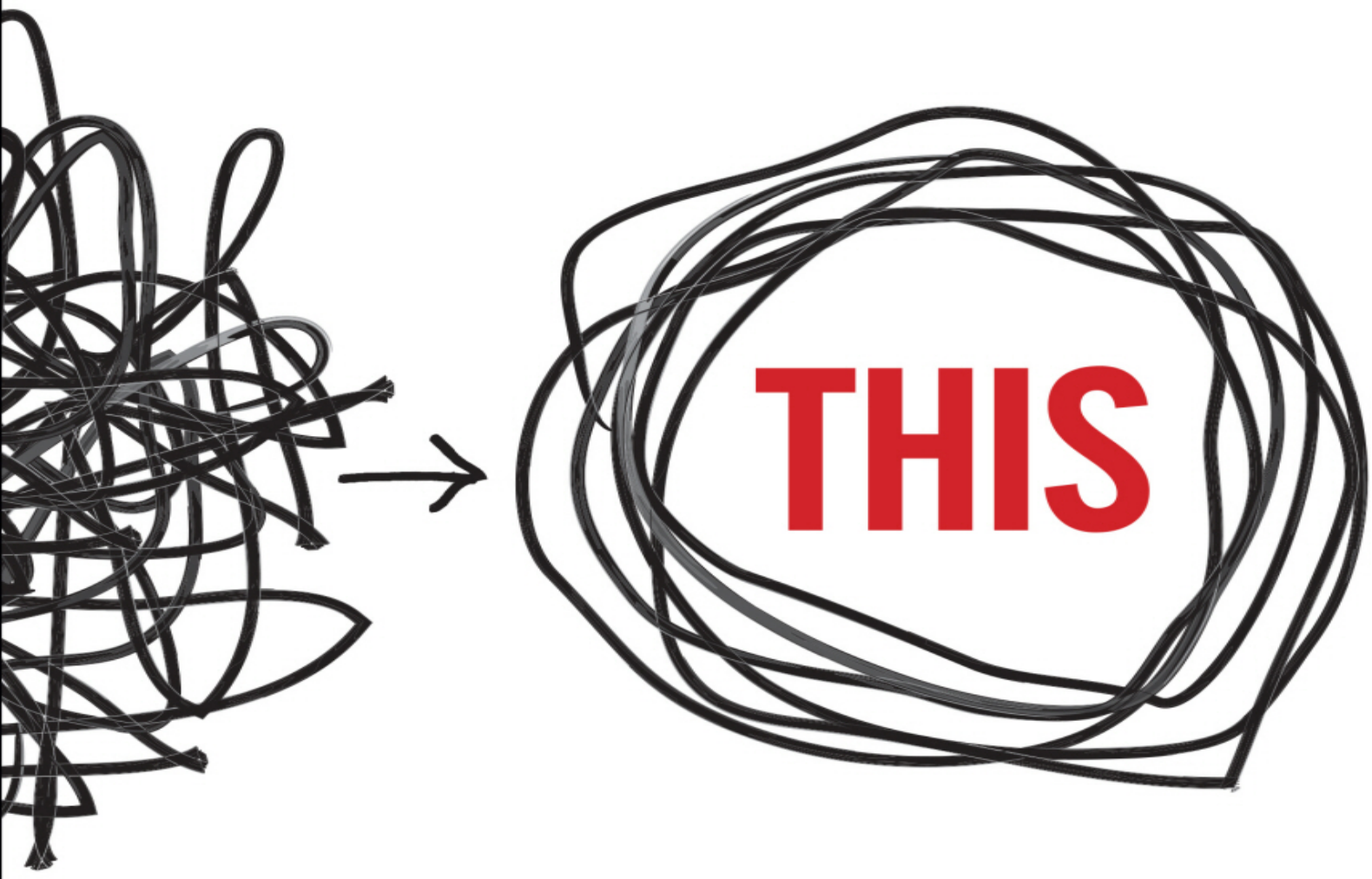

essentialism

The Disciplined Pursuit of Less

GREG McKEOWN

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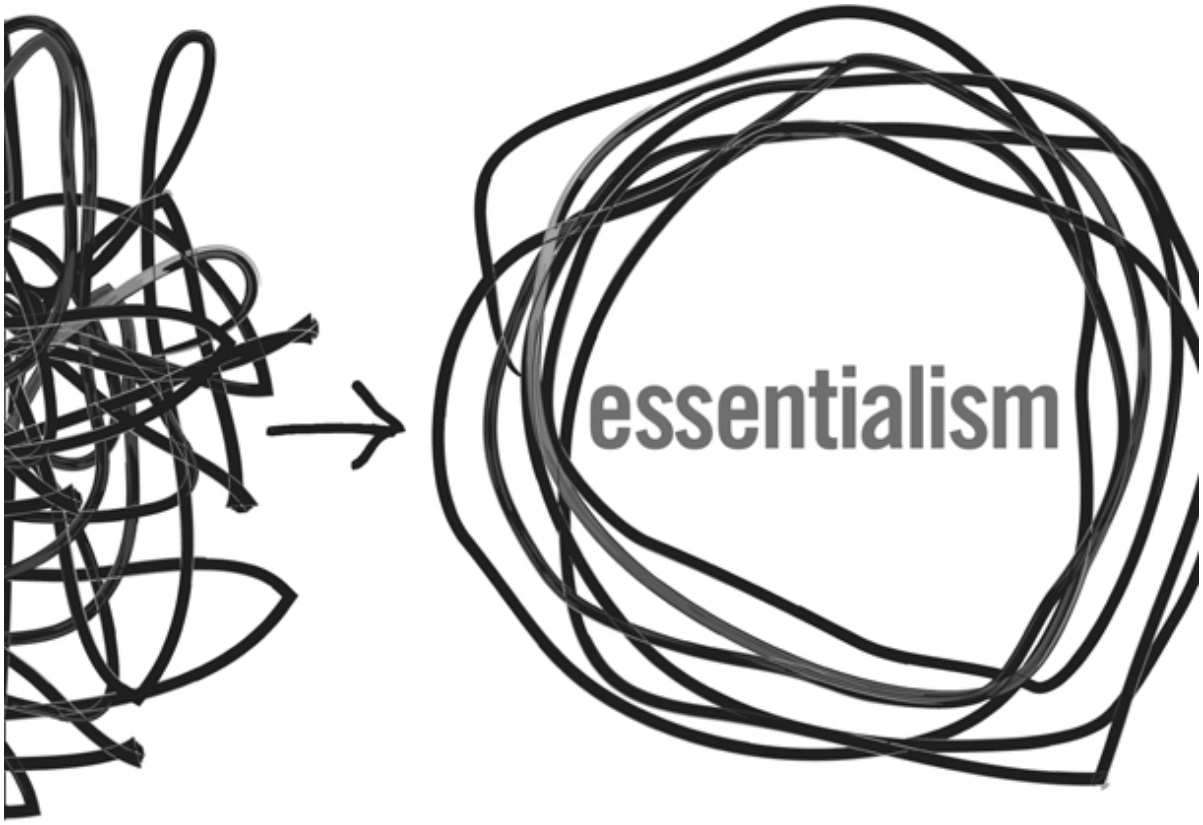
About the Book

- Have you ever found yourself **stretched too thin** at home or at work?
- Have you ever felt both **overworked** and **underutilised**?
- Do you ever feel **busy but not productive**?
- Do you ever feel like you’re **constantly in motion**, but never getting anywhere?
- If you answered **yes** to any of these, the way out is becoming an **Essentialist**.

This is not a time-management strategy, but a systematic discipline you apply every time you are faced with a decision. By forcing us to apply a more selective criteria for what is **essential**, the pursuit of less allows us to regain control of our choices so we can make the highest possible contribution towards the things that really matter.

About the Author

Greg McKeown was recently named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. He is the CEO of THIS Inc, a leadership and strategy design agency headquartered in Silicon Valley. He has taught at companies that include Apple, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Salesforce.com, Twitter and VMware. Originally from London, he now lives in Menlo Park, California with his wife, Anna, and their four children. Greg holds an MBA from Stanford University.



The Disciplined Pursuit of Less

GREG McKEOWN

Virgin BOOKS

Dedicated to
Anna
Grace
Eve
Jack
and Esther

You personify everything
that is essential to me.

Chapter 1

The Essentialist

The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of non-essentials.
—Lin Yutang

Sam Elliot[fn1] is a capable executive in Silicon Valley, California, who found himself stretched too thin after his company was acquired by a larger, bureaucratic business.

He was in earnest about being a good citizen in his new role so he said *yes* to many requests without really thinking about it. But as a result he would spend the whole day rushing from one meeting and conference call to another trying to please everyone and get it all done. His stress went up as the quality of his work went down. It was like he was majoring in minor activities and as a result, his work became unsatisfying for him *and* frustrating for the people he was trying so hard to please.

In the midst of his frustration the company came to him and offered him an early retirement package. But he was in his early 50s and had no interest in completely retiring. He thought briefly about starting a consulting company doing what he was already doing. He even thought of selling his services back to his employer as a consultant. But none of these options seemed that appealing. So he went to speak with a mentor who gave him surprising advice: “Stay, but do what you would as a consultant and nothing else. And don’t tell anyone.” In other words, his mentor was advising him to do only those things that *he* deemed essential – and ignore everything else that was asked of him.

The executive followed the advice! He made a daily commitment towards cutting out the red tape. He began saying no.

He was tentative at first. He would evaluate requests based on the timid criteria, “Can I actually fulfil this request, given the time and resources I have?” If the answer was *no* then he would refuse the request. He was pleasantly surprised to find that while people would at first look a little disappointed, they seemed to respect his honesty.

Encouraged by his small wins he pushed back a bit more. Now when a request would come in he would pause and evaluate the request against a tougher criteria: “Is this the very *most* important thing I should be doing with my time and resources right now?”

If he couldn’t answer a definitive *yes*, then he would refuse the request. And once again to his delight, while his colleagues might initially seem disappointed, they soon began to respect him *more* for his refusal, not less.

Emboldened, he began to apply this selective criteria to everything, not just direct requests. In his past life he would always volunteer for presentations or assignments that came up last minute; now he found a way not to sign up for them. He used to be one of the first to jump in on an e-mail trail, but now he just stepped back and let others jump in. He stopped attending conference calls that he only had a couple of minutes of interest in. He stopped sitting in on the weekly update call because he didn’t need the information. He stopped attending meetings on his calendar if he didn’t have a direct contribution to make. He explained to me, “Just because I was invited didn’t seem a good enough reason to attend.”

It felt self-indulgent at first. But by being selective he bought himself space, and in that space he found creative freedom. He could concentrate his efforts on one project at a time. He could plan thoroughly. He could anticipate

roadblocks and start to remove obstacles. Instead of spinning his wheels trying to get everything done, he could get the right things done. His newfound commitment to doing only the things that were truly important – and eliminating everything else – restored the quality of his work. Instead of making just a millimetre of progress in a million directions he began to generate tremendous momentum towards accomplishing the things that were truly vital.

He continued this for several months. He immediately found that he not only got more of his day back at work, in the evenings he got even more time back at home. He said, “I got back my family life! I can go home at a decent time.” Now instead of being a slave to his phone he shuts it down. He goes to the gym. He goes out to eat with his wife.

To his great surprise, there were no negative repercussions to his experiment. His manager didn’t chastise him. His colleagues didn’t resent him. Quite the opposite; because he was left only with projects that were meaningful to him *and* actually valuable to the company, they began to respect and value his work more than ever. His work became fulfilling again. His performance ratings went up. He ended up with one of the largest bonuses of his career!

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.

What about you? How many times have you reacted to a request by saying yes without really thinking about it? How many times have you resented committing to do something and wondered, “Why did I sign up for this?” How often do you say yes simply to please? Or to avoid trouble? Or because “yes” had just become your default response?

Now let me ask you this: Have you ever found yourself stretched too thin? Have you ever felt both overworked *and* underutilised? Have you ever found yourself majoring in minor activities? Do you ever feel busy but not productive? Like you're always in motion, but never getting anywhere?

If you answered yes to any of these, the way out is the way of the Essentialist.

The Way of the Essentialist

Dieter Rams was the lead designer at Braun for many years. He is driven by the idea that almost everything is noise. He believes very few things are essential. His job is to filter through that noise until he gets to the essence. For example, as a young twenty-four-year-old at the company he was asked to collaborate on a record player. The norm at the time was to cover the turntable in a solid wooden lid or even to incorporate the player into a piece of living room furniture. Instead, he and his team removed the clutter and designed a player with a clear plastic cover on the top and nothing more. It was the first time such a design had been used, and it was so revolutionary people worried it might bankrupt the company because nobody would buy it. It took courage, as it always does, to eliminate the non-essential. By the sixties this aesthetic started to gain traction. In time it became the design every other record player followed.

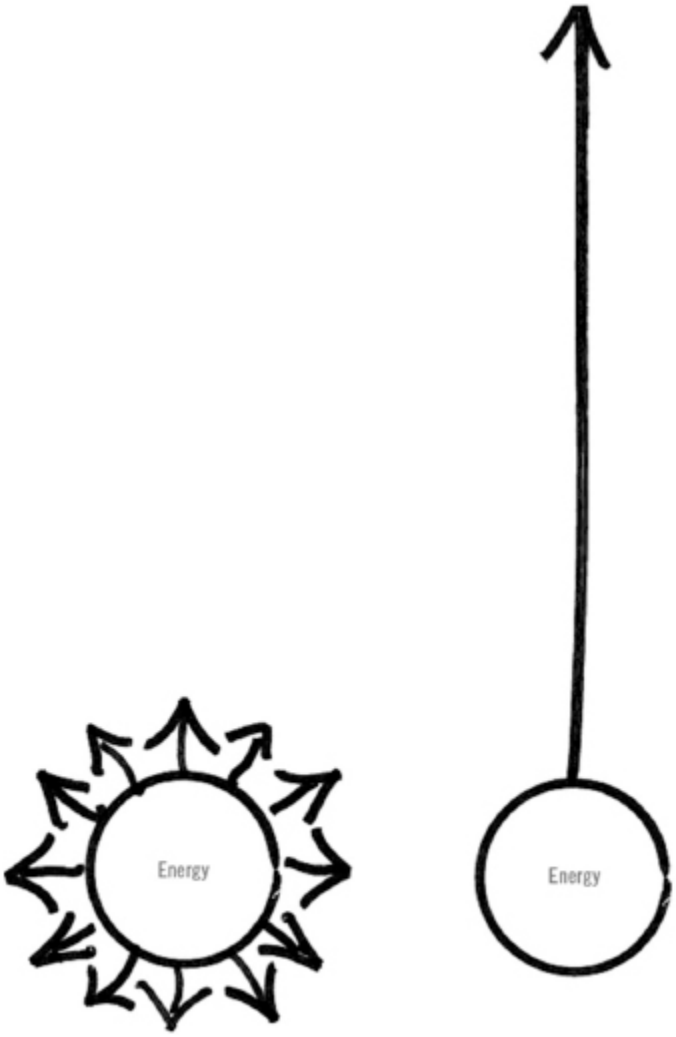
Dieter's design criteria can be summarised by a characteristically succinct principle, captured in just three German words: *Weniger aber besser*. The English translation is: *Less but better*. A more fitting definition of Essentialism would be hard to come by.

The way of the Essentialist is the relentless pursuit of less but better. It doesn't mean occasionally giving a nod to the principle. It means pursuing it in a *disciplined* way.

The way of the Essentialist isn't about setting New Year's resolutions to say "no" more, or about pruning your in-box,

or about mastering some new strategy in time management. It is about pausing constantly to ask, “Am I investing in the right activities?” There are far more activities and opportunities in the world than we have time and resources to invest in. And although many of them may be good, or even very good, the fact is that most are trivial and few are vital. The way of the Essentialist involves learning to tell the difference – learning to filter through all those options and selecting only those that are truly essential.

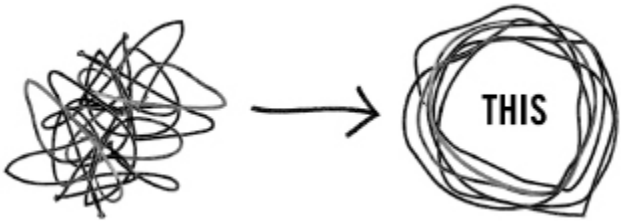
Essentialism is not about how to get more things done; it’s about how to get the *right* things done. It doesn’t mean just doing less for the sake of less either. It is about making the wisest possible investment of your time and energy in order to operate at your highest point of contribution by doing only what is essential.


Energy
Energy

The difference between the way of the Essentialist and the way of the non-Essentialist can be seen in the figure opposite. In both images the same amount of effort is exerted. In the image on the left, the energy is divided into many different activities. The result is that we have the unfulfilling experience of making a millimetre of progress in a million directions. In the image on the right, the energy is given to fewer activities. The result is that by investing in fewer things we have the satisfying experience of making significant progress in the things that matter most. The way of the Essentialist rejects the idea that we can fit it all in. Instead it requires us to grapple with real trade-offs and make tough decisions. In many cases we can learn to make one-time decisions that make a thousand future decisions so we don't exhaust ourselves asking the same questions again and again.

The way of the Essentialist means living by design, not by default. Instead of making choices reactively, the Essentialist deliberately distinguishes the vital few from the trivial many, eliminates the non-essentials, and then removes obstacles so the essential things have clear, smooth passage. In other words, Essentialism is a disciplined, systematic approach for determining where our highest point of contribution lies, then making execution of those things almost effortless.

The Model



Non- **Essentialist**

	Essentialist	
Thinks	**ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE**	**LESS BUT BETTER**
	“I have to.”	“I choose to.”
	“It’s all important.”	“Only a few things really matter.”
	“How can I fit it all in?”	“What are the trade-offs?”
Does	**THE UNDISCIPLINED PURSUIT OF MORE**	**THE DISCIPLINED PURSUIT OF LESS**
	Reacts to what’s most pressing	Pauses to discern what really matters
	Says “yes” to people without really thinking	Says “no” to everything except the essential
	Tries to force execution at the last moment	Removes obstacles to make execution easy
Gets	**LIVES A LIFE THAT DOES NOT SATISFY**	**LIVES A LIFE THAT REALLY MATTERS**
	Takes on too much, and work suffers	Chooses carefully in order to do great work
	Feels out of control	Feels in control
	Is unsure of whether the right things got done	Gets the right things done
	Feels overwhelmed and exhausted	Experiences joy in the journey

The way of the Essentialist is the path to being in control of our own choices. It is a path to new levels of success and meaning. It is the path on which we enjoy the journey, not just the destination. Despite all these benefits, however, there are too many forces conspiring to keep us from

applying the disciplined pursuit of less but better, which may be why so many end up on the misdirected path of the non-Essentialist.

The Way of the Non-Essentialist

On a bright, winter day in California I visited my wife, Anna, in hospital. Even in hospital Anna was radiant. But I also knew she was exhausted. It was the day after our precious daughter was born, healthy and happy at 7 pounds, 3 ounces.[1]

Yet what should have been one of the happiest, most serene days of my life was actually filled with tension. Even as my beautiful new baby lay in my wife's tired arms, I was on the phone and on e-mail with work, and I was feeling pressure to go to a client meeting. My colleague had written, "Friday between 1–2 would be a bad time to have a baby because I need you to be at this meeting with X." It was now Friday and though I was pretty certain (or at least I hoped) the e-mail had been written in jest, I still felt pressure to attend.

Instinctively, I knew what to do. It was clearly a time to be there for my wife and newborn child. So when asked whether I planned to attend the meeting, I said with all the conviction I could muster …

"Yes."

To my shame, while my wife lay in hospital with our hours-old baby, I went to the meeting. Afterwards, my colleague said, "The client will respect you for making the decision to be here." But the look on the clients' faces did not evince respect. Instead, they mirrored how I felt. *What was I doing there?* I had said "yes" simply to please, and in doing so I had hurt my family, my integrity, and even the client relationship.

As it turned out, exactly *nothing* came of the client meeting. But even if it had, surely I would have made a

fool's bargain. In trying to keep everyone happy I had sacrificed what mattered most.

On reflection I discovered this important lesson:

If you don't prioritise your life, someone else will.

That experience gave me renewed interest – read, inexhaustible obsession – in understanding why otherwise intelligent people make the choices they make in their personal and professional lives. "Why is it," I wonder, "that we have so much more ability inside of us than we often choose to utilise?" And "How can we make the choices that allow us to tap into more of the potential inside ourselves, and in people everywhere?"

My mission to shed light on these questions had already led me to quit law school in England and travel, eventually, to California to do my graduate work at Stanford. It had led me to spend more than two years collaborating on a book, *Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*. And it went on to inspire me to start a strategy and leadership company in Silicon Valley, where I now work with some of the most capable people in some of the most interesting companies in the world, helping to set them on the path of the Essentialist.

In my work I have seen people all over the world who are consumed and overwhelmed by the pressures all around them. I have coached "successful" people in the quiet pain of trying desperately to do everything, perfectly, now. I have seen people trapped by controlling managers and

unaware that they do not “have to” do all the thankless busywork they are asked to do. And I have worked tirelessly to understand *why* so many bright, smart, capable individuals remain snared in the death grip of the non-essential.

What I have found has surprised me.

I worked with one particularly driven executive who got into technology at a young age and loved it. He was quickly rewarded for his knowledge and passion with more and more opportunities. Eager to build on his success, he continued to read as much as he could and pursue all he could with gusto and enthusiasm. By the time I met him he was hyperactive, trying to learn it all and do it all. He seemed to find a new obsession every day, sometimes every hour. And in the process, he lost his ability to discern the vital few from the trivial many. *Everything* was important. As a result he was stretched thinner and thinner. He was making a millimetre of progress in a million directions. He was overworked *and* underutilised. That’s when I sketched out for him the image on the left in the figure here.

He stared at it for the longest time in uncharacteristic silence. Then he said, with more than a hint of emotion, “That is the story of my life!” Then I sketched the image on the right. “What would happen if we could figure out the one thing you could do that would make the highest contribution?” I asked him. He responded sincerely: “That is *the* question.”

As it turns out, many intelligent, ambitious people have perfectly legitimate reasons to have trouble answering this question. One reason is that in our society we are punished for good behaviour (saying no) and rewarded for bad behaviour (saying yes). The former is often awkward in the moment, and the latter is often celebrated in the moment. It leads to what I call “the paradox of success,”[2] which can be summed up in four predictable phases:

PHASE 1: When we really have clarity of purpose, it enables us to succeed at our endeavour.

PHASE 2: When we have success, we gain a reputation as a "go to" person. We become "good old [insert name]," who is always there when you need him, and we are presented with increased options and opportunities.

PHASE 3: When we have increased options and opportunities, which is actually code for demands upon our time and energies, it leads to diffused efforts. We get spread thinner and thinner.

PHASE 4: We become distracted from what would otherwise be our highest level of contribution. The effect of our success has been to undermine the very clarity that led to our success in the first place.

Curiously, and overstating the point in order to make it, *the pursuit of success can be a catalyst for failure*. Put another way, success can distract us from focusing on the essential things that produce success in the first place.

We can see this everywhere around us. In his book *How the Mighty Fall*, Jim Collins explores what went wrong in companies that were once darlings of Wall Street but later collapsed.[3] He finds that for many, falling into "the undisciplined pursuit of more" was a key reason for failure. This is true for companies and it is true for the people who work in them. But why?

Why Non-Essentialism Is Everywhere

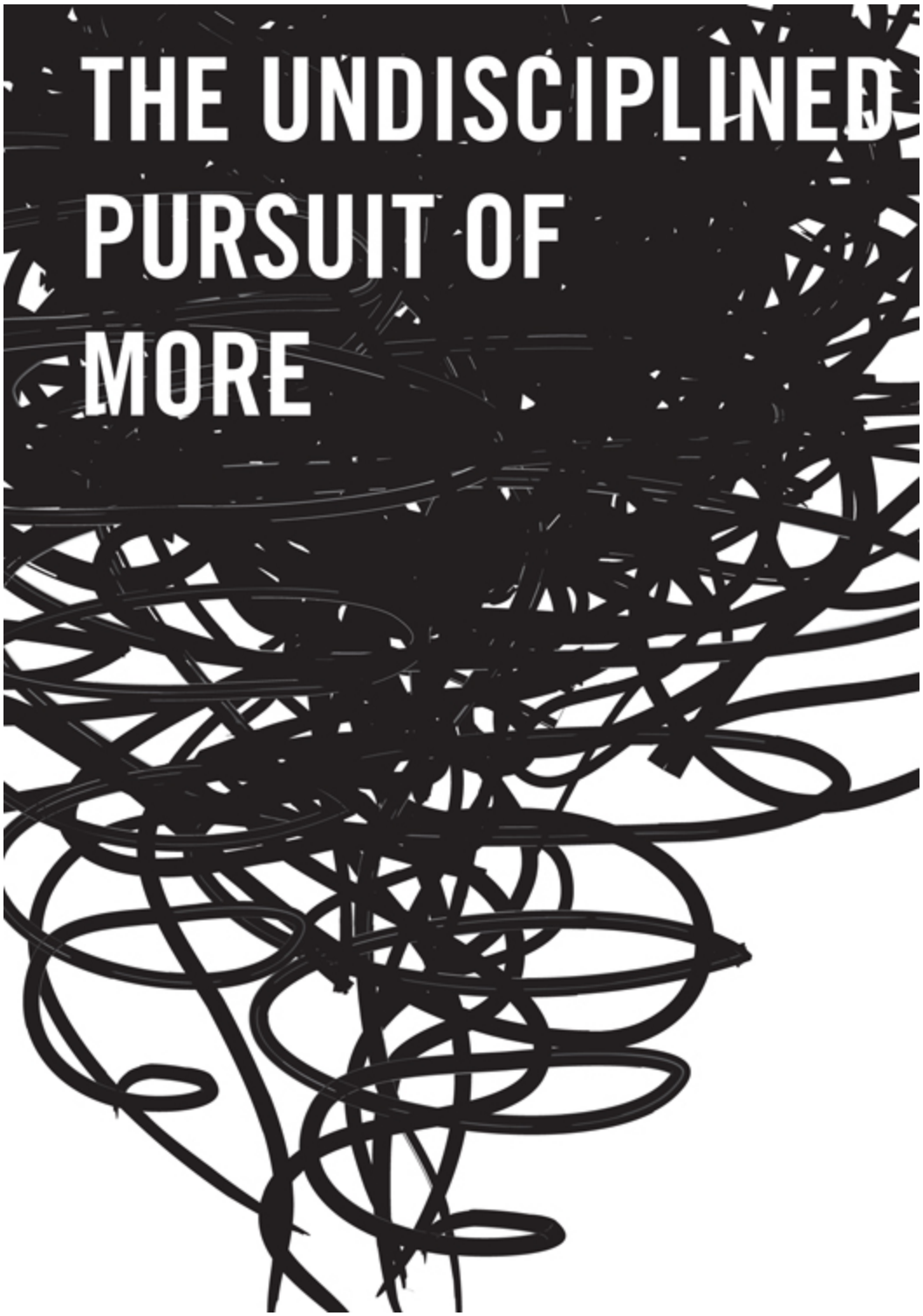
Several trends have combined to create a perfect non-Essentialist storm. Consider the following.

TOO MANY CHOICES

We have all observed the exponential increase in choices over the last decade. Yet even in the midst of it, and

perhaps because of it, we have lost sight of the most important ones.

As Peter Drucker said, “In a few hundred years, when the history of our time will be written from a long-term perspective, it is likely that the most important event historians will see is not technology, not the Internet, not e-commerce. It is an unprecedented change in the human condition. For the first time – literally – substantial and rapidly growing numbers of people have choices. For the first time, they will have to manage themselves. And society is totally unprepared for it.”[4]


THE UNDISCIPLINED
PURSUIT OF
MORE

We are unprepared in part because, for the first time, the preponderance of choice has overwhelmed our ability to manage it. We have lost our ability to filter what is important and what isn't. Psychologists call this "decision fatigue": the more choices we are forced to make, the more the quality of our decisions deteriorates.[5]

TOO MUCH SOCIAL PRESSURE

It is not just the number of choices that has increased exponentially, it is also the strength and number of outside influences *on* our decisions that has increased. While much has been said and written about how hyperconnected we now are and how distracting this information overload can be, the larger issue is how our connectedness has increased the strength of social pressure. Today, technology has lowered the barrier for others to share their opinion about what we should be focusing on. It is not just information overload; it is opinion overload.

THE IDEA THAT "YOU CAN HAVE IT ALL"

The idea that we can have it all and do it all is not new. This myth has been peddled for so long, I believe virtually everyone alive today is infected with it. It is sold in advertising. It is championed in corporations. It is embedded in job descriptions that provide huge lists of required skills and experience as standard. It is embedded in university applications that require dozens of extracurricular activities.

What *is* new is how especially damaging this myth is today, in a time when choice and expectations have increased exponentially. It results in stressed people trying to cram yet *more* activities into their already overscheduled lives. It creates corporate environments that talk about work/life balance but still expect their employees to be on their smartphones 24/7/365. It leads to staff meetings where as many as ten "top priorities" are discussed with no sense of irony at all.

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 five hundred years. Only in the 1900s did we pluralise the term and start talking about *priorities*. Illogically, we reasoned that by changing the word we could bend reality. Somehow we would now be able to have multiple "first" things. People and companies routinely try to do just that. One leader told me of his experience in a company that talked of "Pri-1, Pri-2, Pri-3, Pri-4, and Pri-5." This gave the impression of many things being the priority but actually meant nothing was.

But when we try to do it all and have it all, we find ourselves making trade-offs at the margins that we would never take on as our intentional strategy. When we don't purposefully and deliberately choose where to focus our energies and time, other people – our bosses, our colleagues, our clients, and even our families – will choose for us, and before long we'll have lost sight of everything that is meaningful and important. We can either make our choices deliberately or allow other people's agendas to control our lives.

Once an Australian nurse named Bronnie Ware, who cared for people in the last twelve weeks of their lives, recorded their most often discussed regrets. At the top of the list: "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."[6]

This requires, not just haphazardly saying no, but purposefully, deliberately, and strategically eliminating the non-essentials, and not just getting rid of the obvious time wasters, but cutting out some really good opportunities as well.[7] Instead of reacting to the social pressures pulling you to go in a million directions, you will learn a way to reduce, simplify, and focus on what is absolutely essential by eliminating everything else.

You can think of this book doing for your life and career what a professional organiser can do for your wardrobe. Think about what happens to your wardrobe when you never organise it. Does it stay neat and tidy with just those few outfits you love to wear hanging on the rail? Of course not. When you make no conscious effort to keep it organised, the wardrobe becomes cluttered and stuffed with clothes you rarely wear. Every so often it gets so out of control you try and purge the wardrobe. But unless you have a disciplined system you'll either end up with as many clothes as you started with because you can't decide which to give away; end up with regrets because you accidentally gave away clothes you do wear and did want to keep; or end up with a pile of clothes you don't want to keep but never actually get rid of because you're not quite sure where to take them or what to do with them.

In the same way that our wardrobe get cluttered as clothes we never wear accumulate, so do our lives get cluttered as well-intended commitments and activities we've said yes to pile up. Most of these efforts didn't come with an expiry date. Unless we have a system for purging them, once adopted, they live on in perpetuity.

Here's how an Essentialist would approach that wardrobe.

1. EXPLORE AND EVALUATE

Instead of asking, "Is there a chance I will wear this someday in the future?" you ask more disciplined, tough questions: "Do I *love* this?" and "Do I look *great* in it?" and "Do I wear this *often*?" If the answer is no, then you know it is a candidate for elimination.

In your personal or professional life, the equivalent of asking yourself which clothes you love is asking yourself, "Will this activity or effort make the highest possible contribution towards my goal?" Part One of this book will help you figure out what those activities are.