction to buying and consuming has resulted in serious economic hardship. The average American household carried over \$7,500 in credit card debt in the year 2000 and credit card indebtedness tripled during the 1990s. More serious, since 1996, each year, one in every 70 Americans files for personal bankruptcy. This is more people than graduate from college

annually! Studies indicate that more than half of U.S. families have so little in the way of financial reserves that they can only sustain their lifestyles for about a month if they lose their jobs (de Graaf et al.). The fact that the fastest growing job sector involves temporary employment adds further support to the notion that economic security is ever more difficult for many Americans and indicates why affluenza's associated consumption continues to become a more serious problem.

Economic hardship and the psychological need for more stuff results in social problems as well. Parents that have to work longer hours to make ends meet allows for less quality time with children. Anyone that has had to live paycheck to paycheck (sadly, something around 30% of Americans do (Schor)) knows how stressful this condition can be. On the other end of the economic spectrum, many well-to-do people find their material abundance inadequate since there is always something they don't have and always someone telling them how much they will benefit from obtaining it. As such, this culture imperative compels them to seek these items out necessitating their continued "need" and demand for more wealth. In sum, in our society, no one ever has enough and so nearly everyone is continually unhappy. Stress accompanying this material dissatisfaction leads to heart problems, high blood pressure and even substance abuse. Society pays a high price for psychological and physical problems brought on by stress, overconsumption, and addiction. Heart disease, which is strongly associated with smoking and diets high in cholesterol, is still the number one cause of death in our society.

Environmentally speaking, affluenza takes a huge toll on the planet. Current levels of material consumption in the United States are well beyond our share. According to a recent publication in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, American lifestyles require more than four times as many resources than the average human on the planet. Some environmental economists have calculated that if the world's six billion people were to lead lives similar to Americans, we would need four Earth's to survive. (Thus, following this argument, the only thing allows Americans to survive on their level of affluence is the material deprivation of most of the developing world.) The scary thing is: Populations continue to grow and many people in the Western world continue to consume more and more. (Last I checked the Earth was the only planet within shouting distance to have materials to supply us our needs.) Consider that, the average size of new American homes has more than doubled since the 1950s despite the fact that family size has shrunk! Clearly, we must begin to question our addiction to the mantra—"more is always better."

With all of these detrimental qualities, affluenza warrants greater attention. Like with other diseases that we try to eliminate, attempts to lessen or eradicate it deserve our ears and our minds. Unlike other diseases that currently have no cure, affluenza has been examined and cures and remedies are known. Therefore, minimizing its effects requires substantive changes in our individual and collective behavior and worldview rather than further research. Here are a few changes that we can all make that are recommended by those that have examined affluenza:

- Refuse to accept the notion that "more is better." Studies have shown that what makes us happy in our lives, beyond a basic level of material needs, are not things, but strong friendships and family interactions and more free time. Try refusing to get the new whiz-bang

gadget and rather spend the time you would otherwise be shopping for it with your love-ones. See if you feel better afterwards. Consider if this alternative way of living is preferable.

- Move away from the Gross National Product (GNP) as the main indicator of health and well-being. Currently, oil spills, prison construction and overtime are considered good things in our economy; that is, they make our GNP go up. Yet, because GNP doesn't factor in "pollution, parental time with children, ... or the chance of being mugged," it doesn't act as an indicator of genuine progress in society (Schor). Other measures of collective well-being, such as the genuine progress indicator (GPI) and the social health indicator, have been developed and need more support by citizenry and use by economists.
- Reduce our time spent watching and listening to certain media. We are taught to buy and consume all the time by our sources of information—friends, schools, televisions, radios, magazines, not to mention catalogs, billboards and even bus stop benches. Currently, each of us is exposed to around 3000 product images a day. If we could voluntarily cut down on this—by telling catalog companies to skip our address, by reducing our television watching, by banning commercial-laden news broadcasts (like Channel One) from access to our schools—we would feel less compelled to consume.
- Think very carefully about your transportation options. The overuse of our vehicles is one of the most detrimental behaviors that we have. "Think twice before purchasing a second or third car." And, avoid the urge to buy a sports-utility vehicle (SUV) for its associated comfort and status, rather "choose a fuel-efficient, low-polluting car," if you "must" buy one (de Graaf et al.). Use the money you save (on the lower ticket-price, insurance costs, and gasoline) to support healthy, beneficial causes.
- Eat less meat. Roughly, a one pound slab of meat requires ten times as much land as a one-pound bowl of rice. If you consider the water, fertilizer, and gas required, the comparative factor is much larger than 10. In short, if you eat less meat, you'll very likely be healthier, wealthier (meat is comparatively more expensive), and wiser (since you will be living a much less demanding lifestyle.)
- Give love not gadgets. Next time a "gift" is required for an occasion, offer love instead—in the form of your time, your ears, and your heart. See if the recipient is any less appreciative. Repeat this behavioral modification often.

If we all take some of these and other steps (see references below for further ideas), we can win the battle against affluenza, a disease that may have just gotten our attention in time.

References:

de Graaf, John, David Wann & Thomas Naylor. (2001). *Affluenza*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 268 pp.

Schor, Juliet. (1998). *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need*. New York: HarperPerennial, 253 pp.

Peter Schwartzman, a resident of Galesburg since 1998, is chair of the Environmental Studies Program at Knox College. He is a research climatologist with several peer-reviewed publications in the area of climate change and human population growth and he is currently writing two environmental books focused on bringing environmental understanding to a wider audience. He encourages responses to his writings.