



## **Renewing American Culture: The Pursuit of Happiness**

### ***Educational Resource Guide***

**Using the DVD and Companion Book *Renewing American Culture*  
in a Discussion Group Setting**

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## ***Renewing American Culture - Educational Resource Guide***

This group discussion guide offers a format for leading an hour-long discussion of the PBS documentary (and its companion book, *Renewing American Culture: The Pursuit of Happiness*, by Theodore Roosevelt Malloch and Scott T. Massey). Participants should view the entire documentary (56 minutes) and picture themselves as leaders or persons who will influence society and who want to be effective in renewing culture. The group should see itself as trying to discern what is “right” in their own lives. It should also ask which virtues and habits should guide the groups, associations, political, business and religious communities in which they are involved.

There are *six groups* of questions that relate to the documentary that can be addressed in part or whole:

- American character and virtues;
- Social and spiritual capital;
- Leadership in a global society;
- Humanistic vision;
- A life-affirming future; and
- The Thirty Six Propositions.

### **THE LEADER’S ROLE**

You don’t need special training to effectively lead this kind of discussion. The leader, however, should not lecture or answer questions so much as gently guide the conversation. He/She should begin and end the meeting, introduce the topics, restate questions or salient points, listen closely for follow-up, set a tone of free exchange, involve everyone in the conversation and keep track of the bigger picture. After 15 minutes or so the leader should summarize where the group stands and where everyone still wants to travel. Two moderators may be used to share responsibilities.

### **THE GROUP**

Each group is unique and will emphasize different personal experiences and insights. The goal is to get people to think deeply and to connect with the larger themes, as well as to others in the group. You don’t need to draw too many conclusions but rather to raise important questions. Keep the discussion practical and non-ideological. (Some groups may add a meal, worship, prayer, readings or singing; this is their option.) Stay on track and request other’s views.

Probe and rephrase what was heard. Ask for clarification, if necessary. Summarize regularly. Get the quieter people into the group discussion while also containing those that want to speak too much or at length. Disagreement is fine. Debate occurs when ideas or opinions lead in differing directions. No one should be made to feel defensive about anything they say. Respect is the hallmark of discussion and persons should never be attacked. Try to keep the big picture in view. Set some ground rules. Remember the discussion is *off the record* and is nonpartisan.

## **THE TOPICS**

### **I. AMERICAN CHARACTER and VIRTUES**

1. Are the American Founding Fathers and the Declaration of Independence relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?
2. What does the *pursuit of happiness* mean to them? To you?
3. What forces and trends are most affecting America (your community) today?
4. Which core values would you nominate as the most American?
5. Do some of these virtues and values need to be updated? Describe how are they renewed in this documentary?
6. How would we engage in the process of renewal in today's global knowledge economy and society?

### **II. SOCIAL and SPIRITUAL CAPITAL**

1. Is rapid change in the economic and technological sphere overwhelming our culture?
2. Have we ignored the cultural dimensions of life?
3. Are many of our gains and achievements at greater risk today?
4. How would you reconnect economics, culture, art and leadership to mitigate these risks?
5. What is social capital? How is it formed, stored, transmitted, and consumed?
6. How is spiritual capital of all faith traditions essential to human flourishing? Describe ways this was exhibited in the documentary.

### **III. LEADERSHIP IN A GLOBAL SOCIETY**

1. Was global society caused by the unleashing of the American experiment?
2. What are the roots of the current fears about the future and America's place in the world?
3. Are cultural critics often creating a counter-narrative to that of the American Founders?
4. How can people reclaim civic space and better lead the many institutions that make up society? Give some examples from the documentary.
5. Should leaders rethink and renew relationships among business, government, education, and nonprofit groups?
6. How can other societies and countries join in a dialogue about our common future and increasingly integrated digital, global economy?

### **IV. HUMANISTIC VISION**

1. What do the humanities and various faith traditions teach us that could reenergize the converging forces of technology, globalization and the explosion of knowledge?
2. Which visions in the documentary most appealed to you and why?
3. Is victimhood a dead-end that can paralyze action?
4. What are the hallmarks of cultural transformation depicted in the documentary?
5. Can faith traditions provide a primary narrative for this post-modern future or have they run their course?
6. How is science, as distinct from scientism, critical to our humanistic endeavor?

## V. A LIFE-AFFIRMING FUTURE

1. What does *perfect liberty* mean to you?
2. Are voluntary associations, places of gathering and charity important? Are they in decline or advance?
3. How do the examples here pictured make us healthier, more democratic, and more prosperous?
4. What does living a “good life” with purpose and direction mean to you? How is this documented by examples in the documentary?
5. Is material wealth the definition of happiness or does human flourishing count as a source of meaning?
6. Which virtues exalted in the documentary build our collective wisdom and betterment?

## VI. THE THIRTY-SIX PROPOSITIONS

The book *Renewing American Culture: The Pursuit of Happiness* by Theodore Roosevelt Malloch and Scott T. Massey features *Thirty-Six Propositions* for renewing American culture. They are listed below. Pick some out that appeal to you and the group. Read them aloud to close the discussion. How are these propositions being realized today? How are they brought to life in the documentary? The documentary closes with the remarks of Benjamin Franklin asking members of the constitutional convention if this nation were facing a rising or a setting sun. In your view, is America’s sun a rising or a setting sun?

### THE PROPOSITIONS FOR RENEWING AMERICAN CULTURE

1. The pursuit of happiness is a uniquely American dynamic and outlook that continues to shape our destiny and now affects people around the world.
2. This transcendent right is not derived from any government, institution, or individual, and is unalienable.
3. It follows that the central purpose of government, culture, and work is to put power in the service of human flourishing.
4. The Founders’ bold wager that the purpose of society is supporting each individual’s definitive right to live freely and happily is the most monumental experiment in history.
5. The rapid, interlinked dynamics of technology, the growth of knowledge and globalization have created a perfect storm of change—all unleashed by the American experiment.
6. The old, traditional gulf between the spiritual and the economic can be bridged because economic activity has a spiritual basis: a “spiritual form of capital” that is linked to human and social capital.
7. Genuine economic growth is creative management of endowed resources by stewards acting on their commitments, guided by normative laws, character, and principled habits and practices.
8. The overriding moral question of our times is how to unleash each individual’s distinctive personal capacities to create prosperity.
9. Markets influence and are influenced by the moral character of culture. Put simply, markets and culture matter.

10. Trade in ideas and products and the movement of people are leading the way to a more global and integrated, yet complex technological civilization. The world's operating system is, in effect, being written today.
11. As we move through this global economic transition, a new Schumpeterian cycle of "creative" destruction and intense entrepreneurial competition and repositioning is sweeping through the world like a tornado.
12. The prospects for civility are grounded in notions of human flourishing and conditioned on the premise that private, public, and social sectors each have something unique to provide in the future.
13. The world is now akin to a series of local area networks that form a cybernetic wide area network, accessible through the World Wide Web. Being outside the loop is to be cut off from the forces shaping the future.
14. The humanities need to befriend technological change and tame its darker side. Technology advances the prospects for human flourishing, empowers individual learning and innovation, and places learning at the core of economics; the humanities comprehend and record the fact, including the all-important human dimensions.
15. The humanities need to be rethought to become the keystone to hold together the converging forces of globalization, technology, the explosion of knowledge, and the interaction of different cultures and religions.
16. We must recognize that "victimhood" is an intellectual dead-end. "Victimhood" as a critical and practical model paralyzes action and hope for some future good.
17. Human beings, in distinction from physical, biotic and psychical entities, function as active agents in the entire range of fundamental dimensions—they think; they speak; and they believe.
18. As moral animals, humans are inescapably interested in and guided by normative cultural orders that specify what is good, right, true, beautiful, worthy, noble, and just in life, and what is not.
19. Just as liberty, leadership, and happiness all depend on a well-developed self-regulating system of character, so creative intellectual and artistic work requires self-delineation and regulation.
20. The integrated knowledge economy of global proportions is free of the conflicts and shackles of the past. It is becoming more and more "boundaryless."
21. As global dynamics in economics, knowledge and culture become increasingly powerful; a complementary power develops for localities that understand their role in the global order. Ironically, globalization results in an enlarged value for the local.
22. Humanities-rich communities that succeed in linking leadership, education, and cultural assets are more competitive and off the prospect of a greater state of well-being and wellness for citizens.
23. Cultivating the potential for enlightened and responsible leadership appropriate to the new context of action means envisioning and designing curricula for a diverse global leadership.
24. The state alone is no longer able or willing to fund the arts and humanities. Publics, as customers, are being asked to pay for services and goods on a contributory basis or in competitive, real markets.
25. The humanities must be reengaged with intellectual renewal and reengagement with science, the arts, and religion in a constructive effort to envision and articulate a positive vision of a future of human prosperity and flourishing.

26. In a globally robust knowledge economy, driven by innovation, the not-for-profit sector needs to be rethought, and the humanities should play a critical role in helping to define both purpose and strategies.
27. Leaders in the private sector must articulate the larger humanistic goals of commerce, and leaders in the social sector and humanities must come to understand the practical methods and rationales of knowledge-based economics.
28. If personal happiness consists of well-fitted energies of individual character, social happiness, or justice, consists of well-fitted arrangements of a differential society and the skills and actions made possible through the humanistic mechanisms of finance and money.
29. In the past decade, the plethora of new laws, rules and practices have made all organizations more accountable. The spread of higher standards for governance is laudable worldwide.
30. The future of democracy and civil society depends on the success of corporations as key structures through which people freely associate and work together in a highly diversified and productive society. Corporate organization—in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors—is the primary organizational structure to create free and diverse societies.
31. The public humanities are a critical source of spiritual, human, and social capital. The adage that societies with an abundance of social capital are healthier, more democratic, and more prosperous is proven.
32. There is an urgent cry from humanness, civility, and a restored sense that humans and the cultures they form and interact in should be rooted in a theory of development anchored not only in ever-growing material wealth, necessary as that may be, but also in a philosophy of human flourishing.
33. Practical people may disagree about the virtue or which virtues to exalt, but it is the humanities as the keeper of wisdom and personal narrative that allow and encourage such dialogue and contain it in the public sphere.
34. If the humanities are to flourish and regain their rightful place in public life, thereby influencing public discourse for the good, they must be based in a philosophy of the good.
35. More than ever in a global, complex, and technological setting, and on a lonely planet, we seek wisdom, a dialogue grounded in the good that the humanities were created to foster and to sustain. Only then can we renew culture.
36. As the wellspring of civic-mindedness, the humanities will achieve their intended purpose when they help to build more and lasting human, social and spiritual capital.

*The educational outreach components for **Renewing American Culture: The Pursuit of Happiness** were developed with the assistance of the following educational consultants: Dr. Nathan Hatch, President, Wake Forest University, Dr. Tom Burish, Provost, University of Notre Dame, Dr. Ronald Mahurin, Vice President, Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, Dr. Nicholas Capaldi, Distinguished Professor of Business Ethics, Loyola University, and William Mayer, former Chairman of the Board, Aspen Institute.*