

## **ESSENTIALISM—The Disciplined Pursuit of Less**--By Greg McKeown

### **Part 1: Essence—What is the core mind-set of an Essentialist?**

#### **Ch 1: The Essentialist**

2—Question—Is this the very most important thing I should be doing with my time and resources right now?

4—“Essentially” – you have to say no to be able to say yes.

5—3 German Words—Weniger aber besser. English=less but better.

5—The way of the essentialist is the relentless pursue of “less but better.”

5—Essentialism is not about how to get more things done; its about how to get the right things done.

7—Live by design, not by default.

7—Essentialism is a disciplined, systematic approach for determining where our highest point of contribution lies, then making execution of those things almost effortless.

10—If you don’t prioritize your life, someone else will.

13—Jim Collins, *How the Mighty Fall*, reason for failure—“the undisciplined pursuit of more.”

13—Nonessentialism is everywhere.

14—We have lost the ability to filter what is important and what isn’t. Psychologists call this “decision fatigue.”

15—The idea that you can have it all and do it all has infected everyone. It’s a myth.

16—Australian nurse, Bronnie Ware, cared for people in the last 12 weeks of their lives. She recorded their most often discussed regrets. At the top of the list—“I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, no the life others expected of me.”

17—Our lives get cluttered like our closets—1)Explore and evaluate, 2)Eliminate, 3)Execute

25—Less but better.

26—Live a life true to yourself.

27—“Essentially” (rob)—start with the end in view and decide now what you wished you had decided when you get to end of life.

31—As we rid ourselves of the nonsense of Nonessentialism and replace it with the core logic of Essentialism, the way of the Essentialist becomes natural and instinctive.

#### **Ch 2: Choose—The Invincible Power of Choice**

33—“It’s the ability to choose which makes us human.” Madeleine L’Engle

35—Choice is an action.

39—To become an Essentialist requires a heightened awareness of our ability to choose.

#### **Ch 3: Discern—The Importance of Practically Everything**

43—Pareto Principle (1790’s Vilfredo Pareto)—20% of your efforts produces 80% of results.

44—Joseph Mose Juran—one of the fathers of the quality movement—called the Pareto Principle “The Law of Vital Few.”

44—“Trivial many” vs. “vital few.”

44—Richard Kock—author on several books re: 80/20.

45—John Maxwell—“you cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything.”

46-47—A non-essentialist thinks almost everything is essential. An essentialist thinks almost everything is non-essential.

#### **Ch 4: Trade-Off—Which Problem Do I Want?**

49—Ex of Southwest Airlines. Minimized and focused.

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

55—Thomas Sowell—"There are no solutions, only trade-offs."

55—Jim Collins—Peter Drucker told him you can build a great company or build great ideas, but not both.

## **Part 2: Explore—How can we discern the trivial many from the vital few?**

### **Ch 5: Escape—The Perks of Being Unavailable**

66—Focus.

68—The faster and busier things get, the more we need to build thinking time into our schedule.

69—Create space to read.

71—Make space for priorities.

### **Ch 6: Look—See What Really Matters**

75—The big picture.

75—12/29/27, Easter Air Lines Flight 401 crashed into the Florida Everglades, killing over 100 passengers. They lost sight of the bigger problem. Focusing on the less important led to disaster.

76—Filter out the essential amidst all the noise.

77—C. S. Lewis metaphor, "running around with fire extinguishers during a flood."

### **Ch 7: Play—Embrace the Wisdom of Your Inner Child**

85—Play sparks exploration.

85—Stuart Brown, the founder of the National Institute for Play, has studied what are called the play histories of some six thousand individuals and has concluded that play has the power to significantly improve everything from personal health to relationships to education to organizations' ability to innovate.

85—"Play leads to brain plasticity, adaptability, and creativity. Nothing fires up the brain like play."

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

### **Ch 8: Sleep—Protect the Asset**

91—Gandhi—"Each night, when I go to sleep, I die. And the next morning, when I wake up, I am reborn."

96—The best asset we have for making a contribution to the world is ourselves. If we underinvest in ourselves, and by that I mean our minds, our bodies, and our spirits, we damage the very tool we need to make our highest contribution.

97—Malcolm Gladwell—"the 10,000 hour rule"—best violinists.

97—In a Harvard Business Review article called "Sleep Deficit: The Performance Killer," Charles A Czeisler, the Baldino Professor of Sleep Medicine at Harvard Medical school, has explained how sleep deprivation undermines high performance.

101—Our highest priority is to protect our ability to prioritize.

### **Ch 9: The Power of Extreme Criteria**

103—Decision Making--If the answer isn't a definite yes then it should be a no.

104—If something is "almost" good enough, then the answer should be no. (uses a grading system of 9 and 10 being a yes, 7, and 8 almost, 6 and under no for sure. Consider it the 90% Rule.

105—This forces you to make choices by design not by default.

109—Decide what does it take to say yes. Saying no is often correct.

### **Part 3: Eliminate—How can we cut out the trivial many?**

#### **Ch 10: Clarify—One Decision That Makes a Thousand**

119—Anna Pavlova, Russian ballet dancer—“To follow, without halt, one aim: There is the secret to success.”

121—anyone who wears glasses knows there is a big difference between pretty clear and really clear.

124—Aimless work. Work for work sake does not equal purposeful work. Be purposeful. Aim.

124—Ralph Waldo Emerson—“The crime which bankrupts men and states is that of job-work; -- declining from your main design to serve a turn here or there.”

125—Essential intent—when you decide what you will do it helps filter out what you will not do. (RC)

127—If you could be truly great at one thing, what would that be. (Good to Great vibe)

#### **Ch 11: Dare—The Power of a Graceful “NO”**

131—“Courage is grace under pressure.” Ernest Hemingway

131—The right “no” at the right time can change the course of history. (Rosa Parks. Etc)

133—By not saying no, we will miss out on the more important

134—Stephen Covey illustration—12 year old daughter Cynthia

134—Many are unclear about what is essential.

135—Not saying no hurts in the long run.

136—Big waste basket for all the invitations that don’t advance the priority.

139—Steve Jobs on “no.”

140—How to say no.

#### **Ch 12: Uncommit—Win Big By Cutting Your Losses**

145—Josh Billings, “Half of the troubles of this life can be traced to saying yes too quickly and not saying no soon enough.

145—Concorde jet illustration—cut losses sooner.

146—Sunk Cost Bias—is the tendency to continue to invest time, money, or energy into something we know is a losing proposition simply because we have already incurred, or sunk, a cost that cannot be recouped.

148—Avoid commitment traps.

#### **Ch 13: Edit—The Invisible Art**

155—Michelangelo—“I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”

156—Best Film Editing—an essentialist craft--Michael Kahn, movie editor, Saving Private Ryan, Raiders of the Lost Ark, etc.

157—A good editor is someone who uses deliberate subtraction to actually add life to the ideas, setting plot, and characters.

159—Latin word for decision—cid or cis—means “to cut” or “to kill.” You can see this in words like scissors, homicide, or fratricide. Since ultimately, having fewer options actually makes a decision “easier on the eye and the brain.”

#### **Ch 14: Limit—The Freedom of Setting Boundaries**

163—Anne Lamott—“No is a complete sentence.”

165—Boundaries.

### **Part 4: Execute—How can we make doing the vital few things almost effortless?**

### **Ch 15: Buffer—The Unfair Advantage**

175—“Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.”

Attributed to Abe Lincoln.

175—Story of Joseph planning for 7 years of famine.

176—A buffer can be defined literally as something that prevents two things from coming into contact and harming each other.

177—We can reduce the friction of executing the essential in our work and lives simply by creating a buffer (ex of using a bugger between cars when driving so as to not crash).

178—The Non-essentialist tends to assume a best-case scenario. (ie, no buffer)

179—Essentialist is different—looks ahead, plans, prepares for various contingencies,

180—Race to S. Pole (in Collins book)(See Roland Huntford, *The Last Place on Earth: Scott and Amundsen's Race to the South Pole*)—Detail. Preparation. Evaluation. Story of Roald Amundsen and Robert Falcon Scott in their race to be the first people in modern history to reach the S. Pole.

- Both men had the same objective. But their approaches were quite different.
- Amundson planned and prepared for anything and everything that could go wrong. Scott hoped for the best-case scenario.
- Scott brought just one thermometer on the trip and got mad when it broke. Amundson brought 4 thermometers.
- Scott stored one ton of food for his 17 men. Amundson stored three tons.
- Scott stashed supplies for the return journey in one spot marked with a single flag, meaning that if he went even a fraction off course his team could miss it. Amundson, by contrast, planted twenty markers, miles apart, to ensure that his team would see them.
- Roald Amundsen prepared diligently and read obsessively for his journey, whereas Robert Falcon Scott did the bare minimum.
- Amundsen deliberately built slack and buffers into his plan, Scott hope for the ideal circumstances.
- Scott's men suffered from fatigue, hunger, and frostbite, Amundsen's team's journey was relatively (under the circumstances) frictionless.
- Amundsen successfully made the journey, Scott and his team tragically died.

180—Rob—EEE (evaluate, emulate, elevate)

181—Add 50%to your time estimate.

182—"Planning fallacy"—term coined by Daniel Kahneman in 1979.

183—Add 50% buffer—relieve stress, more realistic. Form of risk management.

184—5 Questions to ask to build buffers—

- What risks do you face on this project?
- What is the worst-case scenario?
- What would the social effects of this be?
- What would the financial impact of this be?
- How can you invest to reduce risks or strengthen financial or social resilience?

### **Ch 16: Subtract—Bring Forth More by Removing Obstacles**

185—“To attain knowledge add things every day. To attain wisdom subtract things everyday.”—Lau-tzu

185—Constraints—the obstacles holding the whole system back.

187—What is the obstacle that is keeping you back from achieving what really matters to you? By systematically removing this “constrain” you'll be able to significantly reduce the friction keeping you from executing what is essential.

188—Aristotle talked about three kinds of work (we talk about only two). 1)Theoretical work—for which the end goal is truth. 2)Practical work—where the objective is action. 3)Poietical work—the Philosopher Martin Heidegger described poiesis as “bringing forth.” This third type of work is the Essentialist way of approaching execution: An Essentialist produces more—brings more—by removing more instead of doing more.

189—Often we don’t take the time to really think about which efforts will produce results and which will not. But even when we do, it is easier to think of execution in terms of addition rather than subtraction.

190—Instead of focusing on the efforts and resources we need to add, the Essentialist focuses on the constraints or obstacles we need to remove. But how?

1. Be clear about the essential intent.
2. Identify the constraints and obstacles.
3. Remove the obstacle.

### **Ch 17: Progress—The Power of Small Wins**

193—Every day do something that will inch you closer to a better tomorrow.—Doug Firebaugh

195—The way of the Essentialist is different. Instead of trying to accomplish it all—and all at once—and flaring out., the Essentialist starts small and celebrates progress. Start small and celebrate progress.

196—Research has shown that of all forms of human motivation the most effective one is progress. Why? Because a small, concrete win creates momentum and affirms our faith in our further success.

197—As a former Stanford professor and educator Henry B. Eyring has written, “My experience has taught me this about how people and organizations improve: the best place to look is for small changes we could make in the things we do often. There is power in steadiness and repetition.”

199—Focus on minimal viable progress. “A popular idea in Silicon Valley is “done is better than perfect.”

201—There is something powerful about visibly seeing progress toward a goal.

### **Ch 18: Flow—The Genius of Routine**

203—“Routine, in an intelligent man, is a sign of ambition.” –W. H. Auden

203-5—Michael Phelps—routines and habits.

206—Routine is one of the most powerful tools for removing obstacles.

207—This power of routine grows out of our brain’s ability to take over entirely until the process becomes full unconscious.

207—Charles Duhigg on routine/habit, “The brain can almost completely shut down...and this is a real advantage because it means you have all of this mental activity you can devote to something else.

209—The power of the right routine. According to researchers at Duke University, nearly 40 percent of our choices are deeply unconscious.

### **Ch 19: Focus—What’s Important Now?**

215—“Life is available only in the present moment. If you abandon the present moment you cannot live the moments of your daily life deeply.” –Thich Nhat Hanh

217—The essentialist lives in the present. Focus on the present.

221—Get present in the moment and ask yourself what is most important this very second—not what’s most important tomorrow or even an hour from now.

### **Ch 20: BE—The Essentialist Life**

225—“Beware the barrenness of a busy life.” Socrates

233—I continue to discover almost daily that I can do less and less—in order to contribute more.

235—Remember, if you don’t prioritize your life, someone else will.

236—Story of dad who took pictures of all the places he took his daughter, and what they did, but not of her.

237—I know someone who visits cemeteries around the world when he travels just to keep his own mortality front and center.

**Appendix: Leadership Essentials**

239—“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead

239—LinkedIn CEO, Jeff Weiner, sees “fewer things done better” as the most powerful mechanism for leadership.

239—He uses acronym FCS (aka FOCUS). Fewer things done better. Communicating the right information. Speed and quality of decision making

240—Clarity of purpose. Clear intent leads to alignment.