

# Unfill.



How minimalism  
can help bring  
clarity in a world  
of indulgence.

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Matt Javanshir



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*How minimalism can help bring clarity in a world of  
indulgence*

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*Content Note:*

*This book explores themes of burnout, compulsive habits, and emotional control, particularly around food, lifestyle, and self-image. Some reflections may be sensitive for readers living with conditions related to eating, food or weight. These are personal reflections, not universal truths. Skip or pause wherever you feel you need to.*



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# Preface

## Hold my girl

This is the story of when I hit rock bottom. It isn't the story of a monumentally tragic event of grief, crime, or trauma. From an outsider's perspective, it's not really a story at all. And yet when I revisit this moment in my mind, it represents so poignantly the pinnacle of a life I used to know.

It was March 2020. I was walking home from the train station after a fraught commute from central London. Every journey was a mix of the bedlam you'd come to expect from working in the City, and an exhausted relief that the trains were even running at all through the onslaught of delays and cancellations. Even on a good day, I could spend several hours standing idle at a platform, with nothing but my phone and the maelstrom of equally frustrated commuters to keep me company. I had arrived at my station and checked the time; it was around 7:30 pm - just around the time our infant daughter went to sleep (typically at least - it's not an exact science!). If I ran, I could make it home just in time to kiss her goodnight before bed. So I picked up the pace, and for the next few minutes my evening had become a Richard Curtis comedy; with me running back home in my suit and tie, seeing my breath in the cold evening air, with George Ezra's *Hold My Girl* coincidentally playing in my ears as the soundtrack to my desperate attempt to make it back home so that I could hold my girl, however briefly. I arrived home just a few moments too late. As I unlocked the front door, my wife was coming down the stairs, having just put our exhausted daughter to bed. She could see the disappointment on my face. There, in the quiet still of the front porch, my rock bottom had

whimpered into existence. More than likely, this wasn't the first time that this had happened. But it was the first time that it dawned upon me that this was going to be every time. This was the reality of things. I worked in London. We lived within commuting distance of an affordable house. We had recently renovated the house by remortgaging and taking out personal loans and credit (we had extended so we could have a bigger space). The train fares, the debt - and of course investing some disposable income on vast quantities of media purchases, hobby equipment and other collectable trinkets (justified with the evergreen "I work hard, so why not? Life's too short!") - all of these things required this lifestyle. This lifestyle made all of these things possible. Basic maths. A symbiotic relationship.

Most of my adult life had been spent this way: on autopilot, "progressing" through life according to the imported criteria of society at large. Doing everything I was supposed to do. A house. A bigger house. Promotions. Thinking success, satisfaction and contentment from life was right around the corner with just a little bit more of it all. Maybe another promotion or two. In my head, these things were inalienable facts; after all, everybody else seemed to be following similar pursuits. I didn't even stop to think about whether I had consciously developed any values of my own, or whether I had a genuine choice in things being any different. What did I actually want from my life? To spend it frantically rushing around just to miss even a simple goodnight to our daughter at the end of her day? These are all first-world, privileged problems, though, right? I graduated from University, I work in London, I have a job with a fancy title that pays well, a roof over my head, a loving family, and my health. It's not unusual for one parent not be home for their kid's bedtime. So who the hell am I to peddle some sob story when there is genuine suffering and strife going on in the world?

These guilt-laden, self-defeating thoughts are the things that I used to tell myself for years and I used them to perpetuate what in hindsight was the frenzied, stressful, rushed and exhausting lifestyle that I had never stopped to actually acknowledge. They paralysed me from being honest with myself

and served nobody. I'm not writing this as a judgement of how others choose to live; the problem I had was that this way of living did not align with what I had wanted my values and priorities in life to be. I kept telling myself that this wasn't who I really was. The people I was pressed up against on a sweaty train carriage for three hours a day? The impatient, impolite, so-called important suits and ties? That was their lives, their values, not mine. But the odious truth was that my actions had proved otherwise: through my own choices and priorities, these habits had moulded my life into a set of values I invariably lived by. This was exactly who I had ended up choosing to become.

I wanted to be the dad who was there to read his daughter a bedtime story and kiss her goodnight. I wanted to be the husband who genuinely listened and was present for conversations with his significant other. I wanted to be someone at peace with themselves. I wanted to hold my girl. Instead, I was the father who left before their child woke up in the morning, and returned home after they were asleep at night. In an impressive house that I barely spent any time in because funding it meant hardly being there. My weekday moments with my daughter were resigned to consisting of a cursory glance of her asleep in the cot, before quickly resuming work emails or social media, binge-watching TV, scoffing down dinner and shuffling around the house as a bloated ball of lethargy who was struggling to find the time and motivation to moonlight as a composer. All the while continuing to senselessly accumulate piles of video games, movies and other collectable memorabilia that largely remained in their wrapping. All as a way to pacify and distract from the latent feelings of discontent that I felt. This was it. A so-called successful life.

Then the world stood still.

## 2020 vision

On 13th March 2020, our office was sent to work from home for two weeks as a precaution to let a mysterious contagious virus blow over. As those two weeks turned into two more, and two more after that, it slowly dawned upon us all that this was an emerging pandemic with no end in sight. Working from home was to become the new normal for an undisclosed period. In the first few weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, three realisations transpired in my life.

Firstly, I quickly realised the seriousness of the pandemic and the ephemeral nature of mortality when my Nan, a great-Aunt, and a number of other extended family members passed away from Coronavirus within a few weeks of one another. It was a bizarre and harrowing experience as families were unable to comfort one another in person, funerals were livestreamed or recorded, and the entire grieving process was muted in such an unceremonious and remote way. These events changed my outlook on life. I have never taken a day on this planet for granted since.

Secondly, as I was sat at home working and looking around my stuffed-to-the-brim 'one day I'll get to this' collection of things, I became aware of just how much stuff I had accumulated over the years. It was obfuscated by how neat and organised everything was. As I looked around the rooms in my house I could see years of accumulation that, in the cold light of day, were in fact nothing more than cluttered and suffocating mausoleums of (mostly) impulse purchases. I had hundreds of Video Games across numerous dedicated bookshelves. Unplayed. I had hundreds of Blurays and DVDs across numerous other dedicated bookshelves. Unwatched. I had mountains of memorabilia and sealed action figures in boxes. Unopened. I had shelves of comics, graphic novels and books. Unread. I had a trunk full of filmmaking and music recording equipment. Unused. I had wardrobes stuffed to the brim with clothes. Unworn. And you know what? The thought of actually using any of this stuff just filled me with a dreaded sense of obligation and exhaustion. Why did I even have it?

The ‘one day I’ll get to this’ opportunity was here. Now. And I didn’t want to get to any of it.

Thirdly, experiencing lockdown for a prolonged period opened my eyes to the big and little things in life I had been missing. Because I was fortunate enough to work from home and wasn’t commuting into London for several hours a day, I could have breakfast, lunch, and dinner with my family every day. I caught up with my wife for a few moments throughout the day. I was able to participate in the bedtime routine and read our daughter a story before bed every night. And yes, I was able to hold my girl. I had been given the gift of clarity. The opportunity to stop and think. Everything I had ever wanted was already here in my life. It was just buried underneath so much other stuff.

Then one day, I randomly rewatched a documentary called *Minimalism: A Documentary about the Important Things*. It explores a movement called Minimalism (also known as intentionalism, simple living, and other names). It interviews various individuals who have been pursuing this lifestyle. Essentially, Minimalism advocates intentionally embracing what you value in your life and minimising everything else that gets in the way. That’s it. It’s the antithesis of the contemporary, more-and-bigger-is-always-better consumerist culture we live in; the opposite of a lifestyle adorned with impulse purchases, upgrades, and success defined by acquisition. I had actually watched the documentary a couple of years prior and aside from a little tidying up and organising, I hadn’t really made any meaningful changes off the back of it. I remember watching it and having a visceral, knee-jerk reaction. Thinking: “I get it. These folks seem to enjoy living with nothing, alone in a white room or whatever. It’s a little entitled and privileged. I don’t have the opportunity they had to make these changes. I like the things I own. I just need to keep going with it all, and then I’ll be satisfied and start enjoying them”. Thinking back it feels like cognitive dissonance on my part.

Whilst I decluttered a bit, thinking about taking Minimalism any further was

just another item on my to-do list of things I'll get around to looking at one day. But for some reason, in the context of lockdown, with time to spare and with these recent realisations in my life, it resonated with me on the second watch. Something clicked. In fact, as I understood more about Minimalism, it lit a fire up underneath me. It gave me a vocabulary to help me express how I was feeling. It gave me a framework for thinking about what I valued in my life and how to make it a reality. I know this reads like hyperbole, but as I looked around my house, out to the world, and into my soul, I saw everything differently. I saw the opportunity to change things. So I got to work.

I began selling, donating, recycling and dumping. Asking myself: Does this item add value to me? Do I actually intend on using it? As I started decluttering, I felt a weight lift. A more pleasing space. Fewer obligations to clean, organise and maintain. I came to realise that it wasn't just about the stuff I was getting rid of; I had bought and kept so much because my identity was wrapped up in it. Removing it was more of an exercise in emotionally letting go than it was in the physical act of getting rid. I owned the video games because I told myself that I was a gamer, and that's what gamers have. I owned the books because I wanted visitors to look at the shelves and see how well-read I was. I owned the action figures because I told myself they showed I got pop culture. I owned the movies and filmmaking equipment because I was an aspiring filmmaker. I spent thousands on music equipment and software because it would make me a better composer. I didn't own these things because I actually got value out of them, but because I thought owning them made me that. I came to realise that, for me, owning things was a false equivalence to having that identity. In fact, it was how I spent my time that shaped my identity, not what I owned. As the weeks began turning into months, I didn't just understand the benefits of Minimalism on an intellectual level; I could see them. I felt them. The implications went beyond the aesthetic impact of decluttering. Because we were housing so much less stuff, we simply needed less space than what we had. The money released from the things we chose to sell, combined with the vast sums saved from commuting, was used to pay off significant amounts of consumer debt we had taken out to renovate and furnish our home.

I use “we” because, shortly after starting, this became something my wife and I did together, which, thankfully, made the entire experience more rewarding, effective, and sustainable. We made the decision to take this a step further and prioritise our values for being close to family by moving back to our hometown (with the optimism that we’d actually be able to see family in person one lockdown had subsided) - we downsized into a smaller house - that came with a smaller mortgage - and with that we were able to pay off the last of our non-mortgage debts. Not only that, but we adopted a minimalist framework for our lives going forward. When our car payments ended, we decided not to buy a new car and repeat that cycle of debt. When our phone contracts ended, we held on a little longer before upgrading just to do it. This isn’t to say we’ve sworn off purchasing anything ever again, but intentionality lies behind everything we acquire and hold on to. We still engage in the practice of constantly reassessing our things in life to question if they are still adding value, and if not then letting them go. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t still feel pangs of resistance as I do this (the fact that we had an entire room full of boxes when we moved, which we eventually got rid of, speaks for itself), but I can confidently say the impulse-buying-consumerist-splurges are unequivocally a thing of the past. Less than a year into the pandemic, we found ourselves in a completely different financial position than at the start of 2020. By paying off consumer debt, downsizing our mortgage, not commuting, and not financing a new car, we reduced our monthly outgoings by over a third (even more in reality if you factor in our new, considered approach to purchases).

However, this was a means to an end, not an end in itself. It meant we had opened up more opportunities in our lives to make new choices. If I were to take a step back and ask myself what my values were in life, I now had more clarity to answer that question: Quality time with my family. Living slower and deeper. Creating.

It was clear to me that if I were to make changes in my life to better align with my values, I had to go further. With all the positive changes I had made, I was still generally busy. I enjoyed parts of my work, but I was still fixated

on promotions as the measure of personal success. I still succumbed to the side-hustle culture, freelancing as a video game composer. If I were to truly embrace the core minimalist philosophy and pursue a life in accordance with my values by minimising everything that gets in the way, I would have a big life choice to make.

## A fork in the road.

I continued to seek ways to bring less into my life. After summoning the courage to have some difficult conversations, and thanks to incredible, understanding, and compassionate management at my job, I was able to step back from the team lead role I had been in, withdraw from consideration for a pending promotion, and begin working part-time. I use the word 'courage' in a slightly tongue-in-cheek way because, whilst it wasn't courageous in a physical or literal sense, acknowledging to myself and others that I no longer aligned my values with the idea of pursuing corporate promotions and the lifestyle that entailed was one of those fork-in-the-road moments that I decided to emphatically embrace with intentionality. It proved to be the most rewarding decision of my professional life. It gave me the freedom to pursue my creative endeavours without the burden of financial uncertainty, and it also made spending quality time with my family a permanent fixture of my weekdays. An unexpected but welcome consequence of this new arrangement was that the elements of my career that I had enjoyed were amplified. I found myself embracing my working week with enthusiasm, energy, and dedication rather than busyness, obligation and resentment. A few months later, we welcomed our second daughter into the world, and our family of three became four. Life had truly changed in so many ways. After two years of doing this and saving enough money to cover expenses for a couple of years, we were ready to take a further leap of uncertainty. I was in a position to embark on a new professional journey by moving away from finance completely for the next couple of years, towards the flexibility and creativity of music composition and video game development, alongside even more active parenting throughout

the weekdays. It is at the start of this new season of my life that I am writing these words.

It is not lost on me that I find myself in an incredibly privileged position, and that such opportunities are not available to everyone. It is easy to succumb to feelings of guilt because, whilst so many were suffering (and continue to suffer) physically, emotionally, and financially, I had experienced two of the most illuminating years of my life and, in many ways, was able to use the pandemic as a period of personal reflection and change. I've come to appreciate that it was only through the privilege of having "succeeded" in a prior way in life that I was gifted the clarity to see it wasn't for me. I found myself with an opportunity to take my life in a different direction. And I took it. As lockdowns began to dissipate and some semblance of normalcy emerged with coronavirus a part of everyday life, the zeitgeist was awash with talk of "the great resignation" and "quiet quitting" (presumably targeted towards individuals like myself who had also stopped to question the status quo they had previously found themselves in), and whilst it took me a couple of years after this period, I too had joined the ranks of this great resignation. We still had (and have) ups and downs, as everyone does, but more importantly, I went through a period of deep re-evaluation and established a new framework for thinking about what a meaningful, successful life meant to me. And for us, Minimalism was a significant and foundational part of that.

Less stuff.

Less fancy job titles.

Less hours commuting.

Less salary.

Less costs.

Less stress.

More time.

More peace.

More moments.

More creativity.

More possibilities.

More life.

The level of personal fulfilment and growth in my life from embracing Minimalism is unparalleled. It has simply and naturally transformed almost every part of my life that I had previously felt any discontent with.

Every part except for one.



# Introduction

If my life is truly this fantastical, minimalist utopia, then what is this book about?

The truth is, there is an area of my life that has been a constant source of mental clutter. A clutter that I have been unable to let go of: my relationship with food. I've struggled with food and my weight for as long as I can remember, approaching obesity at various points from childhood. I've been on the boom-and-bust roller coaster of weight loss and weight gain ever since. I've tried *acquiring* my way to a better place with it many times:

I've tried the calorie-counting apps.

I've tried buying the fat-free, sugar-free, calorie-free foods.

I've tried signing up for diet programmes.

I've tried fasting for long periods.

I've tried reading the advice on the *one best way* to do food.

I've tried the expensive gym memberships.

These ultimately proved to be unsustainable for me. I would invariably fall off the wagon and end up in a worse state than when I began. It's not just the weight either; it's snacking, cycles of shame and guilt, unproductive energy spikes, and a general preoccupation with food. Whether this is due to a lack of willpower, a lack of self-esteem, or a lack of understanding of my own mind and body as to what *healthy* actually is (or indeed a combination of these) is something that I don't know. But I do know that I cannot consume my way into having a better relationship with food. Whilst on the outside looking in, I am an overweight guy, but certainly not to the levels of morbid obesity; the

bigger problem for me is that I'm exhausted from mentally wrestling with it. I'm tired of thinking about food and feeling as though it has some kind of hold over me, claiming so much of my mental and physical energy.

Enter Minimalism. It's an angle I hadn't explored in any real depth. Namely, actively unpacking my thoughts in this space and exploring how a Minimalist framework can help give me the time and space to understand the issues and opportunities better, establish habits that foster a healthy relationship with food and align with my values, and work out what is getting in the way of achieving these things and getting rid of it. Many of the Minimalist books I have read describe how their journeys to simplify their lives have led to self-evident, seemingly effortless weight loss and a natural pathway to greater physical health. Unfortunately, this hasn't been the case for me. It would seem that for some people, certain areas of life are harder to let go of than others. For me, it's this. So that's what this book is about. It's the opposite of the old adage "write what you know". I'm honestly writing precisely what I *don't* know in the hope that doing so will provide me with some emergent insights about myself that I can use to form a framework and create a point of reference now and in the future. Having written it, I'm in a much better place than I once was.

This is also a good place to caveat that I'm not a Doctor, a nutritionist, or a therapist – in case your reading of any of my personal thoughts and opinions here mistakenly crosses into the territory of advice or psychoanalysis for you. This isn't that. I'm just a bloke living in the suburbs of southern England with his wife and kids, who follows Minimalism, has an unhealthy relationship with food, and cannot get out of his own head about it. This is really, rather selfishly, a reference book for me. An exercise in introspection, reflection, and self-discovery so that I can help myself. A literal self-help book in the truest sense of the term. But one that I hope could help serve as a companion to others in some small way as well. Alternatively, you may find this to be more realistically the flowery, incoherent ramblings of yet another privileged millennial seeking self-actualisation within their overly sensitive, self-centred soul. Only this time it's specifically around the act of stuffing

## INTRODUCTION

their face. Written by someone who is paradoxically attempting to get over their obsession with food by obsessively obsessing about their obsession with food. It's possibly a little bit of both. I'll let you decide.

# 1

## What Do You Want Your Life To Be?

**E**at less. Exercise more. Problem solved.

When I began my journey with minimalism, I knew that decluttering would help me create a more pleasing space and provide me with greater mental clarity. But after that initial burst of motivation, it became difficult to know why to keep continuing unless I had a purpose I was gravitating towards. When I started, I didn't know what that purpose was. Years into my minimalist journey, these values have emerged as the ones I live by today. Not that they're perfect. But they're perfect for me.

When I think about how we apply this mindset in our relationship with food, I see similar trappings. We fixate on the blunt objective of eating less and exercising more to lose weight and get fit and healthy. While these actions are objectively correct, in my view, they are just acts masquerading as a direction for living your life. It misses the point entirely. It doesn't address the root cause of a person's relationship with a thing in the first place or offer insights into how, and crucially, why a person would want to incorporate these acts through the values they live by. Without that, it's just doing for the sake of doing because "it's good for you", and it will not be sustainable. Instead, when I think about a healthy relationship with food, I ask myself the same question I still ask myself today about minimalism: what do I want my life to be?

## WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR LIFE TO BE?

As a core part of my journey with minimalism, I discovered values that align with my definition of a meaningful life. They are spending quality time with my family (and friends), living and thinking more slowly and deeply, and expressing myself creatively. Applying a minimalist mindset means getting rid of anything that stands in the way. When it comes to food and exercise, I apply the same framing. What role does food play in what I want my life to be? I carve out time in my routine to focus on cooking new meals, experimenting with baking alongside my daughters as a fun activity, or making a birthday gift for the people in our lives. Calorie-wise, this may be no different from buying a pack of cakes or biscuits from a shop, but the act of baking allows me to learn new things, be creative, and spend more time with the people I love. Aligned with my values. It's the same with pizza, which I make from scratch for a family movie night or an evening with friends. Or burgers, which my wife and I make together. I've even started experimenting with fresh fruit, trying different varieties and planting my own fruit trees to spend more time in the solitude of nature and stay active while doing so. I pair my exercise routine with a social activity, doing it with my brother and our friend. Or, solo, as a way to unwind with music or an audiobook. These actions may not look that different to anyone else from the outside. But because I have aligned them with the values I want to live by, there are far fewer impulse purchases at the checkout aisle. There is less overindulging in snacks that offer little in the way of nutrition or satiation. There's no resisting exercise but doing it anyway, simply because it's good for me. The vicious cycle of stress, comfort eating, shame, and guilt is, by and large, a thing of the past. My relationship with food aligns with what I want my life to be.

What this course of action looks like for you could be completely and utterly different. There are over 8 billion of us on the planet, and each of us has a life unique to us. What we value, what we have available to choose from, and the privileges and opportunities bestowed upon us mean that what good looks like for us will vary. It will determine the activities you do, the foods you eat, when and how you eat them, with whom, and why. And indeed, a much larger topic is the structural inequalities that many of us face, making it challenging

to find the time and means to live a values-based lifestyle, even if we wanted to. It's not a path we all get to walk down easily, completely or right away. But for me, moralising the rote prescription of a "good" diet and exercise, and the health and beauty implications associated with a certain weight or lifestyle, are second to whether an individual is genuinely (and honestly) living by the values they determine give them a meaningful life. And if they are (and, of course, assuming those values are legal and do not harm others), I don't judge. It sounds like I have it all figured out. I don't. Like everything in my life, I'm not perfect with it. I slip up from time to time, as everybody does. But with this perspective guiding my actions, I've found a sustainable and effective way to introduce food and exercise into my life that works for me. For now, at least. Nothing ever stays static, and, like so many things in life, including minimalism, it is more of a direction than a destination. It'll change over time, but as long as those changes continue to be in line with what I want my life to be, I'm golden.

## It Is Going To Take Time

**T**ime is a funny thing. As humans, we're famously bad at gauging the relativity of things that are orders of magnitude outside of our immediate day-to-day lives. Whether it's our ability to grasp the relative significance of something described in billions or the effect of exponential growth, we tend to overestimate short-term effects and underestimate long-term effects. This is known as Amara's Law. While it is typically used to describe our ability to estimate the effects of technology over time, the bias applies to all walks of life, including personal behaviours.

In my journey with minimalism, I realised I had been falling prey to this bias as well. When it comes to my expectations around living a healthy life, I still am. Having a minimalist mindset has transformed my relationship with decision-making. Before, when I considered making a purchase, it was, in many ways, driven by a latent expectation to conform to a certain lifestyle and acquire a certain identity. Buying my way to contentment was a quick fix. And if I had the means to buy it, then why not? I was investing in my future self, right? What I didn't realise was that it is not only the monetary cost of a thing that matters in the long term. There is the time it takes to clean, maintain, repair, and administer. There's the attention it takes to research, set up, and get use out of. There's the space needed to keep it around. There's the obligation that festers into ensuring that it lives up to the impossible

expectation you heaped upon it for how owning it would make you feel. And all that's assuming you didn't financially indebt your future self to acquire the thing in the first place. In the short term, it was a quick decision. A little hit of dopamine. But the long-term effects were suffocating, chipping away at my peace and contentment. While I can only reflect on my own lived experience, I'm now still several years into decluttering my life, and I've yet to truly regret letting go of anything because the corresponding release of time, attention, and obligation has vastly outweighed any downsides. So how can I apply this mindset to my relationship with food? I use a minimalist mindset here to reconcile my short-term food decisions with the longer-term values I want to shape my life around. I have come to appreciate that, for me, the quick fixes of fad diets and expensive exercise equipment overestimate their short-term value and completely underestimate the time, attention, obligation, and ultimate dissatisfaction that will fester in the long term.

A couple of years ago, I joined a flashy health club. In the short term, it felt great; it meant I was taking my health seriously. What I didn't consider was the expense's impact on my longer-term financial goals, or that it was a ~20min drive to get there, park, and walk through the building to the gym. I already had evening and weekend obligations. There was a companion app I had to use. When I did go to the gym, I usually went solo. There was also a cafe and a restaurant on the premises, which I ended up frequenting. In the longer term, I had spent far more time, money, and attention than I had ever intended, and cluttered up my life in the process. I tried to fit the identity of "someone who works out regularly" into my specific life. After a few weeks, I ended up going hardly ever. After a period of reflection, I instead joined a nearby gym at a tenth of the cost, found weekly slots to visit with my brother and our friend, and we began running park runs for free on Saturday mornings. It's now not just exercise; it's mental decompression and a chance to catch up with friends and family. It aligns with the values I hold for a meaningful life over the long term. This has taught me that finding a sustainable relationship with food that works for me may require trial and error, iterative learning, and ultimately may take longer than I anticipate. But I believe that this way of thinking and

doing is a quicker fix than the so-called quick fixes advertised to us.

Consider this: I have been eating food for approximately thirty-eight years. That's nearly 2,000 weeks of habits, routines, preferences, biases - and all of the baggage that goes with them - to form the thing that comprises my relationship with food. Even if I spent the next 6 months (I'll save you the calculation - that's 26 weeks) unpacking that, working towards forging a more sustainable relationship with my health, and failing a few times, that still represents just over 1% of the total timeline of my life so far. That's the equivalent of spending an hour doing something one way and feeling like a failure because you haven't completely turned it around after 30 seconds. Hofstadter's Law encapsulates this perfectly: *"It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's Law."* Spending six months trying something that isn't yet working would feel like a failure to most of us. But in the context of a 38-year time horizon, it barely scratches the surface. So while I will never preach universal truths about one right way to "do minimalism," a lesson I have learned is that quick fixes are rarely quick, and if they don't fit into your life, they're not fixes for you in the first place. It is going to take time.

## Good Is Better Than Perfect

**W**hether it's the Delphic maxim of "Nothing in excess" advocating for moderation, or the aphorism attributed to Voltaire of "Perfect is the enemy of good", long has the struggle of perfectionism existed among us. I think there is a risk that some interpretations of Minimalism can be taken that way, too. The perfect number of items. The perfect environment. The perfect life. A mindset of "Have you really decluttered everything? No? Then you're not really a minimalist." I never really understood this. Finding more through less doesn't mean finding more through nothing. This clicked with me fairly early on in my experience with minimalism. Recognising it as a pragmatic tool in the journey and not a dogmatic destination in and of itself. But when it comes to my relationship with food? For the longest time, I was guilty of this perfectionist attitude too. Struggling to start, share, or continue with anything that improved my diet or general health because the reality of the effort could never truly live up to whatever dreams were in the comfort of my own head. So I never really tried. "I've ruined it. Again." A momentary lapse in judgement resulting in the indulging of a snack I didn't really need. Or a bigger portion than I really needed. Or improper planning, preventing anything other than a piss poor performance of grazing and snacking in between unsatisfying meals. Losing the streak. Falling off. Failing. This would always result in me thinking to myself, "I've ruined it now, so what's the point? I might as well quit

altogether” Cue the shame. Cue the guilt. Cue the cookies.

But this isn't a healthy way to think about things. These days, I think slightly differently, through my own minimalist lens. Let's say I've crafted a regular diet for myself that I find nutritious, nourishing, delicious, and sustainable, but on one afternoon, I indulge in a piece of birthday cake at a family celebration. Does it mean that I've ruined my entire diet? In my view, minimalism teaches me to let go of guilt, shame, and the expectation of perfection, and instead embrace the aspects of the situation that align with my values. This means recognising that I have the privilege of family, the time and means to attend a celebration, and the opportunity to be around the people I love. Maybe I get the chance to bake that cake from scratch and add some personal touches that bring joy to me and others. It means recognising that my diet is good enough for me to even notice this alleged infraction. An exception that proves a rule. But is the relentless chase of that perfection - to never indulge in birthday cake again - required to have a healthy, balanced, sustainable relationship with food? Not in my view. Sure, I can decline the piece of cake and still have these wonderful recognitions in my life, but a perceived imperfection reminds me that I have intentionally crafted my diet, and these instances are an opportunity to recognise a part of the rich tapestry that comprises my life. Bumps in the road. A road with a freakin' fantastic vista. But if I indulged in cake all the time in every situation? Well, guilt and shame may or may not be there, but they certainly wouldn't make me reflect or change. It wouldn't be notable to me because there is nothing in that situation for it to be imperfect. A perfect vicious cycle of indulge-shame-deprive-indulge would be in place in its stead. But instead, this apparent dietary disruption is the very thing that reminds me that, by embracing less elsewhere in my diet, I have the clarity to notice a perceived challenge in the first place, one that stems from choices that align with my values. To me, this is the power of minimalism. Eating it intentionally introduces an imperfection into an otherwise good diet. So guess what? Good is better than perfect.

What do we even mean by perfect, anyway? Most would take it to mean

the absence of anything wrong. According to the Oxford English Dictionary definition, we get the following: “*Having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics; as good as it is possible to be*”. This definition allows for slip-ups, mistakes, and change. It allows something to be complete and flawed. It calls for what’s pragmatically possible. Something can have all the desirable elements, and even some undesirable ones, and still be perfect. These things are not mutually exclusive. Reading this definition, I feel as though we’ve twisted what it even means to be perfect. By letting go of the expectations and binary rigidity of my relationship with food to have to be a certain way – completely, all the time, every day, in a specific, unflinchingly “perfect” way – I can use minimalism to fully embrace an actual perfect diet with intentionality, including all of its imperfections. So the next time you’re feeling as though your diet, your weight, your health, or your exercise regime isn’t perfect, just remember: It means you’ve reflected and actually tried. It means you’ve succeeded in some things and failed at others. It means you’ve changed and kept going. It means things are going well enough for you to notice. It’s good, and that’s better than perfect.

## Letting Myself Go: Labels And Self-Image

**L**abels are a funny thing. We use them as templates to make quick judgements about ourselves and others. If somebody you're talking to is a professional Senior something, they must be authoritative, experienced, competent, and intelligent. If someone starts a response with "as a parent", they must be compassionate, patient and responsible. When making small-talk, we use "what is it that you do?" as a short-hand for "who is it that you are?". Labels are blunt instruments for defining who a person is or isn't. We use them to avoid taking the time to understand one another's context, nuance, and genuine idiosyncrasies. Instead, we just mentally compartmentalise and move on with our day. They wouldn't understand. They're a creative. A technologist. A manager. An accountant. A writer. It is perhaps because of my own insecurities with not fitting very neatly into certain labels - whether that's through my interests, professions, political outlook, or even my cultural heritage that I've always had a general preoccupation with the role of labels and the extent to which we use them to define an overall identity for ourselves as individuals. They are not inherently bad, but our relationship with them can be reductive.

During my exploration of minimalism, I realised that I too was using labels - and all of the baggage associated with them - in order to try and work out my own identity. At one point, I was an audit director, so I was in the throes of

chasing corporate titles, status, and the lifestyle that came with them. I was also a composer, so I bought all the composer things, attended the composer events, talked the composer talk, and thought the composer thoughts. My definitions of success were wrapped up in whatever society had deemed it to be for those labels. It's the same when thinking of myself as a sound designer, a game developer, or a writer. My time, money, attention, perceptions, and sense of self-worth all revolved around the labels I had given myself. Letting go of them, of trying to "find the tribe", and instead revolving my life around my core values - and celebrating being an interdisciplinary person in doing that - is one of the greatest gifts that minimalism has given me. And yet I realise that there's one label that I've continued to carry around my entire life: that I am an overweight person.

I'm not saying that I need to simply think myself thin. I know there is a medical definition of overweight that takes objective variables such as height and weight into account. I also know many people have it worse than I do. But I'm not living their lives; I'm living mine. I'm coming at this from the perspective of how we use labels to see ourselves. To me, there is a difference between being someone who is currently overweight and being an overweight person. To me, the shift in language can be insightful. The latter is a label that risks cementing an identity and perpetuating a vicious cycle. It serves only as a vehicle for thought-terminating clichés. You don't go outside to try a new activity because you're an overweight person. You shouldn't be looking forward to that meal because you're an overweight person. You've always been out of control with your portions ever since you were a child; no wonder you're an overweight person. The guilt, the shame - and to be honest, even the pride - of a label is missing the point. If it's not serving you and doesn't align with your values, why not try letting it go? My relationship with food, body, and health may simply be the emergent result of living more authentically, in line with my values. What that actually looks like for me will be different from what it does for you. And that's the point.

## LETTING MYSELF GO: LABELS AND SELF-IMAGE

## Check Your Privilege, Minimalist

**S**ave your money. Simplify your space. Clear your mind. More time, money, and energy to do what you want with your life. Welcome to Minimalism. It all sounds great. But simplifying is not always so simple. One of the most common critiques I hear about minimalism is that it's steeped in a blindly privileged perspective. It's all well and good advocating for decluttering when you've got stuff to clutter up in the first place, a home to clutter with things, and the time and means to change. This was my perspective for a long time. In some ways, it still is. However, over time, I've gleaned some nuance and context for the role privilege can play in minimalism and how I can apply that to my relationship with food. Minimalism is not just white walls and good vibes only. It's an invitation to reflect on how we make decisions with the privileges we do have, however limited.

Firstly: yes. Minimalism is privileged. I think there is a merit in the argument that minimalism and privilege are inexorably linked. Structural forces at play create inequalities in our society, granting certain privileges to some and withholding them from others. But rather than moralise privilege as a bad thing, I would argue that minimalism can be a lens on the smallest choices we make in what we consume. After all, privilege exists in more places than many of us are comfortable admitting. If you're reading this, chances are you hold some kind of privilege - whether through education, time, or access. And

that's not something everyone has. It's often easier to point out the privilege in others than to see the privilege in ourselves. But rather than dwelling on comparison as the thief of joy, I would advocate focusing on how minimalism can help us embrace the freedoms we do have in our lives. Let's take the example of a phone. Many of us have the privilege of being offered contracts that put us into debt just to own one. For someone with less disposable income, the decision to acquire or upgrade one of these devices is more consequential than for someone with the privileged means to buy a dozen outright. In economics, there's a concept called the marginal propensity to consume: the idea that the less money you have, the higher proportion of it you have to spend on consumables (rather than saving it). So the idea of minimalism - to consider whether having that phone truly aligns with your values - becomes a bigger deal to someone with less disposable income compared to someone with more. This rings true for me when I consider that many in our society can afford to buy houses, take vacations, and purchase luxury items, yet they fund those purchases almost entirely through mortgages, consumer debt, credit cards, and overdrafts. They have some privilege to choose in their lives, and the means to go into the corresponding debt, but they can also fall perilously close into the trappings of the vicious cycle that often entails.

A life of privilege can act as a cushion against bad decisions, but minimalism can be a toolkit that offers all of us the same opportunity to reflect and realign. This can apply to all of our consumption habits. Food is indeed something we must consume to survive. And when we're struggling to find the time and means to cook, it's understandable that our society is continuing to go in the direction that we eat whatever is fastest and cheapest, regardless of the impact on our long-term health and wellbeing. For those struggling, it can be a matter of survival. At the same time, there is also the cycle of shame surrounding being overweight; beauty standards aside, we can often focus on the privilege of access to food as an impediment to action in our own lives. I know for the longest time I didn't acknowledge my unhealthy relationship with food because people are starving in the world, and my problems are small in comparison. It is easy to see how we put up and shut up because

someone somewhere has it worse than we do. But wherever in our lives we have a choice, we have the privilege of choosing differently. In such scenarios, minimalism can help us frame our choices by inviting us to explore how less can be more. That could mean spending less time and money elsewhere in our lives and instead investing them in learning about food, nutrition, cooking, or the wonder of a family meal. It takes time. It takes money. It takes privilege.

It's easy to dismiss a minimalist lifestyle as the cold aesthetic of privileged California dreamers. But to me, those with the ways and means to afford a diet of anything alongside access to personal trainers, cosmetic weight loss treatments, or cosmetic procedures have less to gain from minimalism than those of us who do not have such privilege, and more to gain from making the few choices we do have through a lens of what truly aligns with our values for a meaningful life. That includes the food that we eat. Choosing the luxury of an indulgent home-cooked meal and a meaningful conversation could win out over takeout and TikTok if you had that choice, and it aligns with your version of a meaningful life. In this context, embracing minimalism feels like a responsible thing to do to me. The alternative is a lifestyle of chasing the bigger, the immediate, and the more performative, a life burdened with debt, distraction, discontent, and relentless comparison. I've been there. No, thank you. I know that this chapter is light on specifics. The truth is, there is no one-size-fits-all way to consume things. Including food. There isn't just one type of privilege, nor one way to practice minimalism. Our lives are all unique. We each face different challenges, privileges, and levels of freedom, allowing us to make different choices in our lives. I believe that intentionality, simplicity, and the values-based decision-making that minimalism brings can apply to all of us, especially those of us with less privilege than others.

## 6

### Hurry Up And Slow Down

**B**usyness used to play a big role in my life. Rushing to get the early morning train. Passing ads boasting how quickly a coffee can go from machine to gullet. Enduring performative productivity through the number of emails you're blasting through or flitting between seemingly endless meetings. Tolerating impatient, curt, and uncaring attitudes from people while masquerading them as the consequences of working in the so-called "fast-paced environment" of a capital city. Engaging in inauthentic and half-hearted conversations with one eye on your phone and the other on your watch. Hustling to churn out project after project. "Yeah, busy!" is the default badge-of-honour response to any conversation about how you are. If something in my life ever broke, I'd just buy another one of them instantly with a single click. Next-day delivery to boot. Fast food. Fast fashion. Fast news and media. Fast life. A culture worshipping at the altar of the fast. It promises you that if you do more, work more, produce more, acquire more, and consume more, then you are worth more and your life will be more. The factors that give rise to a more-is-better culture, paired with the almost subconscious allure of instant gratification, have also coincided with an increasing number of us being anxious, obese, tired, and just plain dissatisfied. Unsustainable for the planet, our attention spans, and us as individuals more broadly.

Minimalism has helped me to instead embrace the value of slowness. Saving

time, money, space, and effort through decluttering and adopting a more mindful attitude towards my consumption habits has paved the way for me to experiment with slowing down and embracing the breathing room to make more intentional choices in my life. A culture of slowness has developed into a wider movement spanning music, cinema, fashion, politics, and even food. Without the knee-jerk reactions that busyness often incentivises, slowness can instead encourage a culture of nuance, context, and careful, considered introspection. Cal Newport explores this in his latest book, *Slow Productivity*. By advocating for the three values of doing fewer things, working at a natural pace, and obsessing over quality, we can paradoxically achieve more of what we want in our lives. While I have my own hang-ups about productivity and hustle culture more broadly, it's a message I can get behind.

In my own life, this means I reduce or eliminate certain things so I can have more time to think things through. In the context of food, this could mean keeping a food diary, planning meals, baking something from scratch, or cooking a family meal with a food I haven't tried before. Slowing down gives me space and flexibility to try new things, learn from them (spoilers: not everything I try is a resounding success), and work out exactly what works for my family and me. Both sustainably and enjoyably. For me, these kinds of insights were not found in fast food, meal-replacement shakes, or other quick-fix packets of whatever. It will be different for every person, and that takes time and thought to figure out. Slowing down can give you that time. To be honest, it's still not something that comes particularly naturally to me. I still feel the urge to get things done as quickly as possible; I still make compromises in my food choices due to competing priorities; and I'm still not the paragon of patience I would like to be. And sure, all this slowing down is easier said than done. Busyness and the feeling of not having time to slow down can feel like the one unifying force we all share, regardless of how much money is in the bank or any other privilege we may have.

But minimalism is all about focusing on what matters to you and minimising anything else that gets in the way. It may involve making some difficult

## HURRY UP AND SLOW DOWN

decisions, meeting obligations, having conversations, and making sacrifices. But for me, unlocking the insights into which values and food choices align with my vision of a good life has come directly from slowing down, trying different things, and thinking it all through along the way. What are you waiting for?

## Quality Matters

One of the most revelatory aspects of my journey with minimalism has been how it has helped me re-evaluate my relationship to quality and quantity. Why buy a dozen games on sale if I'm never going to play them, when for the same price I could intentionally buy just one that I'd actually experience? Why indulge in fast fashion if I'm in the privileged position to have the means to buy a single quality product that will last longer and that I'd actually use? Why spend months scrolling through the sweet nothings on social media when I could devote that time to deeper thinking, reading, and writing, from which I actually get more value? In this chapter, I will describe three ways I've begun to frame this in the context of one of the most challenging areas of my life: my relationship with food.

### 1. The quality of the F word.

Let's start with the most obvious area: food itself. I used to prioritise taste and cost over quality. If it tasted good and was cheap, it was a win-win. Even when tracking calories, my focus was on the numbers rather than the nutrients. Imagine consuming 2,000 calories from doughnuts versus a range of fresh foods high in protein, fats, and carbs. Both choices meet the calorie goal,

but only one leaves me feeling energised, nourished, and satiated. The other results in energy spikes, hunger pangs, and a struggle to avoid overeating. Quality, not just quantity, determines the sustainability and enjoyment of a diet over time. The book *Ultra Processed People* by Chris van Tulleken also helped me think through this. It's a deep dive into the insidious world of Ultra-Processed Food ("UPF") - often cheap, abundant and addictive - and the effects of global food supply chains with resultant products produced by companies that ultimately exist to make a profit and not necessarily to nourish bodies. A part of the (many) points that this book makes is that UPF, in particular, has evolved over time to misalign the nutrients in its products from those that the body expects from the corresponding calories. This incentivises you to eat more of it. Then buy more of it. Eat more. Buy more. Eat more. Buy more. Eat more. This feedback loop helps profit-driven companies but harms our health. And thanks to corporate Darwinism, the market will invariably create the most pernicious version of a 'food' that it is able to.

I've made a number of dietary changes to prioritise quality of food over quantity. For example: Eliminating (or limiting) my intake of UPF. Lessening my portions (which is often easier said than done), baking my own bread, baking (as well as cakes and biscuits), making my own pizzas from scratch (including the bases, incorporating whole foods into my diet, and choosing water as the majority of my drink choices. It's not lost on me that much of the above costs more in time and money than if I just bought it off the shelf. I completely get that for so many people, these choices involve privilege. Many don't have the means, the time, or the expertise to make choices that prioritise high-quality food. People have to feed their families in the here and now, work, and juggle the unrelenting demands of modern life. Quick, cheap options often win out in the face of life's challenges. There are broader societal causal mechanisms at play than people simply waking up and deciding to eat junk food all day. However, where I do have freedom to choose, I strive for quality over quantity in my food choices.

## 2. The quality of the outcome.

This is an area entirely down to individual preferences: why do I want to eat healthy? What am I ultimately hoping to get out of it? I had spent much of my life under the assumption that I should eat healthy, exercise and lose weight so I could live a long life. I've realised this mindset focuses more on the quantity of life than its quality. Am I really concerned with making it to the grand age of 100 if, for the vast majority of that time, I've spent it unhappy and unfulfilled, unable to do the things I wanted to do in life? Not in my view. I want to run around with my daughters in our garden. I want to go for a stroll and embrace solitude. I want to go on hiking trips and feel energised throughout the day. These aspirations speak to the quality of my life, regardless of how long I get to enjoy it, and they guide my food choices accordingly. Of course, if given the choice, I'd choose both quality and quantity. However, our choices are often limited here. We can only choose actions, such as a diet, that align with our desired quality of life.

## 3. The quality that aligns with my values.

Minimalism involves identifying your values and removing anything that hinders them. It often starts with decluttering your home, but can extend to other areas such as your finances, career, relationships, and even diet choices. For example, family meals are a core value for me. My wife, daughters and I have breakfast together most mornings, and we make pancakes together from scratch on Sundays. This commitment means that practising things such as intermittent fasting, gym sessions first thing in the morning, or limiting calories at breakfast time are simply off the table for me. Instead, we prioritise our family meals, which align our food choices with our shared values. Similarly, on Mondays, my wife and I host friends at our house for group cooking and experimenting with new recipes. These gatherings often involve more elaborate and indulgent meals than we might otherwise prepare, but they are among the highlights of our week. The conversations and

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connections made during those meals are invaluable to us. Even if they're not considered the healthiest. In my view, aligning my food choices with the value of quality time with family and friends is more important to me than just perfecting nutritional content.

## My Minimalist Mistake

**S**everal years into embracing minimalism, I realise that I have been making one crucial mistake. I have conflated minimalism with efficiency and productivity, and, as a result, swapped physical clutter for digital clutter. Is this another one of those pieces bemoaning modern technology and its hijacking of our attention spans, clarity and mental well-being? Well, yes. I completely sleepwalked into this one.

When I embraced minimalism, practically everything in my life changed for the better. When I decluttered, I was able to combine shelves of books into a single easy-to-use eReader. I could even get rid of that eventually because I had an app on my phone. When I decluttered, I didn't need a notepad or even a laptop to write. I have an excellent note-taking app on my phone. When I decluttered, I didn't need my camera or audio recorder to capture an idea for a music composition. I just need to whip out my phone, and that'll do the job. When I decluttered, I didn't need a million different ways to keep in touch with the people in my life. I use a single Messaging platform to stay in contact with those I speak to regularly. It's an app. On my phone. You get the point. I had inadvertently focused my entire attention on a device, rendering me completely dependent on it. It's here where I can see I've made a bit of a misstep. This isn't minimalism. This isn't bringing less into my life. It's just an exchange of one form of clutter for another. I can see now that this

approach was actually productivity disguised as minimalism. I thought I was saving time by owning and maintaining less, but all that time and attention were sucked right back into that little glowing screen. A zero-sum game. If anything, it made some things worse: Waking up to a brand new day? Phone. Washing up? Phone. Stood waiting to collect my daughter from school. Phone. Cooking an evening meal? Phone. Talking to a loved one for a finite amount of time that I'll never get back in the one precious life we've been given? Phone. In my desire to declutter my space and physical possessions, I had cluttered my mind. Did I really embrace minimalism to be this inattentive? To not notice the little things? To not be present with the people I care most about in the world? To not look up and care?

After reading Cal Newport's excellent *Digital Minimalism*, I made a number of changes, such as turning my device to greyscale, uninstalling all browsers, and limiting my screen time. The detox worked. Until I slowly dwindled back into old habits. Like a diet revolving around a place of deprivation, I wasn't able to make a long-term impact from this single act of change. By concentrating so many of my tasks - even intentional, 'productive' ones - into one place, I allowed my relationship with this thing to slowly eke back into a place of mind-numbing inertia. With idle screen time being how I spent too much of my precious time. This is the opposite of my values. If this is what it means to be fast and efficient in your life, then count me out of the productivity game. This serves as a reminder to myself that minimalism is not some one-and-done thing. It's not only about getting rid of what you can see. It's not some strategy to inject efficiency into every facet of your day. It's a process of constant re-evaluation and introspection. Of questioning how less can bring you more, both in ways you can see and ways that you can't. This is true whether it's my relationship with technology, food, or even other people.

## The Time to Indulge

**O**n 31st December, we celebrate the year just gone. We let our hair down. We eat. We drink. We be merry. After all, the hard work to change begins fresh tomorrow. A few weeks in, we celebrate pancake day. The tradition itself tends to be lost in favour of the swathes of pancake batter, sugar, and lemon juice on sale. Better buy it quick; you can't miss pancake day, and it's only one day! Around this date, it's also Valentine's Day. The ultimate excuse to showcase your love through chocolate. Buy all the chocolates to show all that love. A few weeks later, it's Mother's Day. Have you gone and bought that box of chocolates? Why not? You love your mother, don't you? Go on - treat yourself to one while you're there. It's buy one, get one free! Easter is up! Celebrate the occasion with a mountain of chocolate eggs and other confectionery. Go on, it's only once a year. Now it's Father's Day. More confectionery. More presents. How else will he know you love him? It's Halloween! Trick or treat! Sweets, candy, and chocolate galore. Indulge, it only comes around once a year. Nice costume, by the way. Where did you get it? It's Black Friday. Get those bulk deals quickly! You're going to eat it all at some point anyway, right? So you might as well buy it in advance. And now, as we approach the end of the year, it's Christmas time. Cheese, mince pies, cake, pudding, chocolate, nuts and more. You've worked hard all year, so why not? 'Tis the season, after all. No matter where we look, we are confronted (nay, affronted) with signals that we should be indulging. That we are missing out if

we do not consume whatever is being sold to us. There is always an occasion.

You don't even have to stick to the events I've mentioned above. Take your Birthday, a public holiday, a sporting event, heck - take a Friday, and there will be a product being advertised to us at some point in our day that we deserve to indulge in whatever it is they're peddling. We are being told that we are not enough unless we buy a solution to the problem created by those same societal mechanisms in the first place. Just look at the two times in the year where there is a prolonged amount of time in between the events I mentioned above: firstly, New Year's. New year, new you, right? How can you begin to be a better person unless you grab that gym membership, running shoes, fat-free-protein-heavy-whatever-the-fuck-bar and just wait to watch those pounds drop right off? Secondly, summer. Attention shifts to barbecues, ice cream, and good vibes only. Alongside people being made to despise their own bodies unless they are beach body ready, an insidious term that once again preys on individuals to try and spend their way out of it. It is a constant boom and bust of consumption based on weaponising an individual's feelings of inadequacy, obligation, or self-esteem. This is the cult of consumerism. And it can get in the bin.

When I embraced a minimalist lifestyle, I mentioned before that I saw the world differently. I stopped seeing bargains and realised I was constantly being sold to. First the problem, and then the solution. In a constant back-and-forth that was claiming my time, money, attention, and well-being. To navigate this, I had to change my relationship with consumption. I have found this hardest to do in my relationship with food. Looking back, I have definitely been susceptible to the (empty) promise of fulfilment if only I would consume this one. Last. Thing. I am making slow, sustained progress toward addressing this by considering this relationship in the context of Minimalism itself. Because Minimalism is finding what you value in life and getting rid of everything that gets in the way of that, I've been able to focus on my own definition of when and how to indulge. Rather than using deprivation as a means to 'save

up' the right to indulge guilt-free, I can use it to assess whether something actually adds value to my life in the first place. Will this meal nourish my body and add value to my day? Or will I wake up tomorrow with regret and shame? Will indulging this now affect me in the long term? Is this meal going to be a great accompaniment to a wonderful conversation or a new memory? I am not judging those deciding to indulge for whatever reason. You do you. But these are the types of questions I now ask myself. Whether or not it actually makes a difference in my decisions, my reasons for making them are based on my own intentional values of who I am, not outsourced to an advertising campaign telling me who I should be.

## Productivity, Parenthood, And Constraints

**H**ere is the best way to optimise your day: set your alarm for 4 am and don't hit snooze. Make your bed and spend 30 minutes clearing your mind in solitude. Hit the gym. Eat a carefully prepared, nutritionally complete breakfast as you reflect. Get to work early, ahead of the competition. Do your most important work without distraction. Hustle. Leave time to unwind at the end of the day. Above all: protect your time, without exception. It's sacred.

Ugh.

This is the type of narrow-minded advice I see constantly vying for my attention as the one best way to be productive in modern life. I don't buy it. It's almost certainly written by a demographic that thinks most people have the same responsibilities and options in life as they do. The idea that "everybody has 24 hours in the day" completely discounts the circumstances of an individual's life.

Let's take an example close to home for me: the privilege of being a husband and parent. What if you're not in control of when, how well, and even where you sleep? What if you have others in your life depending on you to get them dressed, fed, and off to school on time? What if there isn't someone else

there who willingly puts aside their own goals and dedicates their life solely to cooking your food, washing your dishes, cleaning your clothes, and tidying your house? Protecting my “sacred time” in that context is nothing but an unflinchingly insular, inherently selfish course of action that doesn’t align with my version of being a present parent or a supportive spouse. The other side of the coin is that it’s not an easy task to think about exercise or a good diet when you’re trying to juggle various parental responsibilities and just get through the day. Even maintaining basic hygiene was considered a win for us in the early days of our children’s lives. But rather than languishing in resentment and resigning myself to a life of lethargy and poor food choices, I have come to think of constraints as a key part of sustainable productivity.

I’ve discovered several ways parenthood helps me improve my productivity and cultivate better relationships with food, exercise, and my overall health. Firstly, with early mornings. My daughters are early risers. I’ve been fortunate to often not have to set an alarm, so I (usually!) embrace early mornings and start our routine with time to spare, including preparing family breakfasts during the week. Choosing to stay up late is also a more considered choice than it once was. There’s also the outdoors. I’ve rediscovered a love of nature and being active in it. Whether that’s walking to the local children’s park, a trip to explore around our local forest, or spending time gardening and playing outdoor games. When it comes to school runs, we’re fortunate enough to live within walking distance of our daughter’s schools. This means that we are outdoors walking considerably more simply by virtue of our routines. Making sure we provide plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, cook meals, and limit the snacks and treats we give our children has definitely helped my own dietary discipline. It’s not something we get perfect, but it is more of a natural consideration in our lives than it otherwise would be. Lastly, with baking. Making bread, cakes, and biscuits from scratch has become a regular activity with my daughters, whether for gifts or just as a tasty treat. A more active lifestyle, more time with family, including the solitude of the outdoors, and more time being mindful of different food choices. These are all things that align with my values for a meaningful life, and they result directly from the

constraints of parenthood, not despite them.

Becoming a parent and being a stay-at-home dad for the last year or so has, without exception, been the greatest privilege of my life. It's also given me a fresh perspective on things I had previously taken for granted in my perception of what good productivity looks like for me. It's opened my eyes to how the trials and tribulations of having young children can also serve as opportunities to embrace constraints as a part of my journey with a healthy lifestyle. You don't have to have kids for this to apply to your life. We all have responsibilities in our lives that we often prioritise over ourselves. Maybe these constraints can help you, too.

## Closing Thoughts

**I** started on the journey with minimalism over five years ago. In so many ways, my life is unrecognisable from what it was when the journey began. I wanted this book to serve as an exercise to help me let go of one of the hardest things I was still holding onto: an unhealthy relationship with food. Using minimalism as a framework to address this has been a wonderful and effective project for me. It is light on specific, prescriptive how-tos and doesn't focus on a particular weight or physical outcome. Instead, it highlights several insights that apply uniquely to each of us. How this looks in your life and what you specifically do to explore these topics will be different for each of us. I do not think there are specific instructions for “solve” topics like this in one-size-fits-all products or diets.

For the first time in my life, I've found a sustainable way to make food amplify the joy in my life rather than diminish it. Whether it helps forever, I can't say. But it helps for now. I hope some of the reflections in here can help you, too.

## Bibliography and Further Reading

**T**he following are either mentioned throughout this book or have offered me some wonderful insights into Minimalism or related topics more broadly:

**Love People, Use Things: Because the Opposite Never Works**

Joshua Fields Millburn & Ryan Nicodemus | Bluebird, 2021 | ISBN: 9781529071981

**Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life**

Joshua Fields Millburn & Ryan Nicodemus | Asymmetrical Press, 2011 | ISBN: 9780615648224

**Everything That Remains: A Memoir by The Minimalists**

Joshua Fields Millburn & Ryan Nicodemus | Asymmetrical Press, 2014 | ISBN: 9781938793189

**Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less**

Greg McKeown | Virgin Books, 2014 | ISBN: 9780753555163

**Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World**

Cal Newport | Penguin Business, 2020 | ISBN: 9780241453575

**Slow Productivity: The Lost Art of Accomplishment Without Burnout**

Cal Newport | Penguin Business, 2024 | ISBN: 9780241652640

**Zen Habits: Mastering the Art of Change**

Leo Babauta | Self-published, 2014 | ISBN: 9781499111255

**The Obstacle Is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph**

Ryan Holiday | Profile Books, 2015 | ISBN: 9781781251492

**The More of Less: Finding the Life You Want Under Everything You Own**

Joshua Becker | WaterBrook, 2016 | ISBN: 9781601427960

**Goodbye, Things: The New Japanese Minimalism**

Fumio Sasaki | Allen Lane (Penguin), 2017 | ISBN: 9780141986388

**Ultra-Processed People: Why Do We All Eat Stuff That Isn't Food... and Why Can't We Stop?**

Chris van Tulleken | Cornerstone Press, 2023 | ISBN: 9781529900052

## About the Author

Matt is a music composer, sound designer, indie game developer, and former governance and data analytics specialist. Based in his hometown of Southampton, UK, he enjoys life with his wife and two daughters, revelling in dad jokes, and writing in reverie about a range of things. Check out more of his work at [mattjavanshir.co.uk](http://mattjavanshir.co.uk).

