



Fostering Critical Thinking Through Discussions & Journaling

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READING SELECTION

“Don’t Eat the Flan” by Greg Critser

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By now you have likely seen nearly every imaginable headline about obesity in America. You’ve seen the ominous statistical ones: “Nearly two-thirds of all Americans now overweight, study says.” Or the sensational ones: “Two N.Y. teens sue McDonald’s for making them fat.” Or the medical ones: “Adult-onset diabetes now soars among children.”

But one obesity headline you will not see is the one that deals with morality. Specifically, it is the one that might read like this: “Sixth deadly sin at root of obesity epidemic, researchers say.” This is because gluttony, perhaps alone among humanity’s vices, has become the first media non-sin.

I first got a whiff of this transformation a few years ago while working on a book about obesity. Looking for a book about food and morality, I asked a clerk in the religious bookstore at the Fuller Seminary in Pasadena where I might find one on gluttony.

“Hmm,” he pondered. “Maybe you’d want to look under eating disorders.”

“But I’m not looking for a medical book. I’m looking for something about gluttony – you know, one of the seven deadly sins.” I was sure he’d point me to Aquinas, Dante, or at least a nice long shelf on sin. But he didn’t.

“Oh, why didn’t you say so?” the young man said, now quite serious. “If we have anything like that, it’ll be over in self-help.”

I then made inquiries about interviewing a professor who might be an expert on sin. I was told there was no one at this conservative seminary who had anything to say on the subject.

What might be called the “therapization” of gluttony is hardly limited to the sphere of conventional religion. Of much greater import is the legitimizing of gluttony in medicine and public health. For at least two decades any suggestion that morality – or even parental admonition – be used to fight the curse of overeating has been greeted like Ted Bundy at a Girl Scout convention. Behind this lies the notion, widely propounded by parenting gurus, that food should never become a dinner-table battle.



The operative notion here is simple: Telling people to not eat too much food is counterproductive. Worse, it leads to “stigmatization,” which can lead to eating disorders, low self-esteem, and bad body image. Though the consequences of being overweight, numerous and well documented, are dangerous, little if any evidence supports the notion that it is dangerous to stigmatize unhealthy behavior. Nevertheless, suggest to an “obesity counselor” that people should be counseled against gluttony and nine out of ten times you will be admonished as a veritable child abuser.

That’s too bad, because it eliminates a fundamental – and proven – public health tactic. In the campaigns against unsafe sex and smoking, stigmatizing unhealthy behaviors proved highly effective in reducing risk.

Worse, this absence of moral authority in the realm of food leaves children – everyone, really – vulnerable to the one force in American life that has no problem making absolute claims: food advertisers, who spend billions teaching kids how to bug their parents into feeding them high-fat, high-sugar foods. Combine that with the lingering (albeit debunked) 1980s dogma – that “kids know when kids are full” – and you get, as one nutritionist-parent forcefully told me, the idea that “kids have the right to make bad nutritional decisions.”

You would have a hard time selling that to the one Western nation that apparently avoided the obesity epidemic: France. The French intentionally created a culture of dietary restraint in the early 20th century, through a state-sponsored program known as *puériculture*. Reacting to early cases of childhood obesity, health activists wrote parenting manuals, conducted workshops and published books. Their advice: Parents must control the dinner table; all portions should be moderate; desserts were for holidays. Eating too much food was a bad thing.

And therein lies at least part of the explanation for the legendary leanness of the very confident French: They were taught as children not to overeat. And they didn’t even have to look in the self-help section for the advice.



Levels of Questioning

Questions of Fact: Convergent questions designed to promote comprehension and recall.

Who	What	When	Where	How much
List	Name	Describe	Draw	How many

Questions of Interpretation: Divergent questions that encourage students to interpret text and support multiple answers and meanings.

For Application & Analysis:				
Which	Compare	Explain	Analyze	
Why	Contrast	Estimate	Give an Example	
What	Classify	Tell in your own words		
For Synthesis:				
Predict	Imagine	How can?	Suggest	Plan
Design	Pretend	How could?	Put together	Think of a way
Develop	What if...	How would?	If this...then what?	

Questions of Evaluation: Questions that ask students to consider the implications of a text on a larger map and explain their answers.

For Synthesis:				
Predict	Imagine	How can?	Suggest	Plan
Design	Pretend	How could?	Put together	Think of a way
Develop	What if...	How would?	If this...then what?	
For Evaluation:				
Justify	Choose	Which do you prefer?		Which is better?
Prove	Defend	What do you think of...?		Do you agree?
Give your opinion		Would it be better if...?		



Sources: *The Teacher's Guide to Success* (2008) by Ellen L. Kronowitz
Checking for Understanding (2007) by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey
The Great Books Foundation (1990)

JOURNAL #2/Discussion Preparation

Post Reading Question: Who or what does Critser blame, primarily, for the problem of obesity?

Your Response: _____

Follow-up Questions:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

