Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less

If you are looking for a book that will invite you into a quiet place of reflection and help you ask the right questions about how you lead your life and steward your contributions, look no further. Author, speaker, leadership strategist Greg McKeown in his book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* offers a clear pathway to making the most of your life. (And who doesn't want to do that?) Long story short, *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 our highest point of contribution by doing only what is essential.*

In a world packed to the rafters with options and invitations, along with countless distractions, take a look at these Book Notes to whet your appetite for some practical guidance on how to leverage your life.

Title: ***Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less***

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Book Description:

Have you ever:
- found yourself stretched too thin?
- simultaneously felt overworked and underutilized?
- felt busy but not productive?
- felt like your time is constantly being hijacked by other people's agendas?

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

Essentialism is more than a time-management strategy or a productivity technique. It is a *systematic discipline* for discerning what is absolutely essential, then eliminating everything that is not, so we can make the highest possible contribution toward the things that really matter.

By forcing us to apply more selective criteria for what is Essential, the disciplined pursuit of less empowers us to reclaim control of our own choices about where to spend our precious time and energy—instead of giving others the implicit permission to choose for us.

Essentialism is not one more thing—it's a whole new way of doing everything. It's about doing less, but better, in every area of our lives. Essentialism is a movement whose time has come.

Book Quotes:

…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. Location 83

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. Location 99

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 our highest point of contribution by doing only what is essential. Location 105

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 nonessentials, 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. Location 115

If you don't prioritize your life, someone else will. Location 148

PHASE 1: When we really have clarity of purpose, it enables us to succeed at our endeavor. 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. Location 173

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. Location 179

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. Location 194

Essentialism is about creating a system for handling the closet of our lives. This is not a process you undertake once a year, once a month, or even once a week, like organizing your closet. It is a discipline you apply each and every time you are faced with a decision about whether to say yes or whether to politely decline. It's a method for making the tough trade-off between lots of good things and a few really great things. It's about learning how to do less but better so you can achieve the highest possible return on every precious moment of your life. Location 257

STEP 1. EXPLORE: DISCERNING THE TRIVIAL MANY FROM THE VITAL FEW. Essentialists spend as much time as possible exploring, listening, debating, questioning, and thinking. But their exploration is not an end in itself. The purpose of the exploration is to discern the vital few from the trivial many. Location 290

STEP 2. ELIMINATE: CUTTING OUT THE TRIVIAL MANY. To do it well takes courage and compassion. So eliminating the nonessentials isn't just about mental discipline. It's about the emotional discipline necessary to say no to social pressure. Location 296

STEP 3. EXECUTE: REMOVING OBSTACLES AND MAKING EXECUTION EFFORTLESS. What if we stopped being oversold the value of having more and being undersold the value of having less? What if we stopped

celebrating being busy as a measurement of importance? What if instead we celebrated how much time we had spent listening, pondering, meditating, and enjoying time with the most important people in our lives? What if the whole world shifted from the undisciplined pursuit of more to the disciplined pursuit of less … only better? Location 323

Just imagine what would happen to our world if every person on the planet eliminated one good but nonessential activity and replaced it with something truly essential. Location 342

Essentialism is not a way to do one more thing; it is a different way of doing everything. It is a way of thinking. Location 351

For too long, we have overemphasized the external aspect of choices (our options) and underemphasized our internal ability to choose (our actions). This is more than semantics. Think about it this way. Options (things) can be taken away, while our core ability to choose (free will) cannot be. Location 396

To become an Essentialist requires a heightened awareness of our ability to choose. We need to recognize it as an invincible power within us, existing separate and distinct from any other thing, person, or force. Location 426

After all, we have been taught from a young age that hard work is key to producing results, and many of us have been amply rewarded for our productivity and our ability to muscle through every task or challenge the world throws at us. Yet, for capable people who are already working hard, are there limits to the value of hard work? Is there a point at which doing more does not produce more? Is there a point at which doing less (but thinking more) will actually produce better outcomes? Location 446

We can try to avoid the reality of trade-offs, but we can't escape them. Location 585

Essentialists see trade-offs as an inherent part of life, not as an inherently negative part of life. Instead of asking, "What do I have to give up?" they ask, "What do I want to go big on?" The cumulative impact of this small change in thinking can be profound. Location 615

To discern what is truly essential we need space to think, time to look and listen, permission to play, wisdom to sleep, and the discipline to apply highly selective criteria to the choices we make. Location 638

Essentialists spend as much time as possible exploring, listening, debating, questioning, and thinking. But their exploration is not an end in itself. The purpose of the exploration is to discern the vital few from the trivial many. Location 647

Play doesn't just help us to explore what is essential. It is essential in and of itself. Location 960

The best asset we have for making a contribution to the world is ourselves. If we underinvest in ourselves, and by that I mean our minds, our bodies, and our spirits, we damage the very tool we need to make our highest contribution. One of the most common ways people — especially ambitious, successful people — damage this asset is through a lack of sleep. Location 1004

While sleep is often associated with giving rest to the body, recent research shows that sleep is really more about the brain. Indeed, a study from the Luebeck University in Germany provides evidence that a full night's sleep may actually increase brain power and enhance our problem-solving ability. Location 1060

The researchers explained that while we sleep our brains are hard at work encoding and restructuring information. Therefore, when we wake up, our brains may have made new neural connections, thereby opening up a broader range of solutions to problems, literally overnight. Location 1067

In a nutshell, sleep is what allows us to operate at our highest level of contribution so that we can achieve more, in less time. Location 1072

When developing statements of purpose — for your company, your team, or even yourself — there is a tendency to start obsessing about trivial stylistic details, like "Should we use this word or that word?" But this makes it all too easy to slip into meaningless clichés and buzzwords that lead to vague, meaningless statements like the ones I cited at the beginning of the chapter. An essential intent doesn't have to be elegantly crafted; it's the substance, not the style that counts. Instead, ask the more essential question that will inform every future decision you will ever make: " If we could be truly excellent at only one thing, what would it be?" Location 1356

Peter Drucker, in my view the father of modern management thinking, was also a master of the art of the graceful no. When Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the Hungarian professor most well known for his work on "flow," reached out to interview a series of creative individuals for a book he was writing on creativity, Drucker's response was interesting enough to Mihaly that he quoted it verbatim: "I am greatly honored and flattered by your kind letter of February 14th — for I have admired you and your work for many years, and I have learned much from it. But, my dear Professor Csikszentmihalyi, I am afraid I have to disappoint you. I could not possibly answer your questions. I am told I am creative — I don't know what that means. … I just keep on plodding. … I hope you will not think me presumptuous or rude if I say that one of the secrets of productivity (in which I believe whereas I do not believe in creativity) is to have a VERY BIG waste paper basket to take care of ALL invitations such as yours — productivity in my experience consists of NOT doing anything that helps the work of other people but to spend all one's time on the work the Good Lord has fitted one to do, and to do well." A true Essentialist, Peter Drucker believed that "people are effective because they say no." Location 1453

The way of the Essentialist is different. The Essentialist looks ahead. She plans. She prepares for different contingencies. She expects the unexpected. She creates a buffer to prepare for the unforeseen, thus giving herself some wiggle room when things come up, as they inevitably do. Location 1955

Essentialists accept the reality that we can never fully anticipate or prepare for every scenario or eventuality; the future is simply too unpredictable. Instead, they build in buffers to reduce the friction caused by the unexpected. Location 2035

The way of the Nonessentialist is to go big on everything: to try to do it all, have it all, fit it all in. The Nonessentialist operates under the false logic that the more he strives, the more he will achieve, but the reality is, the more we reach for the stars, the harder it is to get ourselves off the ground. The way of the Essentialist is different. Instead of trying to accomplish it all — and all at once — and flaring out, the Essentialist starts small and celebrates progress. Instead of going for the big, flashy wins that don't really matter, the Essentialist pursues small and simple wins in areas that are essential. Location 2149

Routine is one of the most powerful tools for removing obstacles. Without routine, the pull of nonessential distractions will overpower us. But if we create a routine that enshrines the essentials, we will begin to execute them on autopilot. Instead of our consciously pursuing the essential, it will happen without our having to think about it. We won't have to expend precious energy every day prioritizing everything. We must simply expend a small amount of initial energy to create the routine, and then all that is left to do is follow it. Location 2285

In an interview about his book The Power of Habit Charles Duhigg said "in the last 15 years, as we've learned how habits work and how they can be changed, scientists have explained that every habit is made up of a cue, a routine, and a reward. The cue is a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then there is the routine — the behavior itself — which can be physical or mental or emotional. Finally,

there is a reward, which helps your brain figure out if this particular habit is worth remembering for the future. Over time, this loop — cue, routine, reward; cue, routine, reward — becomes more automatic as the cue and reward become neurologically intertwined." What this means is that if we want to change our routine, we don't really need to change the behavior. Rather, we need to find the cue that is triggering the nonessential activity or behavior and find a way to associate that same cue with something that is essential. So, for example, if the bakery you pass on the way home from work triggers you to pick up a doughnut, next time you pass by that bakery, use that cue to remind you to pick up a salad from the deli across the street. Or if your alarm clock going off in the morning triggers you to check your e-mail, use it as a cue to get up and read instead. At first, overcoming the temptation to stop at the bakery or check the e-mail will be difficult. But each time you execute the new behavior — each time you pick up the salad — strengthens the link in your brain between the cue and the new behavior, and soon, you'll be subconsciously and automatically performing the new routine. Location 2335

What we can't do is concentrate on two things at the same time. When I talk about being present, I'm not talking about doing only one thing at a time. I'm talking about being focused on one thing at a time. Multitasking itself is not the enemy of Essentialism; pretending we can "multifocus" is. Location 2456

There are two ways of thinking about Essentialism. The first is to think of it as something you do occasionally. The second is to think of it as something you are. In the former, Essentialism is one more thing to add to your already overstuffed life. In the latter, it is a different way — a simpler way — of doing everything. It becomes a lifestyle. It becomes an all-encompassing approach to living and leading. It becomes the essence of who we are. Location 2527

Today Essentialism is not just something I do. An Essentialist is something I am steadily becoming. At first it was a few deliberate choices, then it grew into a lifestyle, and then it changed me, at my very core. I continue to discover almost daily that I can do less and less — in order to contribute more. Location 2587

Note: should you wish to find any quote in its original context, the Kindle "location" is provided after each entry.