leo b.
on
minimalism



the minimalist business

some thoughts on minimalism, from the guy who showed me how to do it

Leo was the first real minimalist I ever met.

I'd read a lot of books, sure, but books are theory, and this was Back In The Day. Most of the books at the time were written for, ahem, *people who are not me*.

I found the blog Zen Habits in the late 2000s and I fell head over heels in love. The author, Leo Babauta, was prolific, smart, cool, and had six kids. This made it a better fit for me than the usual minimalist fare which was, at the time, predominantly made up of dudes in their 20s who only wore clothing from hiking stores.

I quietly worshipped from afar for quite a while. I had not yet made the step over into the simpler business and lifestyle I craved - I was still in the "reading about it and talking a lot" part of my minimalism journey. Sure, my lifestyle was pretty simple already, but that was by accident, not by choice. (I didn't drive, which really keeps your car costs down. I didn't have access to consumer credit, which made home ownership a set of problems I did not have. That kind of thing.)

So I was dreaming, and scheming, and talking a big game, but that was about it. And I read every post on Zen Habits. Like, all of them.

Then one day in October 2010, I was in Las Vegas for a conference, and Leo happened to be there. I squeed. He was gracious. And I puked my love of all things minimalism-with-business-and-kids over his impeccably minimalist black t-shirt. (It was metaphorical puking.)

(I think.)

We sat in a bar. He bought me a vodka tonic. And he patiently answered my every question. I was out of my mind with happiness. He made me believe it was possible for me to live the way he did, and for that, and for the vodka, he will forever have my gratitude.

As we get ready to embark on our journey towards business minimalism, here are a few of my favorites from one of the best. The topics vary, but I find them as inspiring today as I did the day they were published.

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paring down

One of the things I love about minimalism is that it doesn't end. You don't get to a minimum of things and say, "I'm done."

It's a constant paring down. And that's a good thing.

Why would you want to keep doing it, instead of just completing the process? Because the process of paring down is really the process of asking yourself, "What's important?"

We tend to forget what's important in the din and tumult of daily life. We need a mindfulness bell to bring us back to the essentials, and paring down is that bell for me.

There are numerous examples of paring down – I whittle down my clothing collection, for example, on a regular basis. I will look at a room

and remove unnecessary objects. I'll clear out programs on my computer I don't use.

On Zen Habits, I pare down the design regularly. A couple years ago, the site was considered an example of clean design, but since then I've removed most elements.

Recently I removed numerous links in the sidebar and footer, and then removed photos. It was like breathing out a sigh of relief, to be able to let go of photos. No one seemed to mind – I didn't get any comments. I love it when paring down is met with the approval of silence. As on mnmlist, I'm removing almost everything but the article, which is the only thing that's important.

Paring down has been a beautiful way to hone in on the essentials, to be mindful each day of those essentials. I think that's a necessary thing these days.



paring ideas

As minimalists, we often talk about paring down possessions, and sometimes paring down what we do. But what about what we think?

Is there any use in paring down thinking? I've found myself doing this over time, in many areas.

My ideas about exercise have been simplified over the years. I used to worry about the ideal mileage, percentage of increase in mileage, intervals, reps and sets, weights and progression, lifts, workouts,

programs … it was very complicated. But as I've learned more about fitness, I've dropped most of those ideas. I now know that none of that matters much, as I've let go of specific fitness goals. Now I just try to move on most days, and have fun doing it. I've dropped ideas about schedules, about programs, about loads and goals. I'm left with the simplest of ideas.

Same applies to diet. I used to worry about not eating grains, or soy, or processed foods, or fruits, or chemicals. Should I eat quinoa or steel-cut oats or amaranth or chia seeds or bulgur wheat or buckwheat? I used to count calories. Now I just try to eat real plant foods most of the time, and am mindful of my eating. It's simpler this way.

About writing: I worried about structure and voice and style and terseness and grammar and schedules and tools and reading the best authors and the snowflake method and editing and much more. Now I just write when I'm inspired, and I let it flow.

About work: I worried about productivity and goals and action items and meetings and paperwork and the Pareto principle and the perfect desk and the perfect computer setup. Now I use simple tools, and do what I'm excited about.

The same is true of anything I've done. About finances, I just spend less than I earn, and have my bills paid automatically. About my site, I just write and publish and forget about comments and ads and stats and social networking. About my social life, I just meet with a friend and try to be present. I could go on all day, but you get the point.

When we start out with something, we usually will try everything. But as we learn, we can pare down ideas that we find out don't matter. We're left with the essentials.



the first rule of simplifying: identify the essential (or, how to avoid the void)

"Our lives are frittered away by detail … simplify, simplify"
– Henry David Thoreau

We talk a lot about simplifying your life on Zen Habits, from simplifying your possessions and clutter to simplifying the stuff you need to do. But recently I had a comment from a reader who said that the problem is that he doesn't know what to do with himself after cutting out television and other time-wasters from his life.

The simple answer: Do what you love.

His comment, while understandable, illustrates a common misunderstanding of simplification, and it's a good point that I thought is worth discussing. The misunderstanding: that simplifying is basically just cutting stuff out, leaving an emptiness or void. People think that it leaves you with a boring life, and nothing fun. They couldn't be more wrong.

The real goal of simplifying, and the First Rule, is to first identify what is essential, what you love, what is important to you — and then cut out all the rest that distracts you and keeps you from doing what's important.

We have so much stuff in our lives, from possessions to things we need to do to information coming in to visual and emotional clutter, that we are overloaded. The result? We end up doing a lot of things that aren't really

important to us, because we have so much other stuff to do that has crept into our lives and that we leave in our lives, unexamined.

Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Well, Socrates must have been an excellent simplifier — as evidenced by the fact that he just wore a robe and sandals. In any case, in order to simplify our lives, we must first examine our lives. What is important, and do all the things in our lives give us value? These are the questions to ask, and if you find the answers, simplifying is extremely easy.

Let's look at how finding what is essential, what we love, and what is important to us, can help us simplify, and what it leaves in our lives:

1. **The first question**: What is most important to me? What do I love to do? The answer is different to every person. For me, it's simple: I love my wife and kids, I love writing, I love reading, and I love helping others. For others, it may be hiking or mountain biking or creating music or anything, really. Answer this question first.

2. **The second question**: what are the things going on in my life, the things I do every day and every week and month, and how are they related to what is important to me? If you are going out drinking with the guys, and it's not really important to you, and it's stopping you from doing what is important, that's a candidate for simplifying. Examine all your commitments, and ask yourself if they are really important to you, if they give you great value for your time, and if they are related to what is truly important.

3. **Possessions**: The same questions can be asked of all the stuff you own — do you really love them? Are they truly essential? Another question you can ask, to clarify your thinking: If my house burned down, which few things would I want to replace? Get rid of all the

rest. They leave clutter and stress and keep you from enjoying the stuff you really love.

4. **Everything else**: This same concept can be applied to anything else in your life – your work, the information you read every day, the television programs you watch, the people in your life. Know what's essential, what you love, what's important … and get rid of the rest.

5. **What you're left with**: If you get rid of the extraneous stuff, the stuff that's not related to what's important to you, what do you have left? Just the important stuff. Just the stuff you really love to do. When you get rid of the other stuff, when you cut, let's say, television and hours of Internet surfing and beer drinking from your life, don't just cut it out – remember what's important and what you love to do, and do that instead. For me, that means spending time with my family instead of working, that means writing or reading instead of watching TV, that means helping others instead of going to the mall (something I want to do more of).

Simplifying isn't meant to leave your life empty – it's meant to leave space in your life for what you really want to do. Know what those things are before you start simplifying.



eliminate all but the absolute essential tasks

If you're like me, you have a long list of tasks to do, perhaps broken down by different contexts (work, home, errands, calls, etc.). Your list of tasks is so long that it's overwhelming. You can never completely wipe out your list because it's growing every day.

Simplify your list down to the barest of essentials, and you can eliminate the need for complex planning systems.

The long to-do lists are one of the problems of GTD, which as I've said before, is an excellent system. But it does no prioritizing, and everything is added to your lists. In the end, it's overwhelming, and you are left extremely busy, trying to knock off all your tasks.

Today we'll look at **ZTD Habit 8: Simplify – reduce your goals & tasks to the essentials**.

Let's first imagine the ideal scenario. Recently I've begun simplifying my time management system from GTD down to basically nothing. I still have long lists of things to do, but I don't look at them much anymore. Instead, I've begun the process of elimination, and focusing on what's really important.

Now my to-do list is basically one list of three essential things I want to do today. I also have a list of a few smaller tasks that I want to knock out, all at once, usually in about 30 minutes or so, leaving the rest of my day free for the more important tasks. I still use my calendar, just as a way of reminding me of appointments, but it's not really a time management tool. I don't need time management tools anymore — I've simplified my list down to three tasks, every day.

How can you get to this point? Here are the key steps:

- **Eliminate, eliminate**. Take a few minutes to review your task and project lists, and see how much you can simplify them. Make it a challenge. See if you can cut it in half! If you've got 50 items, cut it down to 25. Then try to cut it even further a few days later. How do you eliminate tasks? Sometimes a task gets old and isn't necessary

anymore. Cross those out. Sometimes a task can be delegated. Do that, and cross it out. Read on for more tips.

- **Know what's essential**. How do you know what's essential? By knowing what your main goal is, and other goals if necessary. You really should focus on one goal at a time, but if you want to do 2 or 3, that's OK too. Just don't do 10 goals or anything. Those goals should be your essential projects. Any smaller tasks are essential if they help you accomplish those goals, and not essential if they're not related.

- **Simplify your commitments**. How many projects are you committed to? How many extracurricular stuff do you do? You can't do it all. You need to learn to say no, and value your time. And if you've already said yes, it's still possible to say no. Just be honest with people and tell them that you have a high number of urgent projects to complete and cannot commit to this any longer. Slowly, you can eliminate your commitments to a very small number — only have those commitments in your life that really give you joy and value.

- **Simplify your information stream**. I've recently gone through the process of eliminating most of my RSS feeds. I also have cut back on the number of emails I respond to. And for more than a year now, I haven't read a single newspaper, watched television (except DVDs), or read a single magazine. The news no longer gives me any value. Simplify the inputs into your life, and you can simplify the outputs.

- **Review weekly**. Your to-do list tends to build up over the course of a week. Take a few minutes each week to eliminate, and eliminate some more. You don't need a huge to-do list to be productive — just do the stuff that matters.

- **Big Rocks**. During your weekly review, figure out the most important tasks that you'd like to accomplish over the next week. Those are your Big Rocks. Now place them on your schedule, first thing in the day, on different days of the upcoming week. Make those the most important tasks each day, and do them first — don't let them be pushed back to the end of the day.

- **Biggest value**. Consider the case of two newspaper writers. One is super busy and writes a dozen articles a week. They're all decent articles, but they're pretty routine in nature. The second writer writes one article this week, but it gets the front page headline, it's talked about all around town and blogged about on the Internet, it gets him a journalism award and he becomes a big name in journalism. From this article, he lands a bigger job and a book deal. That example is a bit extreme, but it illustrates the point that some tasks really pay off in the long term, and others just keep you busy and in the long run, don't matter at all. The first writer could have stayed home all week and slept, and it wouldn't have changed his world much (except he wouldn't get paid for that week). Focus on those big tasks, that will make a name for you, that will generate long-term income, that will give you lasting satisfaction and happiness. Those are your Big Rocks. Eliminate the rest.

- **Three MITs**. Here's your planning system each day: write down your three Most Important Tasks on a sheet of paper (I write mine in a Moleskine pocket notebook). That's it. Check off those tasks when you finish them. Devote your entire day, if possible, to those three tasks, or at the very least devote the first half of your day to them. Your MITs are basically the Big Rocks you planned for this week, and any other MIT that you need to do for today.

- **Batch small tasks**. During the course of the day, other stuff will come up that you really need to take care of or they could create problems for you later. Write those down on another small list of small tasks (mine is at the bottom of my pocket notebook page). You don't need to do them right now, most likely. Just write them down for later. Set a time (probably 30 minutes or so) to batch process these tasks sometime later in the day (perhaps 4 p.m.). Do your MITs first, and then do all the small tasks at the same time. These might be calls, emails, writing a short letter, doing paperwork, etc. Try to do them quickly and knock them off your list. You might have a few tasks left at the end of the day. Better to leave the small tasks until tomorrow than the big ones. Batch process email, too — if you do it throughout the day, it's just a bunch of interruptions. Just do it once or twice a day.



the creativity of constraints

On this site, I embrace a 400-word limit (unless it doesn't make sense). It forces me to be concise, to focus on smaller topics, to choose the important, to be **creative**.

Yes: constraints force us to be creative.

Often, constraints, limitations, are seen as a negative, but to me they're a feature. They might restrict freedom and force sacrifices, sure, but they also force us to choose. And to work within and around the constraints.

When we must work within limits, we have to figure out how to make those work. This forces us to think outside our normal mode of thinking, to think of new ways to make things work.

Consider:

- When we have a small home, we must find new ways of living within that small space, instead of being lazy and doing whatever we want with lots of space.

- When we must use fewer words, we must choose them wisely, instead of spilling them out carelessly.

- When we eat fewer calories, we must choose more nutritious and yet tasteful foods, to make them count.

- When we have less storage space, we must choose only the most important things, and make do with less.

- When we limit ourselves to four sentences per email, we must say the essential, creatively.

I could go on all day, but that would be contrary to my point. What constraints can you place on yourself, and how can you work creatively with them?



stop making it complicated

Now that I've learned to look at things with the lens of simplicity, I can see others making mistakes I've made in the past.

I want to gently say to them – and to my past self – "Stop making things so complicated!"

I'm not going to criticize how other people do things in this post, but rather talk about things I did wrong in the past.

The biggest problem came when starting a new endeavor – starting running, trying to get organized or productive, starting blogging, getting out of debt, even the act of simplifying.

I'd always make things so complicated – looking back on it, I either want to cringe or laugh. And yet, I know that life is a learning process, and those early mistakes helped me to get to where I am. Even now, I make tons of mistakes, learning as I go.

Example 1: I wanted to be more productive, so I learned GTD (Getting Things Done, an excellent book by David Allen). I bought tools that other GTDers recommended, set up a series of lists, tried out a couple dozen different software (and paper) approaches to lists. Every GTDer knows this problem. GTD, and many other productivity systems, can end up being complicated.

Today, my advice to my former self is: stop making it complicated. Productivity, such as I care about it today, is simple. You pick the most important thing you want to do today, clear distractions, and start on it. You don't even need a list, though having a list for remembering what else needs to be done later is fine. Have one list, but don't fiddle with it. Just pick one thing, and start working.

Example 2: When I wanted to get out of debt, I tried various financial software, I made spreadsheets, I made schedules for payments, I tracked everything, and so on. It was complicated, believe me.

Now I know it's simple. First, stop the unnecessary spending (I know, easier said than done, but once you learn to recognize it and stop your

impulse urges, it's not complicated). Second, put everything you can to one debt at a time (first creating an emergency fund of at least $500), pay off that one debt, then pay off the next.

Example 3: When I started blogging in January 2007, I looked at dozens of different blogging platforms/software, themes, ad platforms, ebooks, articles on every possible blogging topic. This is natural, as I was just learning the field.

But today, I know it's simple: you pick a topic, and write. Then hit publish. Share your stuff via Twitter or Facebook if you like, but don't worry so much about that. Just write interesting and/or useful stuff, and people will find you eventually. Just write, and publish.

When you start something new, sure, there's a learning process. But also realize that while the learning is good, the doing doesn't have to be complicated at all. Find the simplest way to do things, and just start doing it. You'll learn by doing.