

INTRODUCTION

THE MORE OF LESS

(STUFF, CLUTTER, STRESS)

SOCIETY HAS LONG ENCOURAGED US
TO AMASS POSSESSIONS AND TAKE ON INFINITE
RESPONSIBILITIES. BUT NOW WE
ARE LEARNING TO EMBRACE THE PEACE OF
A SIMPLIFIED EXISTENCE.

by Ingela Ratledge Amundson



CONFESSION: I AM A RECOVERING MAXIMALIST. As a child growing up in the '80s and '90s, I enthusiastically embraced a “more is more” mentality. With Madonna’s “Material Girl” cranked up to 10 in the background, I spent my formative years striving to accumulate and amass as much as I could get my paws on, a policy that I applied with equal vigor to my boundless scrunchie and Cabbage Patch Kids collections and to my teeming and precarious social circle. (I attended a middle school where it was standard practice for pals to receive the oxymoronic classifications “first best friend,” “second best friend,” and so on.)

What can I say? Greed was good.

By the time I graduated from college, in 1999, the whole planet seemed to be drinking the same supersize Kool-Aid. It was the height of the dot-com bubble, and the socioeconomic landscape was positively exploding with new possibilities. My mission—and everyone else’s—was to navigate and metabolize this incredible bounty. For the first time in history, we were faced with having infinity at our fingertips.

The options for what any given individual could do, be, know, or order up for delivery at a moment’s notice became endless. And our expectations about what was considered enough, on macro and micro levels, followed suit. The zeitgeist was chockablock with messages that championed the concept of straining the seams: Live life to the fullest. Go big or go home. He who dies with the most toys wins.

You can probably guess where this is headed. Cut to 2019, and I—like so many of us—find myself in a dramatically different mindset. “Having it all”—an objective that we’ve discovered is, by definition, unattainable—has fallen out of favor as the gold standard. I fret about running critically low on both storage space and headspace. I would gladly forgo designs on world domination in favor of an empty DVR, eight hours of uninterrupted sleep, and a gift certificate to the Container Store. My affinity for excess is bowing under its own weight and giving way to other, stronger drives, like a desire for balance and breathing room. I am desperate to simplify. Shed. Streamline.

Clearly, I’m not alone. After so much waxing, an increasing number of folks are being struck by an intense urge to wane. We’re embracing the tenets of *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning* and seeking the guidance of organizational gurus like Marie Kondo in hopes they’ll show us how to offload the physical and mental weight of all of our stuff. Rather than trying to live large, it’s becoming de rigueur—a point of pride and pleasure—to explore how little each of us needs to get by. As a friend

put it recently, “I feel like I’d be so much happier if I could just set 90 percent of my house on fire.”

According to Greg McKeown, the author of the best-selling book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, this cultural groundswell is evidence that we’ve been collectively building toward a tipping point. We’ve exceeded the maximum capacity for what we can handle—on multiple fronts—and the result ain’t pretty. “Humans are really good at adapting when they’re in pain—it’s one of our strong suits—and it’s clear to me that the pain is increasing to a degree that people are looking for something else,” McKeown says. “They’re turning to tidying up, mindfulness, and other similar movements as a natural response to where we are right now.”

The specific call to arms may vary—purging our wardrobes, pruning our Facebook contacts, trading FOMO (the fear of missing out) for JOMO (the joy of missing out), or all of the above—but the goal is the same. “When we set out to simplify, what we’re really saying is, ‘I want to focus on the things that matter most to me,’” explains Peter Bregman, an executive coach and the author of *Leading with Emotional Courage*. “From a Marie Kondo perspective, that’s going into a closet and finding the clothes you really want to wear. From a time perspective, it’s spending your day doing what gives you the most value.”

How we got here

Certainly, this hankering for a more pared-down existence is hardly brand-new. “If you go back to ancient Chinese philosophy, which predates even Buddhism, there’s this need for balance between simplicity and stillness and action,” says Kristin Neff, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of *Self-Compassion*. “The yin and yang really can’t be denied.”

Henry David Thoreau’s transcendentalist treatise *Walden*, published in 1854, neatly echoes sentiments that would fit right in on any self-help short list today: “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand,” wrote Thoreau. “In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live.”

While that core yearning for tranquility may be the same, the factors contributing to our condition have evolved pretty significantly over the past centuries. As

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McKeown points out, we’ve been on a steep upward trajectory ever since the Industrial Revolution, when the ability to crank out products increased exponentially and it became apparent that the limits of what was achievable, as we understood them, no longer existed. The stakes skyrocketed. Then, after the end of World War II and its period of enforced leanness, came the advent of consumerism: Suddenly, there was just so much buying and selling to be done. Marketing slogans beseeched us to dream bigger and painted a vision of prosperity for us to work toward. “We were fed rituals and routines about how to shop and what to watch and what our houses should look like,” McKeown says. “It became like a religion.”

We’ve never gone back. And that hunger to eagerly gobble up whatever’s in our path, Pac-Man style, has been further stoked by radical shifts in technology. “Over the past 10 years, we’ve moved from connectivity to hyperconnectivity,” McKeown says. “Once you put a supercomputer in every person’s pocket, you’re going to get what we have now: It’s so hard to say no to non-essential distractions and relatively harder to say yes to what are actually the most important interactions and people in our life.”

Hyperconnectivity makes the juggling act even trickier by further blurring the line between professional and personal spheres—it’s as if we’re never truly unavailable or off the clock. “Many modern work situations place an emphasis on employees having no boundaries,” says Randy Paterson, PhD, a psychologist and the author of *How to Be Miserable*. “Staff are urged to ‘give it their all’—implicitly leaving nothing behind for themselves, their families, their health, or their other interests.”

We are simultaneously trying to cram more in than ever before and bewildered by where the time goes. “We’re fueled by this impulse to overcommit, and we valorize being busy so much that we get together and talk about how busy we are!” says Charlie Gilkey, an executive coach and the author of *Start Finishing: How to Go from Idea to Done*. “On any given day, the starting point for most of us is already over capacity.”

In short, we’re victims of our own success and progress, and we’ve turned into the custodians of far too much. “We used to be a society—and there are lots of them still out there—where the challenge was to have enough,” says Bregman. “For a lot of us, now that’s been overtaken by the challenge of abundance.”

If left unchecked, it’s possible to wind up in a perpetual state of being overloaded, overstimulated, and out of control—which is every bit as unpleasant as it sounds. Says McKeown, “As they’re trying to go to sleep at night,

people feel this commotion inside of them and around them.” Be careful what you wish for, indeed. The embarrassment of modern riches—our jam-packed calendars, the endless barrage of social media updates, the holiday-spending bacchanals, the ever-multiplying queue of Netflix offerings—can be more burden than blessing. “We are overwhelmed with distraction and seduction and choices,” says Bregman. “So what we end up needing and looking for is a methodology to curate all of it.”

Back to basics

Enter Essentialism. Or the KonMari Method. Or minimalism...or any of the antidotes that help provide respite and encourage us to organize ourselves—mind, body, and spirit. “It’s as if each of us has a container within us that can only hold so much,” says Beth Kurland, PhD, a clinical psychologist and the author of *Dancing on the Tightrope: Transcending the Habits of Your Mind and Awakening to Your Fullest Life*. “Because the amount that we can hold at any given time may change and fluctuate, we need to develop the ability to check in on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis, asking, ‘How full is my container?’”

If the answer is a resounding “too damn full,” then deliberately pursuing a path of less can offer longed-for



relief. “I define Essentialism as the continual, disciplined pursuit of what is essential, the elimination of what is nonessential, and the creation of a system that makes it as easy as possible to execute those choices,” McKeown says. In other words: Identify the things that you hold dearest, then figure out how to make them front and center. Chuck the nonsense.

Aside from the obvious benefits of decluttering—like experiencing the visceral joy of finally torching those 1997 tax returns—there’s a whole host of potential mental and physical upsides. For starters, taking back the reins and tackling an aspect of your life that’s become untenable is a reward in and of itself. Learning to be more selective about what you allow into your universe—and disrupting patterns or habits that have been a source of discontent—amounts to a major win for the psyche. “Exercising a sense of choice is very empowering,” Kurland says. “Being able to take action creates a feeling of spaciousness.”

Yes, you can

Sure, all that sounds great—if you’re the type of person who can pull it off, right? It’s natural to feel intimidated by the prospect of radically simplifying, especially if your wiring places you on the opposite end of that spec-

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trum. You may be harboring preconceived notions about the stringency of the requirements or a particular m.o.: Like, in order to be successful in this endeavor, you must be willing to ultimately whittle your wardrobe down to six utilitarian articles of black clothing and then spend the remainder of your days serenely raking the sand in your Zen rock garden.

Not so. Because as it turns out, there’s no single correct strategy. Simplifying looks different on different people. “There’s no one-size-fits-all approach. It’s really about what works best for each individual,” Kurland says. There isn’t a rule stipulating that you’ll be forcibly parted from your beloved treasures or routines—quite the opposite. If purchasing porcelain cat figurines by the truckload fills your bucket, and that’s working for you, then by all means, fire up eBay and continue collecting to your heart’s content. “This isn’t about less for the sake of less—that’s missing the point,” McKeown says. “The journey doesn’t have to start in an overwhelming way, and you don’t have to be a purist to make progress.”

In fact, perhaps the biggest potential misstep on the quest to downsize would be employing maximalist tactics—attempting to make sweeping, across-the-board transformations without rhyme or reason. Asceticism isn’t the endgame, nor is it sustainable for most of us. Cautions Neff, “It’s good to simplify, but we don’t want to simplify so much that we become complacent and don’t try new things. The goal is to keep learning and stay in the challenge zone.”

The moral of the story? We’re being bombarded with compelling reasons to scale back. Go gently: The ensuing voyage is important enough to merit an intentional, thoughtful approach. “Living simple is a luxury—it’s worthy of being aspirational,” McKeown says. “But if you skip the purpose behind the change, then you’re actually producing a counterfeit and trying to compete using a new status symbol. The real luxury is not competing at all.” Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go bid farewell to some Cabbage Patch Kids. ●