



DIET *for a*
SMALL
PLANET

50th Anniversary

DISCUSSION GUIDE

BY FRANCES MOORE LAPPÉ

OPENING NOTES

Our Choice, Our Power: Introduction to the 50th Anniversary

Key Quotes:

1. “Why are we together creating a world that as individuals none of us would choose? After all, I’ve never met anyone who gets up in the morning vowing to make another child starve or to turn up the planet’s temperature.” (xvii)
2. “Every market has rules. [And] the economically powerful have increasingly reduced our market economy to one rule: Do what brings the most profit to existing wealth.” (xix)
3. “What is democracy anyway? For me, at the heart of democracy are the rules and norms for living together that meet our deepest needs and bring forth the best in our species while keeping our destructive capacities in check.” (xxi)
4. “In this do-or-die moment, it’s clear: ‘Goodness’ is no longer good enough. Courage is our call. And, because we are profoundly social creatures, one way to become more courageous is to hang out with courage. So let us bring into our lives those more willing to risk than we are. Let us try what we thought we could not. Who knows, one discovery may be that we are more courageous than we believed.” (xlix)
5. “I admit, I’ve not always stayed true to my own advice. Yet I am certain that each and every time I have mustered the might to throw myself into the unknown, I’ve experienced a pivotal moment on my journey.” (xlix)

Discussion questions

1. How do you explain the gap between the world as it is and the world that most humans want?
2. Lappé questions the notion of a market that works without rules. Do you think it is possible to create a market economy with fair rules that protect us and the environment we depend on?
3. How does Lappé define the three deepest human needs beyond the physical? What do you believe they are?
4. Lappé describes democracy as not simply a form of government but as a living practice that meets our deepest needs. What is democracy to you? How do you experience democracy in your daily life?
5. On page xxiii, Lappé lists ten “food-related assaults on life that have either arisen or greatly worsened during the last half-century.” What assaults do you find the most shocking and serious? Why?
6. Lappé shares stories of people in India, Africa, the U.S. and elsewhere who are bringing democracy to life in their communities to meet today’s existential threats. Which do you find most inspiring and why? What other, stirring examples do you know of regular people stepping up and making big, positive change?
7. Lappé calls on her readers to act courageously in the face of both the climate and democracy crises. Lappé suggests that choosing gutsy friends can help free us to act. Have you ever been motivated by another’s courageous action? Have you taken action that you previously didn’t believe you could? What effect did your action have on you and others?





An Extraordinary Time to Be Alive: Introduction to the 20th Anniversary

Key Quotes:

1. “We who were born after World War II are the first to know that our choices count: They count on a global scale. They matter in evolutionary time. In our species’ fantastic rush toward “modernization,” we obliterate millions of other species, transfigure the earth’s surface, and create climate-changing disruption of the upper atmosphere, all powerfully altering the path of evolution.” (li)
2. “In so defining democracy, it became clear to me that wherever there is hunger, democracy has not been fulfilled.” (liv)
3. “What could be powerful enough to allow us to destroy majestic redwoods, to dredge breathtaking coastlines, to drain rich wetlands—to obliterate that which has inspired feelings of security, thanksgiving, and awe in human beings over eons of time? Perhaps, I thought, it’s that as individuals we have come to believe we have neither the capacity nor the responsibility to do otherwise, to do other than acquiesce to forces beyond our control. We are in large measure who we believe ourselves to be.” (lv)



Discussion questions

1. In the 20th Anniversary Introduction, Lappé calls for a shift from a “mechanistic” to a “relational worldview.” What does she mean by “relational”? (lxiv) Do you think this shift is still necessary?
2. On page lxviii, Lappé remarks that there is no current functioning model of democracy that “legitimizes the central role of citizens.” Do you agree? Are any democracies today getting closer to the ideal? (Hint: Dozens of democratic countries are ranked higher by “Freedom House” than the United States in political and civil liberties.) What are ways democracies can encourage citizen engagement?



BOOK ONE: DIET FOR A SMALL PLANET

Preface to the 10th Anniversary Edition

Key Quotes:

1. “It was time to chronicle the change that took me from a narrow, personal concern to the courage to face the bigger questions—questions not so easy to define as the differences among rice varieties.” (4)



PART I:

Recipe for a Personal Revolution

Chapter 1: An Entry Point

Key Quotes:

1. “To ask the biggest questions, we can start with the most personal—what do we eat? What we eat is within our control, yet the act ties us to the economic, political, and ecological order of our whole planet.” (8)
2. “Those who believe that our system of waste and destruction should continue are the dreamers. Yes, we are the realists. We want to face up to the terrible problems confronting the human race and learn what each of us can do right now. At the same time, we are also visionaries, because we have a vision of the direction in which we want our society to move.” (15)

Discussion questions

1. On page 9, Lappé refers to messages in the 1960s telling us we were hitting the Earth’s limits to feed us when the true crisis was the system of waste and destruction we created. Do you find that many believe our problem is that we’re “hitting the limits” of the Earth’s capacity? Do you? Or, do more people now agree that it is our economic system, and the political system behind it, that are creating the waste and destruction leading to suffering and loss? What changes in perception and action do you think are most necessary now?

Chapter 2: My Journey

Key Quotes:

1. “Poverty is a symptom, not a cause [of hunger]. Poverty is a symptom of people’s powerlessness.” (35)
2. “I don’t think the solution to the tragedy of needless hunger lies in either guilt or self-denial. It lies rather in our own liberation. If we do not understand the world, we are bound to be its victims. But we do not have to be. We can come to see the tragedy of needless hunger as a tool for understanding.” (58)

Discussion questions

1. On page 18, Lappé discusses the personal reasons behind her shift towards a more plant-centered, non-pesticide-laden diet. She discusses hearing people around her wanting to be part of this shift. Do you see this word-of-mouth spread of positive food messages happening today? Can spreading news of the value of planet-centered, chemical-free eating via social media help more people to commit to environmentally conscious eating?
2. U.S. beef consumption has fallen somewhat since *Diet for a Small Planet* was first published. Why do you think this has happened? What changes in food and farming policies would be most helpful in creating a sustainable, healthy future?
3. On page 56, Lappé remarks that, “a life without risk is missing the ingredient—joy.” In what ways have you experienced joy through risk? How can we encourage others to take risks in the pursuit of joy and progress?





PART II:

Digging to the Roots on Our Small Planet

Chapter 1: One Less Hamburger?

Key Quotes:

1. “These forces that generate needless hunger are hidden from most Americans, so when they hear that the poorest underdeveloped countries are importing twice as much grain as they did ten years ago, Americans inevitably conclude that scarcity of resources is their basic problem. Americans then urge more food exports, including food aid.” (64)

Discussion questions

1. What five forces of global hunger, described on pages 62-64, surprised you the most?
2. Do you see the same forces operating today?
3. What ideas do you have for fixing the hunger-fostering U.S. and global food systems?



Chapter 2: Like Driving a Cadillac

Key Quotes:

1. “In writing this chapter I came to realize more clearly than ever that our production system is ultimately self-destructive because it is self-deceptive; it can’t incorporate the many costs I’ve outlined here. It can’t look to the future. And it blinds those closest to it from even seeing what is happening. Thus, the task of opening our eyes lies more heavily with the rest of us—those less committed to protecting the status quo. As awakening stewards of this small planet, we have a lot to learn—and fast.” (89)

Discussion questions

1. The conversion of grain and soy to beef-based protein seems markedly inefficient with 16 pounds of grain/soy used to produce one pound of beef. Is this extreme inefficiency a recent development? What do you think has led to such inefficiency?
2. What if the cost of harm from agriculture’s greenhouse gas emissions, along with the cost of health care needed due to poisoning from agricultural chemicals, and the medical costs related to meat-centered eating and the cost of biodiversity loss, were all reflected in the price of grain? How might our diets change?



Chapter 3: Meat Mystique

Key Quotes:

1. “To some, I’m convinced, there is an association between meat-eating and masculinity. How many women have I heard sigh with pretended exasperation (but real pride) that their husbands are unyielding ‘steak and potatoes’ men.” (91–92)
2. “Our export strategy thus rests not on shipping our food to a world of hungry people, but on molding the tastes and habits of a relatively small class of people able to afford imported food, making them dependent on products and styles that they never wanted before.” (95)

Discussion questions

1. What is the best way to open the eyes of Americans to the inequitable nature of our food system?
2. It is noted that if every country adopted the eating habit of the United States, the acreage used for cultivation throughout the world would have to be doubled. What could be the impact if Americans took the lead in moving away from meat-centered diets—and along with it the built-in waste and ecological destruction—and moved toward planet-centered eating?

Chapter 4: Democracy at Stake

Key Quotes:

1. “We have been taught that our production system rewards hard work and efficiency while providing abundant food for all, but it actually rewards waste, wealth, and size—and the hungry go without food no matter how much is produced.” (97)
2. “I have learned that hunger can exist anywhere, within any society that has not accepted the fundamental responsibility of providing for the basic needs of its most vulnerable members—those unable to meet their own needs. And ours, sadly, is such a society.” (101)

Discussion questions

1. Smaller farms are often more efficient, yet they struggle to compete against larger operations. What variables in the production system work against smaller farms? What can consumers do to help smaller, local farms thrive?
2. Beginning on page 100, Lappé discusses those most deprived and victimized under the food system of the late 20th century and how badly the United States compares with many other countries in measures of well-being. Half a century after the publication of *Diet for a Small Planet*, has much changed?
3. What disparities are most shocking to you, globally and in the United States, and what can we do to address them?
4. How does the plight of the poor affect the opportunities for all of us?





Chapter 5: Asking the Right Questions

Key Quotes:

1. “We have the information to break out of these old fears and misunderstandings. After 200 years we can see where they have taken us. And we can learn from what we see. The destruction of resources, the emergence of a landed aristocracy, and hunger in America are not necessary. Shocked into this realization, we can begin to imagine the shape of an economic system truly consistent with democracy. What we need now is courage.” (113–114)
2. “Political and economic democracy are inseparable concepts because where wealth is in the hands of relatively few, laws regulating control over society’s basic resources are made in their interest. What’s more, this minority’s economic might allows it to defy laws not in its interest.” (115)



Discussion questions

1. On page 108, Lappé says that grain-fed meat is not the cause of our problems but a symptom and symbol of the real problem. What does this mean to you?
2. On page 109, Lappé notes that “our national blindness to the issues of power—how to share it fairly and effectively—has been aided by myths deeply rooted in our national consciousness.” In what ways have you seen the U.S. fail when it comes to fairly and effectively enabling all of us to participate in power? What can we do to address destructive concentration of power?
3. Do you agree that economic and political power cannot be separated? Why?
4. Which of Lappé’s five grounding principles, found on page 112, speak to you the most?
5. In what ways can you personally be part of the redistribution of power within society?
6. What disparities are most shocking to you, globally and in the United States, and what can we do to address them?
7. How does the plight of the poor affect the opportunities for all of us?



PART III:

Our Dangerous Diet— We Can Do Better!

Chapter 1: America's Experimental Diet

Key Quotes:

1. “The problem is not that Americans are adding more sugar and salt to their recipes or cooking with more fat; the problem is that these are being added for us. All we have to do is take the fatty, grain-fed steak from the meat counter, the potato chips from the shelf, or the Big Mac from its styrofoam package.” (121)
2. “Remember, what the medical authorities are recommending today is not some newfangled way of eating that requires a Ph.D. to put together. It is a pattern of eating that sustained human life for thousands of years.” (139)



Discussion questions

1. Most processed foods have additives and fats present that consumers did not ask for and are not aware of. How important is it for individuals to know the potential health hazards present in processed foods?
2. It may seem like most Americans have access to food, but the types of food that they are able to acquire differ vastly. While privileged groups are able to buy nutrient-rich options, oppressed groups in “food deserts” and “food apartheid” are forced into consuming highly processed foods. Why is there such a divide in food quality within our country?
3. What can be done to make sure all individuals have access to a fresh, nutrient-rich diet?



Chapter 2: Who Asked for Fruit Loops?

Key Quotes:

1. “The energy cost of all this processing is staggering. We use twice as much energy to process our food as to produce all of our nation’s crops, according to the Department of Agriculture.” (148)
2. “More than a third of America’s food dollars are spent on food eaten away from home. To profit on this trend, you’ll need to buy into the fast-food business and spread your stores throughout the nation.” (149)

Discussion questions

1. The American food system has become ultra-industrialized with big businesses and farms controlling much of the market. How can we rethink and rebuild our relationship with the food system to benefit small farms, personal health, and the environment?



Chapter 3: Protein Myths: A New Look

Key Quotes:

1. “When I first wrote *Diet for a Small Planet*, I was fighting two nutritional myths at once. First was the myth that we need scads of protein, the more the better. The second was that meat contains the best protein. Combined, these two myths have led millions of people to believe that only by eating lots of meat could they get enough protein.” (160)

Discussion questions

1. Lappé lists several long-held beliefs about protein that are actually false. Which of these myths were you most shocked to see disproved?
2. Have any of these myths governed the way you have eaten?
3. Do you think the findings presented in this book will affect your food choices?



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to our Small Planet Institute intern, Katherine Davis, for her stellar work on drafting this discussion guide. In addition, I profoundly appreciate the invaluable assistance of our team at the Small Planet Institute for their superb editing and support: Rachel Madison, Nina Larbi, Denisse Manzo Gonzalez, and Amelia Gantt.

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