

Why? What other types of evidence might Marco find to support his argument?

### Suggested Writing Assignments

1. Write an essay in which you argue against Sherry's thesis. (Glossary: *Thesis*) In what ways is flunking bad for students? Are there techniques more positive than a "fear of failure" that can be used to motivate students?
2. Think of something that involves short-term pain or sacrifice, but can be beneficial in the long run. For example, exercising requires exertion, but it may help prevent health problems. Studying and writing papers when you'd rather be having fun or even sleeping may seem painful, but a college degree leads to personal growth and development. Even if the benefits are obvious, imagine a skeptical audience, and write an argument in favor of the short-term sacrifice over the long-term consequences of avoiding it. (Glossary: *Audience*)

## The Obesity Epidemic: Who's to Blame?

### *Don't Eat the Flan*

#### ■ Greg Critser

Greg Critser lives in Pasadena, California, and writes regularly for USA Today and the Los Angeles Times on issues of nutrition, health, and medicine. An authority on the subject of food politics, Critser has been interviewed by PBS and other media, and his writing on obesity earned him a James Beard nomination for best feature writing in 1999. Embarrassed by a passing motorist who shouted "Watch it, fatso," Critser went on a diet and lost forty pounds. In the process he discovered that in America, weight is a class issue—fat and poor often go together. In exposing the heavy truths about American obesity, Critser gives our bloated nation a wake-up call. His books include *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World (2003)* and *Generation Rx: How Prescription Drugs Are Altering American Lives, Minds, and Bodies (2005)*.

In the following essay, which first appeared in the February 3, 2003, issue of Forbes, Critser explains that in doing the research for *Fat Land* he could not find any present-day connection between the sin of gluttony and our national problem with obesity. He argues, therefore, that we should reintroduce moral authority in fighting obesity, a tactic that has worked well in our fight against unsafe sex and smoking.

#### For Your Journal

Most health reports indicate that obesity continues to rise in America toward epidemic proportions. What do you think has gone wrong? What do you think needs to be done? What incentives are needed to encourage change?

**B**y 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*,<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup>—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<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup>*gluttony*: excessive eating or drinking.

<sup>2</sup>*admonition*: cautionary advice or warning.

<sup>3</sup>*propounded*: put forth; supported.

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.

### Thinking Critically about This Reading

What does Critser mean by "gluttony, perhaps alone among humanity's vices, has become the first media non-sin" (paragraph 2)? What evidence does he provide to support this claim?

### Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What is Critser's argument in this essay? How convincing do you find it?