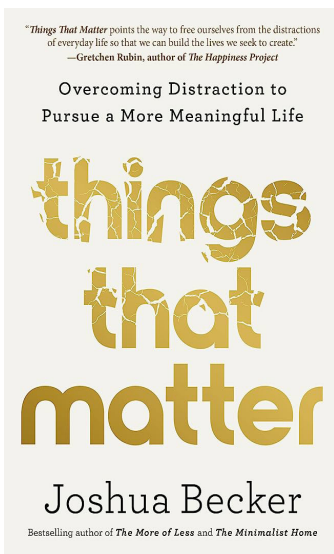


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Joshua Becker is one of the leading voices in the modern simplicity movement. He writes and speaks on minimalism.

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THE SUMMARY

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PART 1: THE OBJECTIVE AND THE OBSTACLES

1. A Life with No Regrets: *Beginning with a View to the End*

For people in the middle age, and even for people in young adulthood, it's common to have nagging anxiety that we're squandering our time and resources on things that are not important while not focusing enough on the things and people that really do matter. And we can easily imagine that we'll be sorry about it someday if we don't make a change. Yet on and on we go, putting the inconsequential ahead of the imperative.

Something's got to change here. And there's only so much time ahead in each of our lives to make the change.

We're always going to make some foolish decisions along the way that we wish we could take back. It's probably not possible to live a life with absolutely *no* regrets. But it most certainly *is* possible to make changes that take us off the easy path of immersing ourselves in the ordinary and the immediate and put us onto a more intentional path that leads to a life that satisfies and resonates beyond our own mortal existence—a life well lived.

The theme of this book isn't a "how to be happy" message, though I believe living a life aligned with your values and passions is the quickest way to happiness in both the short term and the long term. This book is about so much more than how you feel; it's about how you live the one life you have

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and how to keep it focused on the things that matter. I would go so far as to say the world *needs* you to live for the things that matter to you because you're at your most productive and influential self when you're offering your unique contribution.

There may be no greater pursuit for yourself *and* others than choosing to live a meaningful life focused on the things that matter.

For me, learning how to live my life on purpose was not an instantaneous epiphany, although there were plenty of light-bulb moments along the way. It was more of a gradual growth in understanding, influenced by the things going on in my life over many years.

If you've read any of my books or blog posts over the last dozen-plus years, you know how important simple living is to me. I define *minimalism* as "the intentional promotion of the things we most value by removing anything that distracts us from them." It isn't negative; it's positive. It isn't primarily about decluttering or organizing; it's about creating freedom. Because when we own fewer possessions, we liberate precious energy, time, and focus that we can direct toward more meaningful pursuits.

2. Distracted from Meaning: *Letting the Lesser Crowd Out the Greater*

Today, to an extent never before known, we are distracted by the trivial, the novel, and the (seemingly) urgent.

The problem begins when distractions take over our lives and push out more important pursuits. Indulging in distractions can go from being an occasional pastime to becoming an ingrained part of our lifestyles. When a distraction becomes a lifestyle, we lose control over the lives we are living. We lose intentionality.

Few distractions *begin* as a lifestyle. At first, they are simply fun and interesting. But for the most part, the shiny new object is just a welcome distraction from the hard task of living life. Slowly, however, the new distraction begins to take more time and more energy from us. We begin to make accommodations to partake in it even more.

How can we respond when distractions have become our masters rather than our servants?

First, we can be vigilant in self-examination. We ought to frequently sit quietly with ourselves, examining the trajectory of our lives and the distractions that keep us from being the best version of ourselves.

Second, we can verbally articulate what distractions are keeping us from our best work, keeping us from those we love the most, or keeping us from fulfilling our highest purpose. These distractions may not always be unhealthy on the surface—but if they have spilled into places where they do not belong, they may become so.

Third, we can be diligent and intentional in removing these distractions. This can be difficult and requires moments of wrestling with ourselves. But learn to fight.

Last, it is important to remind ourselves of the value of the most important duties in front of us. Your most important work will never be the easiest—in fact, it will probably be one of the hardest things you ever do. Being an intentional parent, loving spouse, faithful employee, inspirational artist, good boss, or selfless member of a community is never the easiest road to travel. But in the long run, there is more joy and happiness to be found there than anywhere else.

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Distractions don't get to define you. *You* get to define you.

And some of the admirable men and women I know were people brave enough to course-correct from one lifestyle to more important goals.

PART 2: DISTRACTIONS OF A PARALYZED WILL

3. Dreams Overshadowed: *Overcoming the Distraction of Fear*

Many people would rather be disappointed and unfulfilled doing things that are safe than go through the anxiety of chasing valuable dreams and goals. Sadly, they prefer a safe, meaningless status quo over taking a risk that might lead to failure—or might lead to success.

Perhaps if they factored in the potential of massive regret before the end of life, it would be enough to help them choose risk over the rut they're stuck in. And let's face it, some pursuits in life are worth risk.

On one hand, there is such a thing as good fear. A healthy dose of caution can keep you from doing things you would rather regret. But on the other hand, there is also bad fear. A sign of maturity is learning to distinguish between the two.

Fear of failure affects us at three points: when we're starting, when we're trying again after failure, and when we're progressing. Overcoming fear is not a onetime achievement but a lifelong skill. Your first attempt (or second or third) at pursuing something meaningful may not go as well as you would've liked, but if you're ever going to be successful at it, you'll have to try again.

Fear and desire are closely related emotions. For example, if you fear hunger, you will desire wealth. If you fear change, you will desire stability. If you fear loneliness, you will desire relationship. If you fear failure, you will desire comfort. And the list continues.

Not every fear is wrong, but every fear does result in opposing desire. We can never eliminate fear, but we can prioritize fears so that our fear of not living up to our fullest potential outweighs whatever fears keep us from taking action and making a difference. That's courage: action taken not in the absence of fear but in the face of fear. Or, in the immortal words of the Great Wizard of Oz, "True courage is in facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty."

So let me ask you in closing, before moving on to the external distractions that keep us from a meaningful life: If you lived your entire life and never took a risk, do you think you would regret it? Probably so.

If fear is keeping you from purposefully living the life you've always desired, try discovering your hidden fears and intentionally redirecting them. For starters, fear the thought of wasting the only life you've got.

4. Wounded: *Overcoming the Distraction of Past Mistakes*

In our pursuit of the things that matter to us, past mistakes can be a drag, a distraction, and a deterrent from moving ahead. By "past mistakes," I'm talking about anything negative you've done or that has been done to you that is preventing you from making progress or achieving accomplishments. Sometimes "mistakes" isn't a strong enough

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word—sometimes the actions in question are downright evil. Regardless, big or little, committed by us or by someone else, past mistakes have a hobbling effect on many of us.

All of us, in one way or another, are influenced by troubles in our pasts. In many cases, a previous mistake or hardship can be like a hand reaching out and grabbing us around the ankle to hold us back. To make this distraction even more difficult to overcome, often it's not just one problem but a combination of errors and mistreatment that accounts for what's gone wrong in our lives. We feel shame and guilt.

Although some past mistakes are easily forgettable, others are powerful and have a long-term effect. They can prevent us from having the vision to do things that matter in the first place. They can contribute to some of the fears we have, or they can dog us and hinder us as we try to pursue our life goals. I call them a distraction, but sometimes they look more like a derailment—something that makes a train wreck out of a life. In the end, we may regret the opportunities and possibilities we missed because of them.

When we should embrace change, past mistakes make us hesitant. When we should be bold, past mistakes make us anxious. When we should believe in ourselves, past mistakes make us feel unworthy. When we should dream big, past mistakes cause us to think small. When we should say yes, past mistakes convince us that all we've got is a no. And it's not just one-time mistakes either. Sometimes it's patterns—bad habits, addictions, negative dispositions—that are so ingrained they seem to be an irremovable part of your nature.

Let's recall our purpose in pursuing things that matter. It's to get to the end of life with more satisfaction over how we spent our time on earth and fewer regrets about the choices we made. We can't expect to do this unless we deal with the distractions and regrets we've already stacked up. And I know that seems heard.

The reality is that we all face different mistakes, hurts, or predispositions from our past. They range from nuisances to trauma. Sometimes, as we begin to deal with and overcome them, there is a moment of realization about how much these past mistakes have kept us from pursuing the things we love. How do we overcome this guilt and shame? By taking pride in the person you're becoming and the changes you're making today. Be joyful about what your life is going to look like. You can't change the past, but you can move beyond it in hope of a better future. You can have more freedom to love, to serve, and to live the kind of life that doesn't result in regret.

PART 3: DISTRACTIONS OF THE LESSER GOOD

5. The Me Monster: *Overcoming the Distraction of Happiness*

The "pursuit of happiness" is famously enshrined in the United States Declaration of Independence. Not that anybody was waiting for Thomas Jefferson's permission to seek happiness for themselves—we all naturally want to do it. And there's nothing wrong with that.

As long as it's the right kind of happiness. Otherwise it's just a distraction.

See, somewhere along the way (or maybe it's always been like this), it appears we human beings confused the pursuit of happiness with the pursuit of self. As a result, we think we'll be happiest if we focus on ourselves, spend our resources on ourselves, and meet our own needs and desires—sometimes even at the expense of others. We see this all around us.

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I want to make it clear that I'm not opposed to reasonable self-care. After all, you can't pour from an empty cup. But there's a big difference between self-care and self-centeredness. Consistently making choices that are about me, me will never deliver the greatest levels of happiness, nor will it prevent regrets at the end of life. "Happiness" can become a distraction from more life-giving pursuits. For those, we need to set our sights higher—to the major life purposes we've identified.

When we shift our focus off ourselves, we live lives of greater meaning and greater contribution. When we serve others without concern over what we might receive in return, we experience the beauty of selfless love. And when we direct our resources of time and money toward others, we begin to discover pursuits more valuable than material possessions, fame, beauty, or sex.

This is an important change in our worldview. Not just because the potential for contribution increases but also because our personal experience of happiness begins to grow.

Routinely asking the question "How does this action benefit someone else?" can serve as an important catalyst to change our views on almost everything we do. It immediately invites a new level of happiness into our lives.

Begin to serve a little. And then to serve some more. And then to make service a habit in your life. You'll find that you have fewer regrets about how you're living your life. And one day you'll realize that the bird of happiness is perched on your shoulder.

6. Enough Is Enough: *Overcoming the Distraction of Money*

When we consider the men and women we most want to emulate with our lives, aren't they always the most generous among us? They are kind, loving, thoughtful, and selfless. They are quick to share their time, money, talents, and spirit. There may be times when we wish to be rich, but deep down we realize that the people we most admire are generous, not wealthy. And at some point in our lives, if we are to reach the end with little regret, we must make the decision to be so as well.

But why is this so difficult? Is it because our desire for money is more persistent than we realize?

Money choices force us to look into our hearts. Specifically, we need to consider if we've made money an end in itself, rather than a means to provide or do what we consider important. Those who live their lives constantly desiring money fall into a trap—a trap that leaves us with empty promises, unfulfilled desires, and handicapped potential.

One reason is that the desire for money can never be satisfied. It is a hopeless love that always desires more. And more than that, it keeps us, our attitudes, and our actions in bondage. When the love of money is present, fulfillment is not, because we are constantly held hostage by the pursuit of material wealth.

The pursuit of money begins to consume our time, energy, and focus. Whether we're thinking about how to find it, make it, grow it, or save it, the desire to acquire more results in our constantly directing our attention toward it. There is opportunity to increase wealth all around us, all the time. Whether it's working overtime, chasing a new client, starting a side hustle, or managing our investments, the pursuit of money requires our time and energy.

But that's not all. The pursuit of money begins to circumvent and even alter our values. When the desire for money is present in our lives, we become almost different people, often engaging in behaviors we would otherwise avoid. The

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desire fuels competition against others. The love of money requires me to desire what you already possess. For me to gain more, you must part with yours. The world quickly becomes a zero-sum game dominated by jealousy and envy.

Stories of generosity move us and inspire us. Celebrities may get the headlines, but it is the real-world examples of sacrificial giving that motivate us to do the same.

That is how generosity affects us. It moves us to become better people and inspiring others to do the same. But when we live our lives constantly pursuing riches, generosity will always elude us. You cannot both be generous and chase wealth.

The more we remove ourselves from the empty pursuits of money, the more we are drawn to other-centered living. And the more we are drawn to helping others, the greater lives of lasting significance we end up living.

7. Litter on the Road to Purpose: *Overcoming the Distraction of Possessions*

Possessions, while necessary up to a point, begin after that point to become an impediment to and a distraction from living a meaningful life. Having too many possessions slows us down in the pursuit of what we care about. In the worst cases, it may prevent us from making any progress at all.

Few of us would admit to having a shopping addiction, or at least one that fits a clinical definition. But I can't help wondering, as I look at our overfilled closets, drawers too stuffed to close, and garages used so heavily for storage that we can't park in them, if we're all suffering from compulsive buying more than we think.

Every single thing you own requires a little bit of your attention and time, whether it be researching, shopping, cleaning, organizing, repairing, replacing, recycling, or working just to make the money to buy the new thing that you can take home to clean and organize and replace.

Look around at your own home. All that clutter used to be money and time. The more you own, the greater the burden on your life your possessions become. And most people have no idea how big a burden their possessions have become until they begin to remove them.

A third way in which our property and possessions distract us from our life goals is not as obvious or quantifiable as money and time. But it's just as real. In fact, it may be the most serious type of distraction-by-stuff of all because it is so subtle. Stuff distracts us by obscuring our focus.

It's easy to see boxes in our closets or basements and recognize that we need to declutter. But when everybody around you is chasing more and more physical possessions, it starts to feel normal or expected, and it's harder to notice how that pursuit is distracting you from things that matter. The world around us will always seek to hijack our passions. Madison Avenue fills every unoccupied surface with messages of how its newest products will improve our lives. They call for our attention, our affection, and ultimately our admiration. And they are winning . . . more than we'd like to admit.

Owning less leads to *wanting* less. This is how the act of decluttering our unneeded possessions removes us from the world of overconsumption we see all around us. And that is one of the reasons I am so passionate about minimalism and helping people experience its benefits. Once we see the advantages of owning less, it is a small step to experiencing contentment with our possessions.

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8. Trending: Overcoming the Distraction of Applause

Becoming Minimalist made me think more than I ever had before about my deepest values and highest goals in life. For example, by freeing up our family finances, minimalism caused me to think about what I really wanted to do with my money. I realized I didn't want either money or possessions to distract me from the things that mattered to me. And in fact, in my own life, to one degree or another, I have had to face *all* the other distractions addressed in this book. But now we'll look at the most serious distraction for me personally.

You see, as the years go by, I care less and less about money and possessions . . . but the allure of other's applause for my achievement gets me every time.

Finding our self-worth in recognition and approval from others is always a foolish pursuit. It negatively impacts the decisions we make and the lives we choose to live. Furthermore, applause never fully satisfies our hearts or souls. Even those who have reached the pinnacle of fame and prestige in our society long for more of the same. As the saying goes, you can never get enough of what you don't need to make you happy.

Our goal is not to secure approval from others. That is empty and fleeting. Our goal is to live that one life we've been given to its greatest potential—whether anybody praises us for it or not.

If you're like me and there are times when you get sidelined because you're fixated on how the praise you're getting isn't enough, then I have two hopeful thoughts for you.

First, it gets easier.

The more focused on and committed to your goals you become, the less an excessive hunger for others' applause should trouble you. When you're doing what you know you're supposed to be doing, it starves the wolf of envy within you.

When a friend uses his extra money to buy a Corvette, I can compliment him on his car without wishing I had one myself. I've got something better. Every time I go to one of our Hope Effect foster care sites, I see it in the eyes of boys and girls who lost their parents but are happy, healthy, and full of hope.

Do I still struggle with too much desire for accolades? I sure do. But I can honestly say that it's not the big issue it used to be. It doesn't hold me back in my pursuits of the things that matter to me.

And now I'll give you the second encouraging thought to take with you: people are attracted to others who are living their mission. Aim for the purpose and not the praise.

9. Beaches Get Boring: Overcoming the Distraction of Leisure

I believe that for just about everybody, the most fulfilling thing we can do, in the long term, is to focus on our work. By "work," I'm not just referring to a nine-to-five job. It could be parenting. Or serving on a board. Or volunteering. Many possible things. Anything that contributes good to others is *work*, regardless if we're getting paid for it.

And what distracts us most from that kind of work? One of the biggest things is work's opposite: leisure. Or better put, modern society's infatuation with leisure.

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I'm *not* against rest, relaxation, and fun. I just don't want you to miss out on the things that matter to you because you've unthinkingly bought into our cultural notions of leisure. What I'm against is making leisure your objective. Because if leisure is your *objective*, it will inevitably displace your highest priorities. That's a very common problem in our society.

Let me put it this way: Leisure makes a great booster to long-term productivity in our pursuit of meaningful goals. But leisure makes a terrible goal in itself. Leisure doesn't provide meaning. It provides renewal for other things that do provide meaning.

The people I've known who have made leisure their purpose have tended to feel empty and have eventually regretted what they gave up for leisure. They get bored with sunbathing at the beach, playing golf, or watching TV. I don't want you or me to end up the same way.

In our society, leisure becomes a distraction primarily in two ways:

- We tend to see work as a necessary evil and try to get away with doing as little of it as possible.
- We assume we should stop working at a certain age, and usually we hope that age is as early in life as we and our retirement savings can make it.

But nothing beats the feeling of laying my head on the pillow at the end of a day of meaningful work and knowing that I gave everything I had to the day. When I get to the end of my life, I will want to know that I tried my best and gave my all. So will you.

The way to overcome the distraction of leisure is to rethink it and find selfless fulfillment in work. If you have a job, see it as love by serving others. If your days are spent in parenting and housework, see that as love. Even if you are unemployed and have way too much time on your hands, there is still meaningful service to others you can find to do. I know that work—whatever it is—can be messy and is never perfect. But if you're working on things that matter, you'll never regret it.

10. Blinking Lights: Overcoming the Distraction of Technology

There are times when technology doesn't help me but rather gets in the way of my living out my purposes and values. As alert to this problem as I am, I still frequently catch myself wasting time on social media or reading a news story that is irrelevant to me. I have to remind myself again and again to click on the red *Close* button or turn my phone facedown.

If ever there was something that deserved the label *distraction*, it's the electronic news, entertainment, information, and time-consuming games that modern technology pushes in our direction. (Not that we put up much of a resistance most of the time.) All those blinking lights and colorful icons and entrancing sounds—they're hard to ignore. Technology can quickly move from tool to distraction when we're not careful. In the end, it can lead to regret.

Things that matter usually take time, energy, and concentration. Is devoting our time to binge-watching movies on TV or beating the next ten levels of Candy Crush really worth it? It might be, if it gives us some much-needed diversion from our real-life stresses. Probably not, though, if these distractions have become a lifestyle and are taking us away from the pursuits we've identified as most meaningful to us.

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One thing is for sure: the leaders of technology are not going to stop warring for our focus, our time, and our money. We must fight back in a responsible way if we're going to live lives that matter.

I want to reiterate that I believe technology can be used for good. This is not a chapter about removing it entirely from our lives. As I've pointed out, in many ways, I'm doing what I do today only because of technology. No doubt, there's going to be a period of evaluating what is healthy and worthwhile when it comes to technology, new media, and social media. And there's going to be a period of evaluating what is unhealthy and soul robbing. My assumption is that humankind will eventually learn how to use it for good, as we've done with previous societal advancements. But in the meantime, we must do what we can to use technology as a tool for meaning rather than a distraction from it.

Bring intentionality to every technological platform and interaction you encounter. Take meaningful breaks to reevaluate its role in your life to see if powering down your devices is a way to power up your purpose.

Rebel against the shadowy motivations of tech companies who profit from your attention and information. And in the end, use technology to promote things that matter rather than being distracted from them.

PART 4: ENDING OF THE BOOK, BEGINNING OF A MORE MEANINGFUL LIFE

11. Live the Story You Want Told: *And Expect Surprises*

I'm sure you understand that finishing this book isn't the end of struggling against distraction. As we've seen, nothing but death will be the end of anyone's struggling with that. But the struggle is different when you have a clear knowledge of who your adversaries are. And when you understand how they war against your purpose. And when you're equipped to root them out, shove them aside, put them on mute.

Even then, clearing away the distractions is not the ultimate point in all this. The ultimate point is to live a life of meaning and purpose. So take advantage of the way you've taken the power position over the distractions in your life. Get going on the things that matter to you.

It's going to be quite a journey. And I've got to tell you, it may not go exactly as you anticipate.

Today, I'm doing things and making a difference in the world in ways I never foresaw or would have dreamed I was capable of a decade or two ago. I credit intentional living for my accomplishments. That has included clearing away the distractions that would have kept me rooted in place or at least slowed down my progress. Now I view the future with enthusiasm and a sense of wide-open possibility. I'm telling you, this is way more fun than buying a bigger house, driving a more luxurious car, or planning a more exotic vacation could ever be.

I have certain slogans I use over and over again because there's always someone who needs to hear them. One of the most popular is this: "You don't have to live like everyone else. In fact, you'll probably be happier if you don't."

Pursuing things that matter will make us more interesting and distinctive, compared to the indistinguishable herd. But regardless of which way your story line goes and which way mine goes, one way all of us pursuers of purpose can judge whether our actions really matter is to ask if they're being beneficial to others.

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Because of your intentional living . . .

- Are relationships healthier?
- Are the poor better off, or the sick healthier, or the uneducated better informed?
- Is our physical world in better shape?
- Is there more beauty to enjoy?
- Is there any more wisdom to follow?
- Is there more kindness for people's fragile hearts?

Obviously, you can't address all the world's problems, but sooner or later there should be something tangible or identifiable to show for what you're doing. And if so, then when you come to the end of your life, you'll be able to look back and honestly say that you've done something to make the world a better place than it was when you came into it. Your life mattered. There will be no regret in that.