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# Annie Says: A Guide to Discussion of *The Story of Stuff*

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Following are some questions you may want to use to guide a discussion about *The Story of Stuff*. As you go into a discussion, remember, no matter how much or how little each of us knows about the environmental, economic and social issues raised in the movie, all of us have things to share and things to learn in our collective work to make the world a better place.



There's a list of [Recommended Reading](#), because being informed is the first step in changing the system. But in order to bring about systemic change—not just shopping better and recycling, but changing the way things are made, used, and disposed of and the way people are treated along the way—we need more than information; we need to work together, to campaign, to organize, to engage with our neighbors, to pressure industry and the government to respect communities and the planet.

**Q:** Annie used some big words in the movie, like “materials throughput” and “perceived obsolescence”. With the group, pick any of the words in the list below, and come up with a definition. Then have each person add to the definition: what does it mean to you, and how have you experienced it in your own life? If the group is really big, you may want to break into smaller groups so everyone has a chance to participate in the discussion.

**List of words:**

- Perceived obsolescence
- Planned obsolescence
- Materials throughput
- Synergistic impacts
- Externalized costs
- Points of intervention

**Q:** Annie says “you can’t run a linear system on a finite planet indefinitely.” Another way to say this is you can’t have unlimited economic growth with limited resources. What does this mean for the future of the U.S. economy? What changes are needed to ensure that our economic system

supports, rather than undermines, the planet's biological systems on which we depend? Where, along the system, are the decision makers who can change the current patterns of production and consumption? How would one influence decision makers at each stage along the way? Which decision makers have the potential to most influence the system? What does that tell us about where to target our efforts to make change? In other words, whose behavior and decisions need to change to create the most positive change and how can we hasten that change?

- Q:** Annie says that an important thing missing from the conventional textbook story of the materials economy is people. Who are the people that have the most say in how this system runs? Who are the people that are most affected by the loss of natural resources and pollution? Who are the people that work in the different parts of this system? Where are you in this system? What options do you have, from where you sit, to change the system to support sustainability and justice?
- Q:** Annie says it's the government's job to take care of us. Do you agree? Given the severity of the ecological crisis we're in, what is an appropriate leadership role for government? How can we let our government know what we expect of it at this critical moment?
- Q:** Annie says the U.S. has 5% of the world's population but uses 30% of the resources and makes 30% of the waste, and that this is, well, a problem. Do you agree that this is a problem? (Not everybody does.) How did it come to be this way, and what are some of the steps that we in the U.S. can take to reduce the quantity and impact of our nation's consumption?
- Q:** Annie says the Third World, according to some people, is "a fancy word for our stuff that somehow got on someone else's land." Pick something in the room you're in that may have come from a Third World country. What might have been involved in extracting the resources for the item, and what are the steps that brought it to you?
- Q:** Has anyone in your group lived or traveled in Third World countries? What are some of the differences you noticed on issues covered in *The Story of Stuff* around the world? Did you notice differences in the cultural role of consumption? Differences in the prevalence of advertisements? Differences in systems of re-use and waste management? Differences in how leisure time is spent?
- Q:** Annie says that people in the U.S. have less leisure time now than we did in feudal times. Yet, on many levels, things are supposed to be getting better, not worse. Why do we have less leisure time? What are some ways that we could change our economy to work less and live more? How can we hasten those changes?
- Q:** Annie says that, in the U.S., most of our leisure time is used to watch TV and shop. How much of your time (per week, say) do you spend watching TV? How much do you spend shopping? (Be honest!) And, for you internet junkies, let's include another anti-social activity in this one: how much time (per week) do you spend surfing the web that you could spend with friends, family, being creative, being in nature, reading a book? When you think about the leisure time activities which bring you the most joy and rejuvenation, what are they? Does your leisure time schedule match your priorities?

- Q:** Annie mentions a chemical called BFR's: Brominated flame retardants. Have you heard of them before? Where did you hear about them? Do you know where you might find BFRs in your home? Where would you look for more information about them? How can we get industry to stop putting these notoriously toxic chemicals in our household items? Why are so few products containing toxic materials labeled to warn the shopper about the risks?
- Q:** Annie wonders how \$4.99 can possibly capture the true costs of producing a small radio and she runs through some of the 'hidden costs.' Even though she just said it, it's worth going over in more detail. Think of the parts of a radio. What resources are used to make it? Where do they come from? Who is involved in each part of the process? What are the impacts along the way which the company doesn't have to pay? How can it possibly sell for \$4.99 after all that mining, drilling, transportation, packaging, labor costs, and profit for the company owners? If the company was required to internalize, or pay, for all those costs it currently externalizes, how might the company be motivated to change its practices? For example, if it had to pay for workers' health care after toxic exposure or for replacement drinking water supplies after industrial spills, it would have an incentive to stop using toxics in the production stage. Forcing companies to stop externalizing so many of the costs of making things is a powerful lever to encourage them to clean up because—when all costs are accounted for—cleaner really is cheaper. So, why are we letting these companies make vast profits while externalizing so many of their costs onto the public?
- Q:** Annie says "recycling doesn't get to the core of the problem." Why not?
- Q:** Annie says that, back in the 1950's, President Eisenhower's Council of Economic Advisers Chairman said "The American economy's ultimate purpose is to create more consumer goods." In one word, how does that statement make you feel? In current times, what do you think the top priority of the government and economy is? What do you think the American economy's ultimate purpose should be? How can we each contribute to turning this around, to getting our government to focus on sustainability and justice and things more valuable than consumer goods?
- Q:** At the very end of the movie, when the little black and white pictures in a straight line turn into little green pictures floating in a circle, Annie describes a New School of thinking about this stuff. She mentions: Green chemistry, Zero Waste, Closed Loop Production, Green Jobs, Renewable Energy, Fair Trade, Local Living Economies. Then she says these are already happening in lots of places. Ask if the people in your group know about these things. What organizations are people currently involved in addressing ecological or social issues? What have people seen or done lately that inspired them, that gave them hope? Ask them to talk about them, to share their stories.