

Essentialism.

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Chapter 1: the essentialist.

- “The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of nonessentials.” – Lin Yutang.
- He was in earnest about being a good citizen in his new role so he said yes to many requests that really thinking about it.
- Stay, but do what you would as a consultant and nothing less. And don’t tell anyone.
- In this example is the basic value proposition of essentialism: only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your highest contribution towards the things that really matter.
- Less but better.
- If you don’t prioritize your life, someone else will.
- Curiously, and overstating the point in order to make it, the pursuit of success can be a catalyst for failure. But another way, success can distract us from focusing on the essential things that produce success in the first place.
- Will we have lost our ability to filter what is important and what isn’t? Psychologists call this “decision fatigue”: more choices we are forced to make, the more the quality of our decisions deteriorates.
- The word priority came into the English language in the 1400s. It was singular. It meant the very first or prior thing. It stayed singular for the next 500 years. Only in the 1900s did we pluralize the term and start thinking about priorities. Logically, they reasoned that by changing the word we could easily bend reality. Somehow we would now be able to have multiple “first” things.
- The prevalence of noise: almost everything is noise, and a very few things are exceptionally valuable. This is the justification for taking time to figure out what is most important. Because some things are so much more important, the effort in finding those things is worth it.
- “What do I feel deeply inspired by?” And “what am I particularly talented at?” And “what meets a significant need in the world?”

Chapter 2: the invincible power of choice.

- Yet, for all the impact the specific choice has had on the trajectory of my life, I value the way to change my view about choices even more. We often think of a choice as a thing. But choice is not a thing, our options may be things, but a choice – choice is an action.
- One important insight into how and why we forget our ability to choose comes out of the classic work of Martin Seligman and Steve Maier, who stumbled onto what they later called “learned helplessness” while conducting experiments on German shepherds.
- I have observed learned helplessness in many organizations I have worked in. When people believe that their efforts at work don’t matter, they tend to respond in one of two ways. Sometimes they check out and stop trying, like the mathematically challenged child. The other responses less obvious at first. They do the opposite. They become hyperactive. They accept every opportunity presented. They throw themselves into every assignment, they tackle every challenge with gusto. They try to do it all; this behavior does not necessarily look like learned

helplessness at first glance. After all, isn't working hard evidence of one's own belief in one's important and value? Get on the closer examination we can see this compulsion to do more is a smokescreen. These people don't believe they have a choice in what opportunity, assignment or challenge to take on. They believe they "have to do it all."

- Become an Essentialist requires a heightened awareness of our ability to choose.

Chapter 3: discern, the unimportance of practically everything.

- Working hard is important, but more effort does not necessarily yield more results. "Less but better" does.
- Richard Koch – author of several books on how to apply Pareto's principle.
- "Warm buffets aside early in his career it would be impossible for him to make hundreds of right investment decisions, so he decide that he would invest only in the businesses that he absolutely was sure of, and bet heavily on them. He owns 90% of his wealth to just 10 investments. Sometimes what you don't do is just as important as what you do." In short, he makes big bets on the essential few investment opportunities and says no too many other investment opportunities.
- As John Maxwell has written, "you cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything."

Chapter 4: trade-off, which problems I want?

- It turns out to be a terrible strategy for people as well. Have you ever spent time with someone who is always trying to fit just one more thing in? Such people know they have 10 minutes to get to a meeting that takes 10 minutes to walk to, but they still sit down to answer a couple of emails before they go. But I agree to put together a report by Friday, even though they have another huge deadline that same day. Maybe they promise to swing by their cousin's birthday party on Saturday night, even though they already have tickets to a show that starts at the exact same time. Their logic, which ignores the reality of trade-offs, is I can do both. The rather important problem is that this logic is false.
- Fortunately for them they had the credo: a statement ran in 1943 by then Chairman Robert Wood Johnson that is literally carved in stone at Johnson & Johnson headquarters.
- Jim Collins, the author of the business classic, good to great, was once told by Peter Drucker that he could either build a great company are build great ideas but not both. Jim chose ideas and as a result of this trade-off there are still only three full-time employees in his company, yet his ideas have reached tens of millions of people through his writing.
- "We had him try out a lot of different things, but as soon as it became clear an activity was not going to be his big thing we discussed it and took him out of it." The point here is not that all parents should want their children to go to Harvard. Point is that these Essentialist parents had consciously decided that their goal was for the sun to go to Harvard.
- Essentialist's C trade-offs as an inherent part of life, not as an inherently negative part of life. Instead of asking, "What do I have to give up?" They ask, "What do I want to go big on?" The cumulative impact of this small change in thinking can be profound.

Chapter 8: sleep, protect the asset.

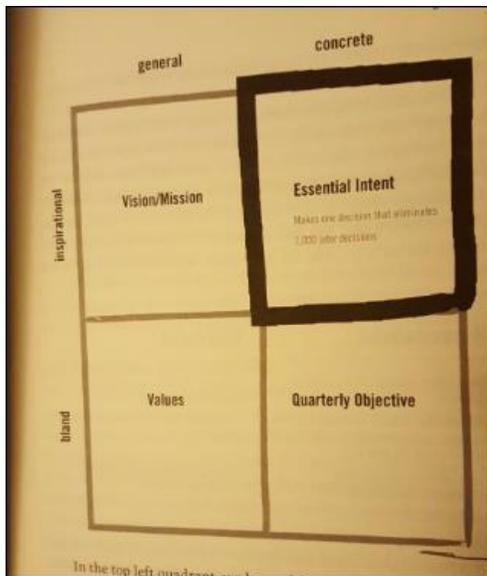
- While sleep is often associated with giving rest to the body, recent research shows that sleep is really more about the brain. Indeed, a study from the Lubec University in Germany provides evidence that a full night's sleep may actually increase brainpower and enhance our problem-solving ability.
- In the study, report by the Journal nature, over 100 volunteers were given a number puzzle with an unconventional twist, required finding a "hitting code" to uncover the answer. Volunteers are divided into two groups; one was allowed an eight hour stretch of uninterrupted sleep and the other group received interrupted sleep. The scientists then watch to see which volunteers found the hitting code and how quickly they found it. The result was that twice the number of people who had slept for eight hours solve the problem than the volunteers from the sleep deprived group. Why? The researchers explain that while we sleep our brains are hard at work encoding and restructuring information. Therefore, when we wake up, our brains may have made several neural connections, thereby opening up a border range of solutions to problems, literally overnight.
- For example, Charles Czeisler at Harvard has proposed a policy that no employee is expected to drive into work after a redevye, and other companies will allow employees to come in late after staying late at work the previous night.
- Our highest priority is to protect our ability to prioritize.

Chapter 9: select, the power of extreme criteria.

- In a piece called "no more yes. It's either hell yeah! Or no."
- Only by going through the work of identifying extreme criteria were they able to get rid of the 70 and 80%'s that were draining their time and resources and start focusing on the most interesting work that best distinguished them in the marketplace.
- If it isn't a clear yes, that had to clear no.

Chapter 10: clarify, one decision that makes 1000.

- Go from pretty clear, to really clear.



Chapter 11: there, the power of a graceful no.

- “Bob, it’s so great to see you. Dinner at the wharf sounds great!” Cynthia was crestfallen. Her daydreams of trolley rides and ice cream Sundays evaporated in an instant. Plus, she hated seafood and could just imagine how bored she would be listening to the adults talk at night. But then her father continued: “but not tonight. Cynthia and I have a special date planned, don’t we?” He would get Cynthia and grabbed her hand and they ran out of the door and continued with what was an unforgettable night in San Francisco. As it happens, Cynthia’s father was they management thinker Stephen Covey, the author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective people*, who had passed away only weeks before Cynthia told me the story. So it was with deep emotion she recalled that evening in San Francisco. The simple decision “bonded him to me forever because I knew what mattered most to him was me by summation point” she said.
- Clarity about what is essential fuels us with the strength to say no to the nonessentials.
- Nonessentialists say yes because of feeling of social awkwardness and pressure. They say yes automatically, without thinking, often in pursuit of the rush one gets from having pleased someone. But essentialist know that after the rush comes the pang of regret. They know they will soon feel bullied and resentful – both at the other person and that themselves. Eventually they will wake up to the unpleasant reality that something more important must now be sacrificed to accommodate this new commitment. Of course, the point is to not say no to all requests. The point is to say no to the nonessential so we can say yes to the things that really matter. It is to say no – frequently and gracefully – to everything but what is truly vital.
- As anyone who has ever been on the receiving end of the situation knows, a clear “I’m going to pass on this” is far better than not getting back to someone or stringing them along with some noncommittal answer like “I’ll try to make this work” or “I might be able to” when you know you can’t. Being vague is not the same as being graceful, and delaying the inevitable know, will only make it that much harder – and the recipient that much more resentful.

Chapter 12 on commit, win big by cutting your losses.

- Sunk cost bias is the tendency to continue to invest time, money or energy into something we know is a losing proposition simply because you have already incurred, or sunk, a cost that cannot be recouped.
- “How will I feel if I miss out on this opportunity?” But rather, “if I did not have this opportunity, how much would I be willing to sacrifice in order to obtain it?”

Chapter 13: edit, the invisible Art.

- Yellow most people don’t know is that the two awards are highly correlated: since 1981 that a single film has won best picture without at least being nominated for film editing. In fact, in about two thirds of the cases the movie nominated for film editing has gone on to win best picture.

Chapter 14 limit, the freedom of setting boundaries.

- How sorry they become the new Friday? I wondered. But what most people don’t realize is that the problem is not just that the boundaries have been blurred, it’s that the boundary of work has edged insidiously into family territory. It is hard to imagine executives in most companies who would be comfortable with employees bringing their children to work on Monday morning, yet they seem to have no problem expecting employees to come into the office or work on a project on a Saturday or Sunday.

Chapter 15: buffer, the unfair advantage.

- The nonessentialist tends to always assume a best case scenario. We all know those people (and many of us, including myself, have been that person) who chronically underestimate how long something will really take: “this will just take five minutes,” or “I’ll be finished with this project by Friday,” or “it’ll only take me a year to write my magnum opus.” Yet inevitably these things take longer; something unexpected comes up, or the task ends up being more involved than anticipated.
- One study found that if people estimate anonymously how long it would take to complete a task they were no longer guilty of the planning fallacy. This implies that often we actually know we can’t do the things in a given timeframe, but we don’t want to admit it to someone.

Chapter 16: subtract, bring forth more by removing obstacles.

- The question is this: what is the “slowest hiker” in your job or your life? What is the obstacle that is keeping you back from achieving what really matters to you? By systematically identifying and removing this “constraint” you’ll be able to significantly reduce the friction keeping you from executing what is essential.

Chapter 17: progress, the power of small wins.

- What if, instead of just focusing on catching criminals – and serving up ever harsher punishments – after they committed the crime, the police devoted significant resources and effort to eliminating criminal behavior before it happened? To quote Tony Blair, what if they could be tough on crime but also on the causes of crime? Of these questions came the novel idea for Positive Tickets, a program whereby police, instead of focusing on catching young people

perpetuating crimes, which focus on catching youth doing something good – something as simple as picking up a piece of litter and putting it in the bin rather than on the ground, wearing a helmet while riding their bike, skateboarding in the designated area, or getting to school on time – and would give them a ticket for positive behavior. The ticket, of course, would be like a parking ticket but instead would be redeemable for some kind of small rewards, like free entry to the movies or to an event at a local youth center – wholesome activities that also had the bonus of keeping the young people off the streets and out of trouble. So how well did Richmond's unconventional effort to reimagine policing work? Amazingly well, as it turned out. It took some time, but the investment in the approach is a long-term strategy, and after a decade the positive tickets system had reduced recidivism from 60% to 8%.

- Research has shown that all forms of human motivation the most effective one is progress. Why? Because a small, concrete win creates momentum and affirms our faith in our further success. In his 1968 Harvard Business Review article entitled “One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?” Among the most popular Harvard business review article of all time, Frederick Herzberg reveals research showing that the two primary internal motivators for people are achievement and recognition for achievement. More recently, Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer gathered anonymous diary entries from hundreds of people and covering thousands of work days. On the basis of these hundreds and hundreds of reflections, they concluded that “every day progress – even a small win” can make all the difference in how people feel and perform. “Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work,” they said.
- My wife Anna and I have tried to apply these ideas to our system of parenting. At one point, we have become concerned with how much screen time had crept into our family. Between television, computers, tablets and smart phones have become just too easy for children to waste time on nonessential entertainment. But our attempts to get them to change his habits, as you can imagine, were met with friction. The children would complain whenever we turned the TV off or try to limit their screen time. And we as the parents had to consciously police the situation, which took us away from doing things that were essential. So we introduced a token system. The children were given 10 tokens at the beginning of the week. These could each be traded in for 30 minutes of screen time for \$.50 at the end of the week, adding up to five dollars or five hours of screen time a week. If a child read a book for 30 minutes, he or she would earn an additional token, which can also be traded in for screen time or money. The results were incredible: overnight, screen time went down 90%, reading went up to the same amount, and the overall effort we had to put into policing the system went way, way down. In other words, nonessential activity dramatically decreased and essential activity dramatically increased. Once a small amount of initial effort was invested to set up the system, it works without friction. We can all create systems that this both at home and at work. The key is to start small, encourage progress, and celebrate small wins.
- Do the minimum viable preparation. There are two opposing ways to approach an important goal or deadline. You can start early and small or start late and big. “They obey” means doing it all at the last minute: pulling an all-nighter and making it happen. “Small and early” means starting at the earliest possible moment with the minimal possible time investment. Often just 10 minutes invested in the project or assignment two weeks before it is due can save you much frantic and

stressed out scrambling at the 11th hour. Take a goal or deadline you have coming up and ask yourself, “What is the minimal amount I could do right now to prepare?”

- One leader who is an exceptionally inspired speaker has explained that the key for him is to start to prepare his big speeches six months before he does them. He isn't preparing the entire speech; he just starts. If you have a big presentation coming up over the next few weeks or months, open a file right now and spend four minutes starting to put down any ideas. Then close the file. No more than four minutes. Just start it.
- Visually reward progress. Every time you ate your spinach, or went to bed on time, or clean your room you got a star, and pretty soon you are doing these things virtually without any prodding.

Chapter 18: flow, the genius of routine.

- The work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has done on creativity demonstrates how highly creative people use strict routines to free up their minds. “Most creative individuals find out early what their best rhythms are for sleeping, eating and working, and abide by them even when it is tempting to do otherwise,” she says. “They were close that are comfortable, they interact only with people they find congenial, and they do only things they think are important. Of course, such idiosyncrasies are not endearing to those they have to deal with... But personalizing patterns of action helps to free the mind from the expectations that make demands on attention and allows intense concentration on matters that count.
- In an interview about his book, the power of habit, Charles Duhigg said “in the last 15 years, as we've learned how habits work and how they can be changed, scientists have explained that every habit is made up of a cue, a routine and there will award. The key was the trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode in which habit to use. Then there is a routine – the behavior itself – which can be physical or mental or emotional. Finally there is the reward, which helps her brain figure out if this particular habit is worth remembering for the future.
- Over time, this loop – cue, routine, reward – cue, routine, reward – becomes more automatic as the cue and reward become neurologically intertwined. What this means is that if we want to change our routine, we'd don't really need to change the behavior. Rather, we need to find the cue that is triggering the nonessential activity or behavior and find a way to associate that same cue with something that is essential. So, for example, if the bakery you pass on the way home from work triggers you to pick up a doughnut, next time you pass by that bakery, use that cue to remind you to pick up a salad from the deli across the street. Or if your alarm clock going off in the morning triggers you to check your email, use it as a cue to get up and read instead. At first, overcoming the temptation to stop at the bakery or check your email may be difficult. But each time you execute the new behavior – each time you pick up the Sally – strengthens the link in your brain between the cue and the new behavior, and soon, you'll be subconsciously and automatically performing the new routine.

Chapter 19: focus, what's important now?

- When faced with so many tasks and obligations that you can't figure out which to tackle first, stop. Take a deep breath. Present and the moment and ask yourself what is most important this very second – now what's most important tomorrow or even an hour from now. If you're not

sure, make a list of everything buying for your attention and cross off anything that is not important right now.

Chapter 20: be, the essentialist life.

- I continue to discover almost daily that I can do less and less – in order to contribute more.
- The nonessentialist disempowers people by allowing ambiguity over who is doing what. Often this is justified in the name of wanting to be a flexible or agile team. But what is actually created is a counterfeit agility. When people don't know what they are really responsible for and how they will be judged on their performance, when decisions either are or appear to be capricious, and when roles are ill-defined, it isn't long before people either give up or, worse, become obsessed with trying to look busy and therefore important instead of actually getting any real work done.
- The iconoclastic entrepreneur and the venture capitalist Peter Thiel took “less but better” to an unorthodox level when he insisted that PayPal employees select one single priority in their role – and focus on that exclusively. As PayPal executive Keith Rabois recalls: “leader required that everyone be tasked with exactly 1 priority. He would refuse to discuss virtually anything else with you except that was currently assigned as your number one initiative. Even our annual review forms in 2001 required each employee to identify their single most valuable contribution to the company. The result was that the employees were empowered to do anything within the confines of that clearly defined role that they felt would make a high level of contribution to the shared mission of the company.”