The Minimalist Woman's Guide to Having it All
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Introduction

Contentment is natural wealth, luxury is artificial poverty
~Socrates

Welcome to this little strategy guide, which is as much for thinking as it is for doing. Your first question might be, “How can you have it all if you are a Minimalist? Doesn’t that mean just the opposite?” Another question might be, “I just want to get the most toys in the fewest steps—will this guide help me?” The answer to both is a resounding “No!”

Instead, you’ll get something a lot better than that: a path to contentment, one that lets you start feeling like you have it all whether you are rich or poor.

Let’s consider what Having it All really means and then compare it to the Minimalist path.

“Having it All” is a phrase associated with abundance, fame, fortune, health, happiness, and achieving our dreams. To one extent or another, “having it all” has meant having a great career, the perfect mate, perfect children, living in a dream house, affording luxuries, having optimum health, and looking like a fabulous model—all at once.

But let’s look at that definition again and see what is really going on: nearly everything about the traditional sense of having it all is about appearances and status. They are all goals with bars set by society, family, or media, and not by one’s inner self. Even when these goals are attained, they do not satisfy for long. Something deeper needs answering, something that brings us what we truly want and need: contentment.

By its very nature, contentment—the sense of having it all—can’t be attained by achieving levels or goals set by others. It also can’t be attained if we don’t know what it is for us, if we don’t know what truly pleases us. Such self-knowledge can be difficult to acquire in a world that places all its emphasis on appearances and status.

That explains why some people feel they Have it All when they appear to have nothing, and others have nothing when they appear to have it all!
Having it All cannot happen without being content, and contentment is the essentials:

- Being comfortable in your own skin
- A sense of being your own person
- Truly feeling that being yourself is enough
- Not needing more than what you have
- Freedom from nagging desires
- Freedom from anxieties

Contentment is not:

- Satiation
- Happiness
- Personal achievement
- Fulfillment

Contentment, however, makes all of those things possible.

Getting down to these essentials is also the goal of Minimalism.
Minimalists are known for living well with less stuff. The point isn’t just having less stuff, but the benefits of having less stuff: more space, more time, more money, less trash, less cleaning, less organizing, less stress. The amount of time and space freed up is compounded by the sense of time and space regained, which gives back a precious sense of serenity and control to previously harried lives. Minimalists give less a chance, and have almost universally experienced an amazing amount of contentment as a result.

Minimalism is living with just what you need. Needs are defined individually. Minimalism can include, but is not limited to, frugality or simple living. It can be done expensively, as in having the very best of just a very few things, or it can be done on a pittance. It is ideally debt-free. Space and time are given high value. Unrewarding things or activities are kept to a minimum.

A wonderful thing happens along the Minimalist path: you realize you’ve got enough mental and physical space to be yourself, that you are more than the sum total of your possessions, and you actually feel that you are enough in and of yourself. That’s a feeling akin to contentment.

And that’s why a Minimalist approach to life, stuff, and everything is a good way to Have it All.

I’ve drawn from the essentials of Minimalism to help you create an environment for nurturing contentment. The process is set into three chapters, featuring projects that anyone can do:

**Becoming a Mindful Consumer** is the first step, because awareness of what we accumulate and why we accumulate is the first step in understanding our relationship to externally determined ideas of what is desirable to have. Raising your consumer consciousness will put a stop to unneeded things making their way into your home and sucking the life out of your bank account, your space, and your psyche.

This chapter includes the **Stop Shopping Project**, where the mission is to stop succumbing to the consumer siren and keep yourself out of stores to the greatest extent possible. This includes avoiding indirect forms of shopping and exposure to new products and product placement. This step will set the stage for success in the next two projects.

**Keep the Best and Get Rid of the Rest** is the next step, where you take a good hard look at what you already possess and learn to recognize the things that are truly of value to you and to let go of things that are not. This process is potentially life-transforming, especially when applied to the things most directly connected to self-care: clothing, grooming, and food preparation. Marketers aim their heavy ammunition
at these areas, too. Becoming aware of the difference between what they suggest and what we recognize as our own genuine preferences enables us to have a keener appreciation of our uniqueness and value.

This chapter has the **Personal Selection Project**. Now is the time to sort through all of your stuff, starting with clothes and stuff in the bedroom, moving to the bathroom and personal grooming items, and working your way to the kitchen. Your goal is to select the most essential things among your possessions and then eliminate anything that is not suitable and relevant to the way you actually live your life. The emphasis is on what you *choose to keep* rather than what you choose to discard.

**Taking Back Time** is a natural extension of awareness and mindfulness, because asserting your own preferences over the noise of marketers and our consumer-based culture is asserting the value of your life and time. Once you become comfortable with asserting your own value, it becomes natural to make choices that lead to contentment.

This sets the stage for the **Onwards and Upwards Project**. You’ve broken free of the marketers and free of a lot of the stuff they convinced you that you needed. Now you can build on what you’ve learned. You’ve got the confidence to recognize and eliminate the mental clutter of culturally-induced fears, regrets, and other kinds of negative thinking that stand in the way of becoming what you are meant to be.

We are creatures of both mental and physical habits. It’s easier and faster to change attitudes—and sustain them—by achieving simple changes in the physical world as well. I hope by showing you both the thinking and the doing, that you can discover and experience your own authentic definition of Having it All.
Becoming a Mindful Consumer: The Stop Shopping Project

Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need.
~From the movie Fight Club, based on the novel by Chuck Palahniuk

Humans are hard-wired to adorn themselves and to accumulate things. Looking good and powerful has always been a part our survival instincts, as it is with many other species. Looking a certain way or having certain possessions also marks us as part of a tribe, and in turn gives us the security of a collective. Whether it is a necklace of shark teeth or a Rolex watch, what we acquire and display marks us as “that kind of person.”

When Hans Christian Anderson published “The Emperor’s New Clothes” in 1837, the ruling class had long taken symbols of luxury, wealth, power, and special-ness to absurd lengths, and the emerging middle class showed signs of doing the same. A little child spoke truth to power when he declared that the Emperor had no clothes, thus catching out the Emperor’s hypocrisy: he could not admit that he couldn’t see the magic fabric from which his new clothes were made. The Emperor was still vulnerable to being sold a bill of goods that on the surface played to his vanity; in actuality it played on his fears of inadequacy. I wonder what Anderson would think of modern-day marketing and consumerism!

We take great pains to respond to cultural norms of what is desirable. We want to feel adequate, if not optimal, so we spend a tremendous amount of time, effort, and money in the pursuit. But it doesn’t stop there.
The great engine of marketing and consumerism relies on a constantly changing concept of worth and desirability, from a “look” that determines fashion to “new and improved” that determines products. The base standards for desirability need to change because companies need us to keep buying what they make. Marketers convince us that the desirability standard changes, making us vulnerable to never feeling adequate for any length of time, even after we have already taken great pains to look “better” or purchase certain products.

Thus we are conditioned to always partake of the next great thing, because not doing so would be tantamount to letting ourselves down. The system does not want us to know our own best selves, because if we do we then have no need to buy things that “they” say are worthy and desirable. Satisfied people don’t buy as much stuff.

The only way out of this trap is to peel back the layers of influence until we get down to our essential selves. We need to remove the influence of marketing from our lives or to remove ourselves from the influence. We can’t hear or see our real selves, our real values, until we shut out the constant brainwashing designed to make us good little consumers.

Very few of us are immune to marketing. There is a reason why billions of dollars are spent every year on marketing—it works. It is so constant that it works subliminally as well as directly. Furthermore, most of our friends, family, and coworkers are also brainwashed. This has been going on for a few generations now, so most of us have not known any other way of being in the world. It’s time to squelch the brainwashing before it costs us a penny or a minute more.

We need to create an environment of minimal outside influence, to give ourselves a fighting chance to really know ourselves, to know our true inner preferences. In such an environment there will be enough space, enough non-marketing/silence, to hear our own thoughts, to see things as they really are, and get to know our essential selves.
The Stop Shopping Project

The best way to create an environment that allows your own preferences to emerge is to stop shopping and to stop anything that tempts you to shop.

Stop shopping for anything other than food and absolute necessities such as medicine. Stop shopping for fun, or out of boredom, or as a way to bond with your kids.

Stop recreational shopping. Do something else instead.

You probably already have everything you need or can make do with what you already have. You want to avoid falling for your conditioned shopping triggers, spending money on stuff you don’t need, and bringing it home to take up space it doesn’t deserve.

Stop Shopping does not have to be permanent, but it does need to last long enough to actually free yourself from the habit of shopping for anything except bare necessities. Do it for at least one month—three is better, six is better still. Shopping is a hard habit to break, but an essential one if you want to give your true self a fighting chance.

Stop Shopping means staying out of stores, both brick and mortar and virtual. Even if you are “just browsing,” you are exposing yourself to marketer-designed temptations,
and thus letting in the very influences you are trying to get away from. Don’t let them clutter your head anymore, or drown out your unique voice and vision!

Stop Shopping means avoiding passive shopping, via print media and certain kinds of television programming. Many popular shows are notorious for product placement, but other influences are in the set designs and the cast wardrobes.

Many people advocate getting rid of their televisions for this very reason—the commercials and programs put ideas into their and their children’s heads and trigger desire for things which they didn’t know they wanted before.

The mailbox can be a dangerous marketing inlet, with catalogs, magazines, advertisements, coupons, and credit card offers. You can cancel much of this by signing up to not receive junk mail and calling up catalog companies to remove your name from their mailing list.

Magazines are another source of passive shopping, even if you ignore the ads. I had subscriptions to many different home and lifestyle magazines for years that inspired me to buy things, redecorate, or change my wardrobe. When we downsized we eliminated all subscriptions, but I would still read the magazines at the public library. After a while I realized that doing so actually caused me great pain because I couldn’t indulge in the beautiful designs I saw in their pages. I was torturing myself. What it really meant was that I was still vulnerable to suggestion—and still hooked on looking for suggestions from other sources.

Once I got away from the magazines and browsing in stores with market tested and focus grouped temptations, my own sense of style took stronger hold. I began to prefer a less “stuffed” style and to appreciate the possibilities of the things that I already owned. After a few months the need for acquiring more and making big decorative or wardrobe changes subsided, until I was able to go into a store with beautiful things and no longer “feel” their possibilities for my own home and life. It was and still is marvelously liberating. I also got out of the habit of feeling inadequate for keeping things exactly as they were.

Stop Shopping means to stop Playing House and Playing Dress-Up, and any of their equivalents such as Playing Sportsman and hanging around auto and boat shows. It also means stop Playing Geek and looking for the latest and coolest technology. Give it a rest. Unless there is a dire need for replacing something, you can very well do without. Learn to be truly happy with your material things at exactly the level that they are right now.
Let's consider some of the forces that compel us to shop.

We are victims of our desires. It's part of the human condition to want things, to want more of what we haven’t got. In a consumer-based culture, however, the desires are tantalized and they spin out of control, creating anxiety, neurosis and disharmony. Marketers understand how to play on our desires and appetites. They know we love shiny new objects, and instinctively reach for the security of objects that imply status. We've been an amazingly compliant bunch of lab animals on which they've experimented and grown rich; entire industries have grown up around the experiments and the rights of the labs to experiment upon us. It’s a nasty picture, isn’t it?

The great marketing experiment has been going on for several generations, since the post-Industrial Revolution growth of the middle class. Nineteenth-century middle class households were particularly vulnerable to keeping up appearances in order to keep one's status and reputation, since there was rarely a long and established family history to fall back on. Those attitudes and habits were passed from generation to generation, influenced by print advertising, and later film, radio, and especially television. (Ironic side note: the middle class businessman is the one who turned marketing into an art form.) The key word here is habits. The original need for keeping up appearances, keeping up with the Joneses, has been lost, but the habits of being a sucker for everything new remain. They remain because marketers evolve faster than the market, and even create the market. The naive consumer is trapped.

We also shop because, face it, we are really good at creating things! Artists and artisans and designers come up with such lovely and innovative things, and enjoying them is part of being human. We love to adorn ourselves and our homes with fabrics and accessories that appeal to a certain “something” in us, which we have come to understand as our personal style. We express creativity by combining beautiful things and the things we like. However, when large companies hire designers for their products and then mass-market those products, our need for the original creation moves from that which speaks to us directly to that which we are told to want. The original force of the art or design is lost in translation. What is even sadder is the illusion that mass-marketed “designer” brands are actually products of a real designer, when the reality is design by test-marketing committees.

There is a critical difference between expressing ourselves and being told what to express. Left to our own devices, without being made to feel inadequate or silly or ashamed, we can express our genuine selves no matter what the “trends” are.
Stepping Back From the Abyss of Desire

"The gap in our economy is between what we have and what we think we ought to have - and that is a moral problem, not an economic one. ~Paul Heyne

The world is so full of possibilities and beautiful things. We learn as children that certain things are considered superior to and more desirable than others. Certain people are considered more attractive than others, which is not only biologically determined but culturally as well. Different times in fashion history show preference for plump women, slender women, large bosoms, flat bosoms, pale skin, tanned skin, etc. Men have been preferred muscled or lean, bearded or shorn, full or thin-lipped, rugged or elegant. The royal or social leaders of the day set the style, all the worse for those who couldn’t easily pull it off, as when women were laced into corsets to achieve Catherine de Medici’s standard of a 13-inch waist. The second half of the 20th century saw the rise of the ultra-thin supermodel, a standard so difficult to achieve that droves of women became anorexic and bulimic, even dying, as a result of feeling less than acceptably beautiful.
Such crimes against self can take many forms, even subtle ones, when we are pressed into action from a sense of inadequacy. One such form is cosmetic surgery in all but exceptional cases. Another form is massive debt from living beyond our means. Many social commentaries have focused on Americans’ sense of entitlement: if something is good enough for that person, it is good enough for me, so I am going to have it, too—just because nobody has the right to make me feel inadequate!

What I think is more telling, however, is the disconnect between who we are and who we think we are.

Marketers and media play a funny little game with us, aided by a lot of parents and teachers as well. They tell us we can be anything we want to be, we can be rich, beautiful geniuses—and look it, too—if only we wear certain clothes, use this kind of shampoo, that kind of cell phone, go to a particular school, etc. The problem comes when they sell the concept to an audience that doesn’t really know what it wants, such as children, or even us older people who haven’t really thought outside the big box store before. So we want this, we want that, we feed this persona today, we feed another one tomorrow. And nowhere along the line do we consider it in terms of who and what we really are; contentment is replaced by satiation.

A telling demonstration of the unsettled persona is lurking in our clothes closets. Most of us wear less than half of the clothes we own; many have said it’s only 20 percent. Women are particularly vulnerable to buying beautiful things that they never wear, such as silky blouses, party dresses, and unusual shoes. They are clothes for a person who lives a different life, one who is pampered and goes to soirees and parties and elegant restaurants, as opposed to the office, the grocery store and the daycare center. Somewhere along the line these women thought they could be more upscale by dressing more upscale, but actually wearing the upscale clothing looks out of place in their actual lives. Or they buy for the skinny model they were somehow convinced they could be instead of the solid curvy woman they are. Achieving contentment with this kind of thinking is impossible.

Another example of buying for who we thought we were and not who we are is in the array of personal products in our bathroom cabinets. Once again women are particularly vulnerable to changing their hair color, eye color, skin color, just everything. It is as if they cannot be well-groomed or acceptable without first covering up their actual selves. It is difficult to achieve contentment with this kind of mindset: I am not good enough if I am not fashionably tinted and coiffed. It is a message reinforced by a world that is also influenced by the same marketing: the “look” du jour all too often opens the doors of opportunity, both professionally and socially.
The best way to find your body-truth is to find your healthiest self: your healthiest weight, level of fitness, level of cleanliness, level of nutrition, level of rest and activity. Those things are real and you can count on them without getting sucked in by *products*. When you know your health is accounted for, it is easier to be content, and easier to feel secure in just being who you are without another $40 jar of miracle night cream.

So Stop Shopping.

Be alert to the triggers that inspire you to shop: advertisements and “general” stores, such as big-box retailers with grocery and drugstore sections, or the non-food and non-drug sections of grocery and drugstores. There are bargains to be had at such stores, but woe to the person who must then pass through aisles of non-essentials between the essentials and the checkout lanes! It can be torture until you get into the no-shopping habit.

If you fall off the wagon, just get right back up on it. In fact, if you can, return the offending item to the store before you open it up or wear it or use it. Consider the extra time it takes to return the item as part of your reconditioning.

I used to be the world’s greatest rationalist for bargains, buying extras and just-in-case things because I found them “on sale.” One day I saw a tripod on sale, and remembered my husband muttering about possibly needing an extra one for a project. There was only one left and it was a great price, so I put it into my shopping cart. By the time I was in the checkout lane I came to my senses and remembered that we both felt it was more important to stop the shopping than to pop for possible conveniences. I left the lane and went all the way back to the camera department and put it back on the shelf. There were quite a few incidents like this over the course of three or four months, and then it stopped.

It takes time to learn new thinking habits, to stop shopping like your mom and dad and your friends.

Aim to Stop Shopping for three months, then six, and even a year. We’ve gone for 18 months as of this writing and it feels as natural as breathing. Once the shopping habit shakes loose, your relationship to new stuff changes—it really has to earn its keep before you’ll go to the trouble of buying it and making room for it in your life. This is one of the most empowering feelings one can have in a consumerist society, because it puts you completely in charge of the process!
Want to take it a little further? How about these ideas for some Extra Credit:

- Pay off all credit cards and cut them up.
- Stop eating at fast food and chain restaurants
- Stop patronizing any place that advertises nationally

Benefits of the Stop Shopping Directive:

- Getting your head free from marketers and advertisements
- Not adding more clutter to your home
- More Cash
- Less Trash

Less Trash is important in more ways than one, so let’s take a little time to look at the larger implications of generating trash.

As with any animal, what goes in must come out. Our appetites, whetted and gorged with massive amounts of food and things, naturally generate an equally massive amount of waste. This waste is taking its toll on Earth, not only in landfills, but also in the processes required to create these consumable goods. If nothing else, the fossil fuels alone needed for production and transportation of excessive goods have contributed to climate change and a myriad of environmental problems that impact our health. The petroleum industry also provides the material for plastic. It is no accident that plastic forms the packaging or housing of nearly everything we can buy, which of course ends up in the landfills, as well as littering every street corner and wildlife refuge around the world.

Industries have used marketing to created an artificially high demand for their goods and rewards themselves with arrogance toward responsible stewardship of the planet and our neighborhoods. No matter the end result, the responsibility to stop this wasteful production/consumption cycle is up to each and every one of us as consumers. We may have been conditioned into our roles, but we are still the ones generating the waste and the wasteful production of things we don’t actually need.

Some of us lab animals need to wake up and warn the others.
On the Meaning of Our Stuff

The global problem is mirrored inside our homes. If we have had any disposable income at all, we very likely have things we do not need, love, or continue to want. This has been going on for generations, and older generations have passed on many of their possessions to the younger, vastly increasing the amount of things most homes contain. Older generations have also passed on the meaning-ness of things, as if a person’s essence is somehow contained in the object they owned or in something given as a gift. They have also passed on a mixed-up valuation of things, the saving of currently unneeded things just in case they might be needed someday.

The things we possess thus have levels of meaning and significance from the superficial (fashion, trend, status) to the oppressive (fear, sentiment, heritage, obligation). When we combine the cultural habit of indulging ourselves and our elders with the constant availability of new things we feel compelled to have, we end up with homes that have more stuff than living space. And we have to take care of that stuff. And we have to pay for that stuff. And we have to keep track of that stuff, otherwise we’ll buy even more of the same stuff. And if we don’t fully use the stuff we have, we have to guard against the sneaking guilt of having wasted our money on that stuff. This doesn’t do anyone a bit of good.

In an attempt to bring possessions under control, we fueled an entire industry devoted to organizing and organizational products. Closet organizers, shelves, baskets, file boxes, stacking plastic boxes, labeling gadgets, personal planners and software have been designed to help us reduce the chaos that comes from having an excess of possessions. For some people it was a workable solution, but for many, it was not long before these systems failed under their own weight and complexity. It is impossible to find room for something new in a system that is already full. Using organizers actually added yet another job to one’s life.
The increasing awareness of the glut of things and the exhausting lifestyle needed to earn the money for and to maintain those things have spurred many people toward simple living. We have read about fast-track executives who burned out and left the corporate world and the gated community for a llama farm, but those were the people best able to afford it. Others without financial options just kept plugging along, until bit by bit big companies failed, the Great Recession kicked in, and suddenly droves of people were without work, without pensions or health insurance, in debt up to their ears, and left with a lot of time to look at all the crap they had purchased which wasn’t doing them any good or giving them any enjoyment.

Environmental awareness, lifestyle awareness, and financial awareness are three common consciousness events that lead to paring back, downsizing, and simplifying life. Large homes have come to be seen as space and energy wasters. Smaller homes have been made more spacious by not cramming them with extraneous stuff. Expensive activities and hobbies can be curtailed or eliminated, replaced with personal and family time, simple things like walks and meals at home together. In the vacuum created by opting out of the traditional activity- and shopping-filled life, peace and personal relationships can grow to fulfill us in ways the other things never did. In having less, and less to do, we give ourselves a chance to feel rich with contentment.
Chapter 2

Keep the Best and Get Rid of the Rest: The Personal Selection Project

The sculptor produces the beautiful statue by chipping away such parts of the marble block as are not needed - it is a process of elimination.
~ Elbert Hubbard

Different Kinds of Landfills

Landfills as we understand them are those vast, smelly areas where trucks from all over the region come to deposit their collected trash and detritus. There are too many and yet we need more, because we are generating more trash than we’re recycling. Even recycling has its limits. Plastic can be recycled only so many times before it degrades into an unusable—and non-biodegradable—blob. Chemicals such as mercury leach from objects that should not have been thrown into the pile. Generations of ignorance, lack of oversight, and out of control consumerism have caused a problem so huge that few of us can wrap our minds around it. You might say that landfills are not only garbage, but also the collections of stuff we just don’t want to deal with, like a giant junk drawer.

But those big regional landfills are not the only ones. There are landfills of a sort in many homes, basements, attics, and garages, and in the millions of “storage units” where people put the stuff they don’t have room for in their residences. In the worst instances there is hoarding, where literally everything is saved, even garbage. But even a clean home packed full of neatly arranged boxes of unused stuff is still a kind of landfill.

There are also mental landfills: stockpiles of emotions and memories contributing to bad habits, neuroses, and self-destructive or self-defeating behavior. Compulsive shopping, compulsive collecting, compulsive keeping are each indicative of a mass of mental “stuff” we don’t really want to deal with. Somewhere along the line we’ve not learned how to cherish our time and space over and above our shopping and our stuff. Sometimes it is our own fault, and sometimes it’s not. American culture in particular deliberately cultivates this kind of neurotic behavior, because shopping drives the
economy. But once we wise up to what is going on, it becomes our responsibility to get in control of our own habits.

In the course of removing physical clutter, the mind itself becomes uncluttered. The same mental associations which caused us to acquire and keep an object “let go” when we let go of owning the object, even things which were once very important to us. The result of more and more mental “letting go” is the release of stress—very likely stress we didn’t even know we had. This lightening of mind has incredible positive impact, and many describe it as a lightening of spirit. In turn, physical relaxation becomes easier, from both the increase of uncluttered space and the reduction of mental stressors.

Many people who reduce clutter manage to sell their unwanted goods, but many more must give them away if they are going to get rid of stuff at all. The ideal end goal is not to put any more things into a landfill to the greatest extent possible. In the end, however, much of what we have will end up in a landfill sooner or later. I think here of cheap furniture made with plastic-laminated particle board, electronics cheaper to replace than repair, cookware with nonstick coatings that scratch off within a year, etc.

What has already been manufactured is landfill fodder, whether it has been purchased or not. Very few things are designed to be used for a lifetime, or repaired or recycled. This is why we must buy as little as we can. It is the only way to change the way things are made in the first place, a way of communicating to corporations with our dollars.

There are a lot of books and online information about decluttering, written by people who have experienced it themselves, and who can personally attest to the benefits. It is a subject vulnerable to being trivialized because, well, it’s often lumped with “decorating” and other domestic arts. But I can tell you that it is anything but trivial—getting your possessions under control is a reflection of your attitudes about the world at large, and not just about yourself.

A single drawer reveals the absurdity of existence: a collection of trivia that has nowhere else to go: unworn hair ribbons; rubber bands and paper clips in a digital age; chargers for phones that no longer charge; to-go menus for restaurants that have closed. Matchbooks for nonsmokers. Parts that need gluing back on. Fortunes from fortune cookies. Broken bits of jewelry. Candle stubs. Phone numbers without names. Coupons for toilet paper. A small rock. A key. More keys. Business cards from real estate agents. A single drawer and its detritus is the perfect illustration of what is wrong with the way things are usually done.

We’re human, so we naturally acquire this kind of useless stuff—archaeological digs attest to the existence of piles of garbage and ancient landfills. But being human means we can also choose to do things differently. The problem lies in getting enough
people to do things differently, too, so that there is enough cultural and community support to make the better way of doing things the normal way of doing them.

For instance, today I needed a new pen for writing in my notebook. The pen itself is plastic and was part of a plastic package of five pens. I’ve used up the other four and had no choice but to toss the plastic packaging and the used-up pens into the trash. They are not recyclable. Multiply this by trillions of pens. Would it be better to return to the days of really good refillable pens with replaceable tips and buy them one at a time from a stationer who keeps them in a glass case? Even a refillable ballpoint pen creates less waste. And what about those odd pens and pencils in the drawer with all the miscellaneous junk? Why did we buy them? Why do we keep them? Just in case? Waste not, want not?

There is an odd disconnect between keeping things for Just in Case or not wasting money and the way things are made, disposed of, and dumped into landfills. We don’t make the association between personal waste and landfill waste. So we create these little landfills inside our homes—and junk drawers—out of some inner notion that we won’t be wasting resources. The absurdity is lost upon us.

The problem is in the way things are made and made available. Ostensibly it is done in order to answer our demand for cheaper and more readily available goods, so we could in a sense take the blame for the cheap plastic pens with short lives and too much packaging. But it is not the whole story. The manufacturers want us to buy them that way, because plastic is a cheap material, and the ultimate in cost-effectiveness for the manufacturer. Furthermore, the plastic is a product of yet another big business, the petroleum industry. All these big businesses like to keep each other happy and rake in the profits. They assume the consumer is stupid, and for the most part they are correct. We don’t know the larger implications of the way they do things, and we don’t really want to know. We’d rather have the shiny new object in the here and now, at a bargain, and damn the consequences.

Packaging and marketing have gone together so long that now old products are marketed as new simply because they come in a different package. As of this writing, a certain brand of microwave popcorn is now getting a new advertising lease on life because its package now forms a bowl when it is opened after popping. Likewise, a certain brand of soda is getting the same new-look marketing blitz because it’s gone back to using sugar in its formula instead of high-fructose corn syrup or aspartame. Plain old frozen vegetables were first repackaged in “reclosable” bags, and then in “steamable” bags. Niche packaging is notorious: gender-neutral items are repackaged in pink or pastels to “appeal” to women and girls.

Just as we mere consumers reflect our attitudes toward the world at large in the microcosm of our junk drawers, cluttered closets and cabinets, jam-packed
basements, attics, garages, and storage units, corporations reflect their own attitudes toward both people and the planet by using materials, ingredients, systems, methods, and models which are not sustainable or humane. They do not assess damage to the environment or the consumer or the worker as a cost. They are very effective at arguing that the cost of doing business any other way will cause even more harm to people everywhere: we can have our pristine environment, but we can’t have our jobs at the same time.

The most telling example of this is in the food industry, from factory farms down to fast food joints. Somehow in the space of two generations we have gone from farmer-grown food to factory farms totally dependent on chemicals and petroleum. The food is then further processed into continually new and improved addictive variations that are packaged for ultimate convenience. In this, more than any other aspect, we are the ultimate lab animal: how long can they keep us consuming the cheapest possible forms of food?

The landfills and the climate changes and the lack of clean water in areas we’ve never heard of can seem abstract, because not many of us have made it our business to know anything about it. But when it comes to our immediate health and bodies, look out—we are slowly beginning to understand what is happening; now we lab animals are waking up in greater numbers, and figuring out how to unlock the cages.

Big businesses have always given themselves an out when it comes to any damage wrought by their products. They say, “Well, nobody put a gun to your head and said you had to use our products.” They maintain that we have a choice as consumers. And we do! We really do—up to the point that we haven’t been drugged and brainwashed without our knowledge into addiction. This was the issue faced by Big Tobacco: enhanced-nicotine cigarettes and advertising aimed at young people in order to create a new market were the strong-arm tactics that backfired, even after the companies fobbed off cancer victims by telling them that they always had a choice not to smoke.

Now the fast food and factory farm industries are facing similar scrutiny as a result of too many people getting too fat and getting sick. Somewhere along the food chain something has gone wrong, and not all of it is the result of personal gluttony. The activists and investigators working on this, along with the writers and nutritionists working on improving our diets, are helping us realize the importance of the quality of our food. The end result should be interesting. Unlike the case of Big Tobacco, which affected smokers and their families, everyone needs to buy food and eat. Children are particularly affected. We can take charge of the changes we make personally, because we can’t just throw our excess weight into the landfill. We have to spend a lot of time and effort getting rid of fat and keeping it off—it can’t be abstracted and shut away in the junk drawer.
Personal Selection, a Kind of Decluttering

Now that you have committed to getting marketing and shopping out of your head and out of your routine, your next step is to create a supportive environment to sustain the commitment and to let your own values blossom. That step is to take back your home and personal spaces from all the stuff you don’t really need, commonly known by the clunky term Decluttering. Getting rid of excess stuff is one way to look at this project, but the other way to look at it is selecting and keeping the best from what things you have. It’s in what you keep, not what you toss, that you begin to assert your true self.

There are many wonderful and effective decluttering books, websites, and guidelines. Some say to start small and gradual, and others encourage a massive endeavor. All agree that it is futile if you keep shopping and bringing stuff home, so it was important to begin with that first step, the Stop Shopping Project.

Now, getting rid of clutter just for the sake of making more room is enough reason to do it. This is because it has immediate, visible, and tangible rewards and that is such a kick. But there’s an even more important reason for doing it, and that’s the self-awareness which happens when you take a good honest look at what you actually use, wear, eat, cook, and just plain prefer. There’s also the shock of realizing just how much you’ve been suckerized into buying that really doesn’t answer your needs.

If you haven’t worn or used something in the past six months, that’s a good sign it isn’t working for you, no matter how “nice” it is or how much it cost or who gave it to you. There are seasonal exceptions, of course, such as camping gear and holiday decorations.

Whole-house decluttering is not the focus of this book. Since the heart of having it all is contentment, and contentment comes from knowing who you really are and what you really want down deep inside, it is best to begin with the most personal of our possessions. The goal is to make room for our own identities to bloom and grow—and the sooner that happens, the sooner everything else falls into place on the path to contentment.

There are three rooms that impact us intimately: Bedroom, Bathroom, and Kitchen. In each one there are items that we’ve amassed based on externally-determined concepts of worth, virtue, and desirability. Those are the items most associated with our identities, and tend to be the ones that fail us miserably, too: our clothes, our personal grooming products, and our cooking/dietary arrangements.
Clothing

The bedroom is where most of us keep our clothes, and that is the place to begin the decluttering/personal selection process. The most common method is to remove every item of clothing and footwear from your closets and drawers and place them into one of three piles: Outtaheres, Keepers, and Maybes.

Outtaheres are things which are worn out, don’t fit, don’t look right or feel comfortable, are a pain to maintain, or are no longer relevant to the way you live, such as business suits if you’ve changed to working from home.

Keepers are obviously the things you know you’ve been wearing week in, week out. They fit, they suit your working and leisure life, and they don’t require a ridiculous amount of care. They may even be shabby, but you wear them and love them. Keepers can also include one good suit or dressy outfit that only gets worn on rare occasions—providing it still fits. Do the same with your shoes and outwear, your sports clothes, underwear, socks, pajamas, accessories, everything. These are the things that fit your Personal Selection criteria, things you’re actively, consciously choosing to keep and use.

One way to look at the Keepers is as if you are “shopping” from your existing wardrobe—would you pay good money all over again for something, is it really comfortable, does it fit well, do you feel confident wearing it?

Maybes are things you haven’t worn much but feel you can’t or shouldn’t get rid of, because you spent too much money on them, or they were gifts, or you haven’t lost enough weight to fit into them. Or maybe there just haven’t been opportunities to wear them. Look out for that last one.

Work quickly—don’t think about it too much. The more quickly you work, the more honestly you’ll work. Don’t give yourself a chance to rationalize keeping something. Just put everything into its appropriate pile, bam bam bam, working as fast as you can, maybe to some upbeat music. This is a positive thing to do for yourself, so don’t turn it into an exercise in angst. Bam bam bam!

Once it’s done, go have a beer or a cuppa tea and don’t look at the piles for at least a half an hour.

Now go back into the bedroom and look at each pile, especially the Keepers. What do you see? What are the common traits of the clothes you automatically, instinctively kept? Note the style, size, colors, fabrics. Note the condition, as well. If and when you go shopping again, you’ll know what you’ll most likely wear and what’s worth replacing.

http://minimalistwoman.com
My keepers turned out to include three pairs of jeans (regular, “dressy,” and skinny), white t-shirts, knitted shirts, a chambray shirt, some sweaters, and a couple of dresses and coats. The shoes turned out to be boots, shoes and sandals I could do a lot of walking in. Simple, comfy clothes but nothing shabby, appropriate for working from home but good enough to wear to lunch out with friends and family. I also kept a giant oversized man’s work shirt as a coverup for messy jobs like painting and gardening.

The Keepers pile will tell you what your life is actually like—and what you actually like, too.

Keepers get to go back into the closet and drawers.

Now let’s look at the Outtaheres. What traits do those items have in common? When I did this, it was size: I had things that were both too big and too small, from years of major weight swings. I also had things which were no longer relevant to the way I live, such as party dresses and “arty” clothes from the days of owning a gallery, and beach clothing as well. I also had a bunch of shoes that were no longer comfortable for my aging bones. It made me sad to give them up, but I had to embrace where I am in the here and now and make fresh Personal Selections. I also gave up things that were hard to maintain, such as dry clean-only items or things that HAD to be ironed before being wearable. I’m not into either method!

Outtaheres should be separated into donation and discard piles, and then immediately discarded or donated. Don’t let them hang around, either.

My Outtaheres included a whole bunch of socks that were long past their prime, and t-shirts that were best used for rags. Apart from that, most of it was charity-worthy and I happily donated them.

Now let’s look at your Maybes. This is the one that can get a little weird.

What traits do these items have in common? Size? Style? Lack of opportunity to wear them? Do any of them still have price tags on them, or have been unworn at all? How many of them were purchased on impulse, or were gifts? How many were purchased for a special occasion and then have been unworn since? Are any of them kept for sentimental reasons—vacation souvenirs, college sweatshirts, girlfriend knitted it?

My own Maybes pile was full of things I’d purchased as a result of recreational shopping, impulse shopping, things that didn’t fit quite the same after washing, and things that were simply no longer comfortable, such as stiff button-down shirts and certain styles of jeans.
It also included a lot of dressier clothes and shoes that I hadn’t worn in years, because we just didn’t go to places like that anymore. In fact, some of the dressier items were purchased after we stopped going to dressy-outfit places! Why was that? Could it be that I hadn’t yet internalized the changes in our lives when we began to downsize? I chalked it up to a very human mistake, and was glad that I don’t do it anymore.

Maybes get boxed or bagged up, labeled, and hidden away for six months. If you don’t need anything from those boxes or bags, donate them unopened.

I had two big bags of maybes. After six months I couldn’t even remember what was in them!

The space you have created by removing unworn items will suddenly change the way you relate to and care for your remaining clothes. It can also change the way you value yourself. By getting rid of ratty underwear and socks, and getting rid of a pile of “yard work” tee shirts and wearing nicer ones instead, you are caring for yourself in the manner you deserve, not putting off wearing decent things until the proverbial “some day” arrives. This goes for men every bit as much as for women.

Women in particular are notorious for buying clothes for the princesses they think they are, rather than for the competent women they have become. Nonetheless, both men and women are guilty of not wearing their quality items in their daily lives, and end up with a closet full of really nice unworn clothing because their everyday lives never seemed occasion enough to wear them.

If for some reason you discover that you have a closet full of clothing you hate or is uncomfortable or doesn’t fit, then you have given yourself an epiphany and a good reason to shop much more thoughtfully in the future. Now you’ll know not to bother with bargain sweaters that are scratchy, or button down shirts when you prefer high quality tees. You’ll find you really don’t need a lot of clothes, just a few really good ones.

Try selecting just enough clothing for one typical week and weekend or two weeks if that is your laundering schedule, and seeing if you aren’t happier for it. Do the same with shoes. Treat your feet as well as you can and get rid of the worn out shoes, the ones that hurt after wearing them an hour, and the fashion victim ones. The avalanche of shoes that plagues many a closet will be gone and it will be easy to find the ones you want.
You will be amazed at the reduction in stress just by having your closet simplified, airy, and uncluttered. It will be easier to pick out something to wear with a limited selection of go-to clothes, and easier to hang them back up or put them away after laundering. You’ll appreciate the things you kept all the more, and will be much more likely to select similarly satisfying clothing in the future.

What you see in that Keepers wardrobe gives you a photograph of where you are at in the here and now. It might be different than what you think you’re all about, which is probably mirrored in the Maybes pile. A lot of people would say that this is a sign for you to change your life so that wearing the stuff you aspire to is more natural. I’m inclined to disagree.

I believe the Maybes are the things we think we ought to like, that fit an externally-determined image of ourselves. An example of that would be a fad item that was marketed to your particular demographic. Another example would be the blouse that your mother thought would “look so lovely on you.” But your case might be different. Give it some thought and see what you come up with. The way you do or do not utilize the things you own will likely fit a pattern that you’ll see in other aspects of your life.

Some resources for getting clutter under control:

- Francine Jay’s The Joy of Less, a very energetic and comprehensive guide to decluttering your life and home
- Project 333, an ongoing wardrobe-reduction project in which participants wear the same 33 items of clothing for 3 months.
- The Mindful Consumer List, my readers’ list of brands that are fair-trade or environmentally conscious.

http://minimalistwoman.com
Grooming and Health

The next place to assess is your collection of personal grooming products. If you have a mass of partially-used bottles of shampoo, body wash, soaps, colognes, hair and face products, and makeup, now is the time to toss the old and do some thinking about what remains. Did you really need to spend $40 on eye cream? What illusions were you under when you bought that shampoo? Do you just try new things out of habit? If so, what spurred you to try it—the commercial with the sexy actress (who you’ll never admit aloud you wish you looked like)?

In the spirit of stepping back from the marketing, many people have tried combinations of non-commercial products that can be used on hair, face, and body, such as baking soda and lemon juice. Simple haircuts, your real hair color and texture, and light or no makeup is another way to simplify and avoid the toxins all too common in commercial personal grooming products. Many women who have been afraid of going with their real hair color, especially gray hair, have been amazed that it no longer carries a stigma, and receives a positive response from others—if it is even noticed at all.

“Natural” products are a great concept, but these, too, can be fraught with deceptive marketing. A popular “herbal” shampoo might have loads of herbs in its list of ingredients, but it still has loads of suspected toxins, as well, the stuff that provides lathering, appealing color and scent, and long shelf life. If you are interested in natural and organic products, you’ll have to do more than read the front label on the bottle.
While you’re in the bathroom, take a look at the medicine cabinets. Obviously, it is important to throw out old medicines, old cosmetics, and expired products. But what kinds of products are there? Are you reliant on a lot of over-the-counter products, the gas pills, antacids, and laxatives? Is there any way to become less reliant on them simply by having a better diet? What about your first aid supplies? Are they up to date, and most of all, are they accessible? If you needed a bandage in a hurry, could you get your hands on it without digging through the cabinets like a dog after a bone?

Select the best and most relevant of your personal care products, eliminating “mistake” makeup and products, and see if you can’t create a lot of space just by keeping only what you use daily or need on a regular basis. Getting rid of bathroom clutter will add so much more ease and time to your life, and be healthier and safer as well. It will also tell you a lot about your health and your state of mind. If you need to make improvements, or to simplify, it will be readily apparent here, and not just on the bathroom scale.

The Kitchen

The odds of going to the store for a loaf of bread and coming out with only a loaf of bread are three billion to one. ~Erma Bombeck

The kitchen is where food is stored and prepared for meals, right?

Then why are you using it as a dumping ground for mail, receipts, projects, coats, and tools? Why is it home for the junk drawers? Why are you keeping the cabinets stocked with dishware and cookware you haven’t used in ages? And why is it so hard to keep clean and find anything?

The kitchen is often convenient to the door through which our purchases arrive. There’s usually a lot of flat surfaces, ripe for setting things on to deal with “later.” Traditionally, it was “mom’s” area, and families would leave things there for the “mom” to take care of, like school notices, artwork, bills, medicine, dirty plates, mending, receipts, etc. Even if your family isn’t the traditional model, the habits from childhood carry on to our own homes: kitchen = dumping ground for stuff that doesn’t have a better place.

This calls for a major rethinking of the purpose of our kitchens. In simplest terms, it is for the storing and preparation of food to eat. Period. That means all that other stuff needs to stay out, and stay out for good. The counter tops need to be cleared off and
to remain clean. Clean as you go needs to be the new routine. Made a sandwich? Put away the ingredients, wipe down the countertop, and rinse off the utensils. Then go sit down and eat the sandwich. This is easier if you live by yourself but more important if you live with others. A kitchen that is not ready to use will not get used to its fullest potential.

In other words, if there’s crap on the countertops and sticky dishes in the way, you’ll sooner call for pizza than to make one. This is expensive, wasteful, and most of all unhealthy. All the good dietary intentions in the world are meaningless if good food doesn’t get cooked and eaten before it rots in the refrigerator.

“Good food” is the key. Make an assessment of the kinds of food in your cabinets and refrigerator. What do you see? Are there a lot of ready-to-eat items, convenience packaging, instant foods, things you see advertised on television? Start reading the ingredient labels and be prepared to be amazed at the amount of sugar, salt, preservatives, and dyes you are consuming. And calories. Recognize that these foods have been designed to hook you with their ramped-up flavors and convenience. But unless you’ve been living under a rock, you know this.

Now look at your fresh food. Is there any at all? Is it getting used before it rots? Are there so many bottles of soda and condiments that you can’t keep track of the good stuff? Do you know what’s in the freezer and how long it’s been in there? Does your refrigerator depress you, and is it time to change that feeling?

What you see is how you’re treating yourself. Most of us have huge room for improvement in our food choices. If we constantly succumb to convenience foods, we should ask ourselves why, because healthier (and less expensive) options are often just as convenient. Maybe we’ve just gotten into a bad habit. Maybe it’s time to lose the bad habits before our health suffers, too.

There’s often a lot of aspirational clutter in the kitchen, as well. There’s the “good” set of dishes and glassware, perhaps wedding presents that are kept for “someday.” There’s the gadgets or appliances we were sure we’d use every day, but turned out to be more trouble than they were worth. There’s the drawers of utensils that have accumulated with our various cooking experiments, including the melon baller that got used once several years ago, and a couple of old can openers that we’ve kept “just in case” the current one breaks or for some reason we find ourselves needing to open 27 cans in one go.

You can cook a lot of good meals with just a knife, a cutting board, a strainer, a wooden spoon, a bowl, a skillet, and a good heavy pot with a lid. The rest of the stuff is just the particulars.
There are a couple good ways to declutter your kitchen, the radical way and the slow way. I’ve personally done the radical way and can attest to the immediate gratification it provides.

The radical kitchen decluttering involves removing everything from all the cabinets and drawers and shelves and pantry areas and spread them out in a different room, such as the dining room. Clean all the counters and cabinet surfaces, inside and out, and deep-clean the appliances as well (good time to clean behind the refrigerator and stove).

Now begin the Personal Selection:

- Put back only the things you’ve used in the past week.
- Ideally, use only one drawer for cooking utensils, and one for flatware.
- Move small appliances off of the counters unless they receive daily use at a minimum.
- Find a different place to set the mail, receipts, mending, school papers, and coats and hats. The kitchen (or food prep area in very large kitchens) is now out of bounds for these items.

Next, think carefully about the things you know you’ve used in the last two or three weeks. If you can do without them, then don’t bring them back into the kitchen. Otherwise, add them to the mix. Box up everything that has not gone back into the kitchen and seal the box and label and date it. Put it into a storage area, out of sight.

If you are not sure about what to keep in the kitchen, consider how you really cook, or really want to cook. If you eat rice several times per week, that rice cooker might well be a good idea. If you only make it once per week, a good heavy pot with a lid will be enough. Some of us can do without microwaves and toasters and coffeemakers, some of us cannot. Others swear by the slow cooker, others thought they would use it but it just gathers dust most of the year.

Being honest about what you personally will and won’t do as a cook is a positive action—don’t aim for the stars unless cooking is truly a hobby for you. For most of us, it is safer to say watching cooking shows on television is more fun than actually cooking with real food for our real families.

Selecting what is allowed in the kitchen goes hand in hand with selecting your eating and cooking routine. The simpler you make it the more likely it is to happen, and the more likely it will be sustained. It is a process that benefits from periodic reassessment, too. For instance, I used to be a prolific baker, and had many different kinds of pans, the big stand mixer, etc. Then the day came that nobody in my family wanted the extra calories or sugar from baked goods, and I also became sensitive to gluten. It made a large part of my kitchen supplies irrelevant, and now the contents of
my cabinets reflect the current reality.

If you are seriously into making smoothies and juicing, that big heavy juicer or blender is well worth the space it will take up on your counter top—providing the counter top is otherwise uncluttered and clean at all times, ready for you to prep the veggies and other foods that will go into your smoothie. It is also providing you clean up after yourself right away, giving the next person the joy and ease of a ready-to-use countertop. It's not about being obsessive-compulsive about clean and clear spaces, it's about allowing for our proclivity to take the path of least resistance.

When there’s not too much to clean up and put away, we are most likely to go ahead and deal with it. When there’s a mountain of sticky dishes and clutter, we’re more likely to procrastinate or only do a partial job, because the entire job is overwhelming. If you do nothing else for your health and welfare, get rid of the clutter in your kitchen and make room for making healthy food. Make it easy for yourself and your family to develop and keep good food habits.

For further reading:

- I’ve written in more depth on this topic in my ebook, The Minimalist Cook: 27 Practical Recipes.
- My related blog post on creating good diet habits is A Better Diet Made Simple.
- For a clear and comprehensive guide to a vegan diet, I recommend reading Christianna Pierce’s Healthy Eating Rules.
Chapter 3

Taking Back Time: The Onwards and Upwards Project

*It is only possible to live happily-ever-after on a day-to-day basis.*

~Margaret Bonnano

So you’ve put the brakes on your shopping and you’ve gotten your personal clutter under control. These are major accomplishments in a consumer society, practically anti-establishment, radical, blazingly individualist, and undoubtedly counter-culture! I think back to the military recruitment commercials selling the idea of the Army of One—well, you’ve just turned that one on its head and created a Culture of One: namely, your own identity unique from the others around you.

Having the guts to stand up to marketers and externally imposed values in favor of your own gives you the courage and strength to take a hard look at how you want to spend your time, money, and energy for the rest of your life. In questioning the choices you’ve already made, it is natural to question the relative value of everything associated with them. For instance, if you look at a pile of clothes you’ve purchased that you do not actually wear for whatever reason, it is natural to think of how much money it cost, and *how many hours you had to work* to pay for those unworn items. Was it worth it? Do you like the work you do enough to squander the earnings? What are your Time limits, what’s your bottom line, what’s your line in the sand, where does the value of your time begin and where does it end?

This kind of natural assessment will cover not only your relationship to money and work, but also your free time and personal relationships. Your choices make a difference, and now you’ll know how much difference they can make. Just knowing what your own preferences are, what makes you unique, what you value, enables you to put *real, concrete, tangible value on your own life.*

And what is the currency of life? Time. None of us know how much of it we have, but even those with a lot of it know it is the most valuable thing we have. The more of it we
spend on others’ terms and not on our own, the more of it we squander.

When you truly sense the value of your own life, and the precious limits of your time span in this world, it becomes so much easier to step back from what distresses you and say, “I’m not going to take this anymore.” And you don’t. You put into place the changes you need to respect the value of your own life, and you take back your Time from those who would squander it for you.

The changes can be small ones, quiet ones, but they are changes of great importance to you. Once asserted, they give you the permission you need to grow Onwards and Upwards, to make the most of your life on this dear old planet.

Taking Back Time is not for seeing how many things you can get done in any given day, nor is it just stopping to smell the roses. Productivity can be a wonderful thing, and systems that help you get things done are great for getting things done, but life is not a to-do list. Stopping to smell the roses and just breathing is excellent, too, but life is not one long meditation, either. Both methods respond to our human stirrings by redirecting them into more activity, or less activity. If you have achieved balance and contentment, they are useful ways to maintain what is already good.

But if you are seeking to take back time, then there is a stirring within that is not being addressed. Perhaps you want to make up for what has gone before, to change course, or perhaps to slow down the passage of time, to put the brakes on what feels like a runaway train of years: Time is running out.

Of course nobody can actually turn back the clock and restore time that has already been lost. The only things that can change are our perception of time, and the way we spend it. They are the two sides of the same Time coin. Our perception of the passage of time can be changed, by living fully in the present. Making the most of the way we spend time means getting rid of the things that hold us back from becoming what we are meant to be. When we are what we are meant to be, it is possible to live fully in the present, which expands our perception of time. Each element supports the other, giving your life value, and making contentment possible.

These two elements, our perception of time and the way we spend our time, are the focus of the everlasting Onwards and Upwards Project.
The Onwards and Upwards Project

*Forever is composed of nows.*
~Emily Dickinson

I love the phrase Onwards and Upwards because it embodies movement, growth, learning, perseverance, and hope. It applies as much to the spirit as it does to the heart, mind, and body. It means not being held back by regrets about the past, or fears about the future. It means that what we do right now matters most of all.

Living in the Here and Now

Many creative people have said that when they are doing what they truly love to do, there is no awareness of time passing. The writer or the artist takes up where they left off the day before, zeroing in on the project before them, visualizing and expressing what they know of the human condition and our relationship to each other and the universe. Process is the key; they are fascinated with the way the art works, and they trust in the way it works. Intuition and intellect merge, practice increases understanding, and the entire process gives back to the artist as much or more than it demands. Time is suspended while the artist is merged with the process of making art.

It’s not just artists that experience this suspension of time. Anyone truly fascinated by a process experiences it, whether it is a scientist or a landscaper. The satisfaction and contentment derived from the process is more important than material rewards. Hobbies are like that for many people, as well. A true gardener becomes absorbed by the minutiae of his plants and soil, and even finds weeding to be a soothing process. Some people are blessed to find this kind of absorption in both work and hobbies.

This kind of focus, this being fully in the moment, fully engaged in the moment at hand, is possible with everything from a morning run to serving tea. It is even possible to be fully engaged in doing rote things such as assembly line work—mindfulness of your own part in a system replaces fascination with the process. When you live fully in the here and now, the mindfulness will take care of itself.

Living in the here and now is making the most of what time we have. Everything is out there, ready for you to give it a go. Of course most of us don’t give everything a go, for one reason or another. Maybe we’re too shy, too insecure, too sensitive, too klutzy, too depressed, too attached to the status quo, too trapped by all the “toos.” That’s human. Things do take an investment of effort and risk; our preferences and passions help us
create priorities to determine which things are worth the effort and the risk, but that's rarely everything!

There is no risk, however, in living in the here and now.

Living in the here and now and seeing each day anew is the most elegant solution for dealing with the passage of time. Many advocate having a goal and working toward it in order to make the most of life, setting up steps toward the goal, creating five- and ten-year plans, markers and signposts to tell us how far we've come and how far we have to go. This process shares a lot with to-do lists, and as with to-do lists, it is easy to get bogged down by the clutter of details, to feel overwhelmed, and to lose momentum.

Life is so much more than a big to-do list, to scratch off the items at every stage and only consider something achieved when it is scratched off next. Since time is so much bigger than us, it is silly to pretend to impose a finite framework upon it and then still expect to feel in control of it.

So we shouldn't bother with goals? Hardly. Goals and dreams help us define the general path we’d like to take in life, the way we want to work and spend our time from day to day. The enjoyment and deep involvement of whatever it is you love, however, is in the path, not the to-do list. And this does not only apply to work. The more elements of your life you can enjoy from day to day and moment to moment, the more of your life you'll live fully.

The “finish” line never comes in any good path that makes the most of what time we have in our lives.

To get on this path, it pays to think backward a little:

- Your goal is the goal of this book: the sense of having it all, of feeling contentment, of living life fully, of making the most of time.
- To have this sense, you spend your time mindfully, because you know its value.
- To know its value, you must know your own self—who you are, your passions and beliefs, what path will bring you contentment.
- To know your own self, your own true mind, you must face and get past any fears and negative thinking that cause you to hold back.

**Identify What is Holding You Back**

In the first two sections of this book we covered our relationship to stuff—what makes us buy what we do, took an honest look at our clutter, and learned to recognize and
assert our own preferences as opposed to everyone else’s. Now it is time to look at all
the clutter in our minds, because every bit of conscious and subconscious thought that
does not make us happy and move us along the path to contentment threatens to
waste our precious time and energy.

What forces are holding you back from following your path of contentment? The most
insidious forces are the ones in our own minds, the ones associated with negative
thinking and excuses. Any thought of something you’d like to be doing that is
countered with the thought, “I can’t, because...” is a good candidate for the kinds of
negative thinking which stop us from becoming what we ought to be.

It takes the process of knowing your self to be able to make these assertions, because
identifying the forces holding you back is the same as identifying the negative
elements in your life and thinking. Shaking them loose enables us to move onwards
and upwards.

Negative thinking is a habit that starts early in life, when our young psyches are easily
overwhelmed by “NO!” to seemingly everything, too many restrictions on curiosity and
just plain fun, and too many rigid restrictions on self-expression. It’s compounded by
being made to feel inadequate for anything less than the bar set by others for your
expectations, such as grades in school or success in sports. An awkward adolescence
reinforces it, as well as later failure to achieve at least some of your dreams.

We are all wired differently to deal with negative thinking. Some of us are just born to
take criticism to heart, it seems; others from the very same family manage just fine.
Childhood does not last forever, though. Any time you are ready, whether you are
twelve or fifty, you can, in your own mind, step back from the habit and choose to
believe differently. In fact, choosing to do so is a great big step onwards and upwards!

In much the same way as consumer marketing, negative thinking plays like a broken
record, keeping us brainwashed and trapped. We’ve seen how to stop the influence of
marketers by recognizing them for what they are and making a conscious effort to tune
them out or somehow keep them out of our lives. Imagine doing so with negative
thinking—imagine freeing up your head from negative thoughts and discovering your
potential anew, just like you discovered what was really you by shutting out marketing
and consumerism!

There are many techniques for spotting negative thinking, but mindfulness is always
involved. You listen carefully to your thoughts and your speech for negative finishes to
sentences, excuses, reasons why something won’t work, reasons not to bother trying,
reasons for predicting failure, hedging bets, etc. Every time you catch yourself thinking
or speaking in this way, consider its origins and challenge its veracity: “Who says it
can’t be done? Is that really true?” After a while, often within days, negative, defensive
thinking starts to loosen up, and its sapping effect on your energy and willpower starts to fade. It’s a simple formula:

- Identify the negative thought/speech
- Identify the source
- Question its validity
- Change it or step back from it

There are, however, at least two categories of negative thinking that are not necessarily verbal or conscious, but which can fuel a lot of other negative thinking as well as prevent us from following our hearts: Fears and Regrets.

On Fears

Fear of upsetting the status quo keeps a lot of us from doing what is best for ourselves because we do not want to upset our people—our family, friends, and associates. This is admirable in many ways, being considerate of others’ feelings and comfort zones. But there is more wrong with it than admirable when it causes you to live a lie. Squelching ourselves does not make others happy or unhappy—only they are in charge of their own happiness and unhappiness. You can’t really control that, and pussyfooting around the status quo, walking on eggshells, giving in left and right,
agreeing to things you don’t really agree with, all of this piles up and creates a
situation where you will either explode or wither away. Wouldn’t it be best not to do
either?

If you’ve gone through a shopping moratorium and ridding your personal clutter, you
already know that you can act differently than the status quo and the world doesn’t
collapse. Any world that does was on pretty shaky ground to begin with. You’ve got
proof that asserting yourself (not exploding, not sneaking, just asserting yourself) is
clarifying and liberating. It makes you confident, and now you can build on that
confidence. You will no longer react or act out of fear—you know now it’s all okay.

It is possible to step back from fears just like we’ve stepped back from shopping and
the need to own too much stuff, stepped back from being bullied by marketers and
from being confused by other people’s undue influence upon us. Identify the fear,
identify its source, and question its validity, just like you would any negative thought.
Then step back from it. You may or may not actually change your course of action
immediately, but in your mind you will step away from the fear. In time, changing your
action will happen. You’ve changed your attitude, and that’s all it takes to change
nearly everything.

Fear of letting go is another big one: you don’t want to feel abandoned, or to feel you
are abandoning others. A relationship does not have to be criminally abusive to
warrant a breakup, whether it is a marriage, a family relationship, a religious group, or
a friendship. What is needed here is coming to terms with your own feelings about
abandonment. You know it is negative thinking. You also know you are not a newborn
kitten—you’ve got resources and presumably an opposable thumb. Fear of
abandonment, whether it is imposed on you or you impose it on others, means you do
not consider yourself or the others capable of managing life. It’s a bit insulting, when
you get right down to it. Take a close look at your abandonment fears and consider
whether you’ve been emotionally manipulated into having them. Again, identify the
fear, identify its source, and question its validity. Then step back from it.

Once you become free from being a passive participant in negative thinking and fears,
it becomes easier and easier to identify other things that are holding you back from
becoming what you are meant to be. It might dawn on you that you are hearing a lot of
“you’re not good enough,” or that nobody expects you to be able to do something
special—and admit that you’re tired of it. That gives you the choice to set the record
straight or to change your circumstances so that you are not trapped in a negative
environment anymore.

Fear of getting it wrong or failing comes from fear of upsetting the status quo; why else
would it matter? Not all of us are lucky to be free from having felt punished for not
succeeding at something we’ve tried. We dread the putdowns, ridicule, loss of status,
and criticism, and it’s enough to stop us in our tracks. So go ahead and put fear of getting it wrong through the exercise, too:

- Identify the fear
- Identify the source
- Question its validity
- Step back from it or change it

On Regret

The pang of regret is another kind of negative thinking.

Regret, remorse, shame, guilt—all are experienced by most of us at one point or another in our lives. The stronger feelings of remorse, shame and guilt are often dealt with by apologies, counseling, punishment, recompense, etc. Regret, however, is often not expressed, and covers both things that were done and things that were left undone. Regret is probably most poignant when one is at the end of one’s life and is looking back on what could have been.

But regret, and its cousin guilt, is often lurking in the background of our everyday lives without our realizing it. Is there a bunch of textbooks hanging around somewhere for classes or a degree that you never finished? Are there projects left undone for months or years? Do you have supplies and tools for something that you wanted to do, all set to go, and then it got boxed up and set aside for “someday?” Are there racks of clothes that still have the tags on them, because you never got around to dieting into them or getting out to the places where you intended to wear them? Maybe none of these things are earth-shattering, but there they are and that is what they mean even if you manage to suppress it: regrets.

As long as you have those things hanging around, you are not letting go of the regret. You are not allowing yourself the room to grow or move on, but limiting yourself because you still feel you ought to do this or ought to do that, so you don’t seriously attempt anything else until the first things are done. It works like a horror-movie version of cleaning your dinner plate before you’re allowed to have dessert or even leave the table. It’s punitive. That stuff is sitting there like a plate of desiccated peas that you’ve refused to touch and there you are, years later, still sitting in front of that plate—and still no dessert. Doesn’t get more appetizing with passage of time, either, does it?

Being surrounded by the detritus of old times, old projects, old hobbies, old studies, old intentions, and especially unfinished ones, is one of the best ways to breed and nurture guilt and regret. Regret is one of the most insidious things to take up residence
in your brain, because, like many other kinds of negative thinking, it starts in childhood and we get used to it being around. It becomes the wallpaper of our minds and memories, and most of the time we’re not even conscious of it. Yet it is there, and it is taking up tons of mental and emotional energy.

No doubt many of those unfinished dreams and projects cost a bit of money. So I ask you:

Why are you paying for them twice or thrice over?

All of those unresolved things are taking up space in your head, so there’s one extra cost. And they are taking up space in your residence, which is another cost. Goodness only knows what further cost they will take if they are hanging around for the rest of your life!

If there are things like this hanging around your house, it is time to let them go. You are not abandoning them or abandoning dreams, you are setting yourself free to do something different and better. Very few of us follow a straight line between a dream to achieving things, and it is safe to say that most of us are not doing quite what we envisioned when we first started, no matter how successful we became. The bugaboo is expectations.

Expectations are the flip side of guilt and regrets. Without expectations, it is pretty hard to even have regrets. Were you that bright young thing in college, given an unusual amount of encouragement and support to pursue a particular path, but then you didn’t do anything with it? Did your family throw a small fortune at your education, which you didn’t finish or pursue as a career? Or did you prepare for a corporate job from high school through college, secured the job and worked your way up, only to burn out at the age of forty and dump it all for sitting in a coffee shop and wondering what you want to be when you really do grow up? Are you harboring any regrets? Any guilt? Not even a little bit? Sure of that?

Expectations placed upon us by others are pretty bad, but self-imposed expectations can be deadly. They can literally freeze the mind, turning our thinking processes into one giant Block, and make us afraid of both success and failure. Self-imposed expectations can keep us stuck in a time warp. It’s even worse if the self-imposed expectations turn out to be expectations instilled into us by others. Once again, and you know the drill: identify the expectation, identify the source, and question its validity. Then step back.

This is why it is so important to take a fresh look at your dreams and goals on a regular basis. Give yourself permission to change your mind! With that kind of
freedom, you’ll see possibilities arise as you go along, and not ignore them because you haven’t “finished” what you thought you’d started out to do.

When you have accumulated a lot of unfinished projects, and they cost you money and maybe even some face (failed yet again, didn’t you?) it is time to accept the fact that you are a human being living in a world that has constantly changing options. Not finishing something is not a sign of failure, but a sign that it wasn’t really you. If it was, you’d have finished it, gone through with it. So let it go. Get rid of the stuff, give it to someone who really will benefit from it, and move on.

It is time to live in the here and now, and not in the old mindset from five, ten or thirty years ago. You’re not that person anymore. You’re not in that time of your life anymore. If somewhere along the line you do decide to do those things, you’ll start fresh, from your current place in life, which is so much more satisfying.

Freeing yourself up from both expectations and regrets is literally freeing yourself to live life in the fullest, in the here and now, without all the baggage from the past having a controlling vote. You’re free to move Onwards and Upwards.

**Regret and Relationships**

Long-term relationships are particularly vulnerable to regret. Estrangements between spouses and significant others, parents and children, between siblings, and between lifelong friends are intensely upsetting. Cultural norms play a big role, as when fathers avoid hugging sons and telling them they are loved, when people marry outside their faith or race, or even when a child follows an educational/career path that disappoints the parent. Cultural changes play a big role, too, causing people to drift apart or to no longer believe in the same things.

The best thing to do is to take what good you can from the relationship and move on. Some of us are just not meant to spend a lot of time together, even if we would naturally want to if the circumstances were different. If you are upset about the breakdown of a relationship, look at it as you would any other negative thought or action, but only look at your own role—don’t presume to know enough about the other’s mind to do this. In the case, for instance, of a marriage breaking down, only look at your own role in the marriage, not your spouse’s:

- Identify the cause (how you contributed to the problem)
- Identify the source (where your behavior came from—Bad Mommy, alcoholism, midlife crisis, etc.)
- Question its validity (do you still have to behave like that?)
- Make a change or step back from it (cut the apron strings, AA, keep it zipped)

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Blame is a big one in personal conflicts, and is one of the biggest time-wasters of all. Hanging on to blame prevents you from seeing the truth about yourself and prevents you from moving out of the past and into the present. If you really feel that someone else was to blame for your hurt or your setback, for wasting your time, then why are you allowing them to waste even more of it? Let it go. This is the practical intent of the act of forgiving. And as in forgiving, you can let go of blame, even as you can still be mindful not to leave yourself open to the same sort of problem-causing behavior.

Giving yourself permission to understand what happened and then to move on frees up everyone and makes room for greater wisdom. You might not lose the regret entirely, but facing it, acknowledging it, will prevent it from breeding more negative thinking.

I want to say something here about the exhilaration that comes from being free of people who hold you back. These are people who might mean well and feel they have your best interests at heart, but they are invariably negative, possessive, and excel at taking the wind out of your sails. Some of them are so good at this they practically take the air out of your lungs. Depending on the role they play in your life, their influence can create a mindset for failure, crippling your ability to be healthy and thriving. Parents are notorious for doing this, as are other close relatives, old friends, teachers, and employers. Just as when marketers use repetition to hypnotize us into purchasing their products, repetition of negatives from those close to us can hypnotize us into inaction or into giving up too soon when we do take risks to invest in our dreams.

It's a rare person who does not have Negative Nellies in his life, but shutting out their influence is crucial for contentment. After all, how can anyone truly experience Having it All when your "people" repeatedly remind you that you still don't have this or that, or how disappointed they are that you’re not doing what they think is best for you? Only by extracting yourself from their influence. For some, it means physical separation, either for a period of time or for good; for others, it simply means asserting your right to feel and do as you will and freeing yourself from the responsibility of controlling other people’s reactions. Each of us must choose the best way to assert our right to live our lives as we see fit. Without this assertion, we'll never truly feel free to follow our path to contentment.
Looking Time in the Face

_"I got the blues thinking of the future, so I left off and made some marmalade. It's amazing how it cheers one up to shred oranges and scrub the floor." ~D.H. Lawrence_

You look in the mirror one day and suddenly realize that not only do you no longer look young, you’re actually starting to look old. The formerly taut lines of the jaw are softening, the skin is looking a bit crepey, there are deepening lines around the mouth, and the hair is losing pigment and shine. All the fitness and good diet and stress reduction in the world will not turn back our body clocks, not really. We can fake it for a while with facelifts and hair dye and spandex undergarments, but we’re not really stopping the clock, just wasting more of what time we’ve got left on the plastic surgeon, the salon, and the foundation department.

The mind, however, ages much more slowly, or at least differently. If you have kept yourself informed and challenged, you’ll be up for anything mentally as much as you ever have, and perhaps even more so because you’ve a nice collection of experience and personal shortcuts to build on. Even major illnesses, famous for causing mental setbacks (such as “chemo brain”) can over time be worked through or around. Only dementia, really, can stop it. If we can just get past associating vitality with looking youthful and having the same level of physical energy as we did when we were young, there’s an amazing depth of experience yet to be had.

Onwards and Upwards is a mindset we need to hang onto even more as we age, so as to avoid sinking into a withered and unhappy existence. The mindfulness we learn now will help us keep things in perspective as we learn to adjust to being able to do less and needing others to help us. Not only will we maintain awareness of how younger people feel, we’ll also know how to ask for what we really need and avoid creating situations rife with guilt or unrealistic expectations. If we live long enough, we will inevitably need help. The burden to others is not in the help that we need, but in the difficulties we place in their way when they try to help us.

Wrinkles aside, the biggest challenge in aging is the wear and tear on our bodies slowing us down, and perhaps also some long-hidden problems such as cardiovascular disease. Current medical media will have us blaming ourselves for a myriad of problems because we have not been eating properly, exercising enough, or curtailing habits like smoking and the nightly cocktail, or because we haven’t had our colons scoped out regularly. The guilt and the regret can get spread on quite thickly.

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My advice: so what?

When you’re suffering as the result of something you know you shouldn’t have done, say emphysema after smoking for forty years, you can’t turn the clock back. You’re not absolved of responsibility. But your illness is punishment enough without compounding it—or wasting more time—with further regret. Maybe you have developed something related to on the job hazards—as a practical matter you can look into compensation, but even then live in the here and now. Don’t let the litigation of injuries incurred in the past become the be-all and end-all of your present days.

Personal responsibility can only go so far. Many who ate carefully and exercised religiously still acquired disease, as a result of genetic disposition. Those who have struggled with bad health and physical limitations since they were young are the ones who can teach the rest of us how handle it. We can only work with the best knowledge we have at the time. No matter where or when life hands us health challenges, we can only live in the here and now and work to be well, and live well.

If you are faced with a chronic condition, and often even with something worse, your options are much the same as if you were not: live in the here and now. Do what you can to get well, and keep following your path. Write that novel, sail that boat. And if you can’t, immerse yourself in the fantasy, be the ultimate dabbler, just enjoy what it is you enjoy. It’ll help you get well if you’re going to get well, and it’ll help you sail that great boat in the sky if that’s what’s going to happen. Onwards and Upwards. No regrets.
Conclusion

Be content with what you have, rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you.
~Lao Tzu

There must be more to life than having everything!
~Maurice Sendak

Having it All

One of the most amazing things about taking this journey was experiencing the different levels of satisfaction and liberation that resulted. It didn’t happen all at once, but it did happen quickly.

We cannot help where or when we were born, or the conditions and influences that shaped our thinking from infancy on. We can blithely load insult after insult upon ourselves for years, and not have a clue that we are weighing down our souls until one day the right combination of elements gives us pause. It’s the first inkling that the weight of this mental and emotional baggage can stop us from following our path of contentment. Having it All is freedom from the baggage, not carrying it.

I’m a child of my place and time like anyone else, and when I stood back to look at it with a fresh perspective, I saw the connecting links in the chain of social culture that made it possible for my own true self to be overwhelmed and outvoted. My Stuff was
symbolic of my Self. I felt I had to Do it All in order to Have it All. The connecting factor was how I valued my money/time/life. Its importance could not be overstated, nor could the changes needed be underestimated.

Some of the things that have become apparent as I continue on this path are the sheer joy of feeling free to be myself, and I’m not running on the consumer treadmill to nowhere anymore. I feel light and adaptable, and not heavy and constricted. Pain is much more manageable—I don’t hang on to its familiar presence any more than I hang on to old futile regrets and other tiresome baggage. Aging is a little less scary, as well as the ups and downs of the economy and other worldly circumstances. Onwards and Upwards, after all.

This is today! What will tomorrow bring? Life arrives and departs on its own schedule, not ours; it’s time to travel light, and be ready to go wherever it takes us.
Meg Wolfe, author of The Minimalist Woman blog, is a true child of the Baby Boom who has downsized, decluttered, and otherwise simplified nearly every aspect of life in order to see life more clearly. What she found surprised her and her blog follows the course of those revelations, along with thoughts about the relationship of simplicity to American culture and economy.

A minimalist mindset affects nearly everything one can do, from how money is earned, to how it is spent, how much space is needed to be comfortable, how many things to own, how many activities to put on the daily calendar, what to eat, what to wear, and the size of one’s ecological footprint. It changes the way we interact with the world at large.

Meg is happily married to artist and photographer Steve Johnson, who provided the photos and layout of this book.
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Thanks so much for reading.

Onwards and Upwards,

Meg

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