

Introduction

I started my career chasing unicorns. I joined Pinterest as employee number two, but in 2011, I left before my stock vested to build my own billion-dollar company.



Sahil ✓
@shl

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**Just had an idea for my first billion-dollar company.
Tomorrow, I start building it.**

11:45 PM · Apr 1, 2011 · Twitter for Mac

I had spent a weekend building the prototype of Gumroad, a tool that helped creators sell their products online. No complicated setup. No elaborate storefront. Just a link for customers to pay and you're in business. More than fifty thousand people visited the site on the first day, and I was sure I was on the cusp of something big.

The first step: raising money from VCs. As a nineteen-year-old solo founder, I found myself walking up and down the mythical Sand Hill Road, sweating through my jeans, having meetings in the same rooms where the decisions to fund companies like Netflix, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Google had happened. I ended up raising more than \$8 million in venture capital from renowned Silicon Valley investors including Accel Partners (early investor in Facebook), Kleiner Perkins (early investor in Google, Amazon, and Apple), Max Levchin (cofounder of PayPal), Naval Ravikant (cofounder of AngelList), and Chris Sacca (early investor in Twitter, Square, and Uber). They too thought they saw a unicorn galloping in the distance.

The chase was on. In short order, I built a world-class team—recruiting talent out of companies like Stripe, Yelp, and Amazon—and together we went to work on building a world-class product. I was confident that I'd soon be strolling Allen & Company's annual Sun Valley conference, strategizing about the fight against malaria arm-in-arm with Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. I was never in it for the money, I told myself. I wanted to make an impact, but quietly. When I became a tech titan, I was going to be the kind of titan magazine profiles called “down-to-earth.”

I didn't make it to Sun Valley that summer. Or the summer after that. The closest I ever got to Bill Gates was watching him speak at a Kleiner Perkins CEO summit. Gumroad's pitched flight into the stratosphere leveled off after we burned through about \$10 million in venture capital. After nine months of trying to raise more funding, we failed. In October 2015, I laid off three-quarters of the staff—including many good friends.

Once the bleeding stopped, it was time to reassess. Gumroad was still operational, but I felt like a complete failure. With many in my circle still focused on raising money, hiring employees, and chasing their own billion-dollar companies—some successfully—I couldn't bear to stick around Silicon Valley. For much of 2016, I kept my apartment in San Francisco but spent most of my time traveling and writing fiction, convinced that even if I couldn't hack it in Startupland, I could still build a life for myself as a digital nomad. While I was inspired by Tim Ferriss's *The 4-Hour Workweek*, it didn't take long to realize that operating Gumroad as a lifestyle business wasn't for me. I was still trying to figure out what came next when I saw a tweet from Brandon Sanderson, one of my favorite authors, about a science-fiction and fantasy class he was teaching in Provo, Utah. In January 2017, I jumped on the opportunity to save rent and save face by moving to a place where no one knew me. There, I could figure out how to regroup even as I kept Gumroad afloat.

I knew things would be very different in Provo, but the contrast still surprised me. In San Francisco, being successful means you've made a lot of money (which, in San Francisco, is a *lot* of money). In Utah, it means you're married and active in the church. My new Provo friends told me that I'd been crazy trying to build a billion-dollar company in the first place. Why wasn't Gumroad good enough as it was? After all, I had a sustainable business serving a group of customers I loved. What more could I want?

At first, I couldn't quite grasp what they were talking about, but after living in Provo for a couple of years away from the white-hot epicenter of venture capital, I came to agree. While the unicorn I was chasing turned out to be more of a Shetland pony, my original vision *was* being realized. Thousands of creators were using Gumroad to build their own creative businesses. Real people in the real world were paying their mortgages or topping off their kids' college funds or simply paying for a few extra lattes by selling courses, ebooks, and software online.

Over time, I realized that the problem wasn't Gumroad, the problem was me. I was still so focused on that elusive unicorn, I couldn't see the thriving business humming along right in front of me. Gumroad was profitable, the right size for its market, and enabling more and more writers, coders, crafters, and other makers to achieve their dreams with each passing day. Gumroad may have been a crappy investment for a few venture capitalists, but it was still a great company for its customers.

In the year after the layoffs, when I worked by myself, Gumroad *still* sent approximately \$40 million to our creators, without *any* content marketing or paid advertising. Just creators telling other creators. When I recommitted to growing the company again in 2019, I continued to say no to those things I had said yes to previously, and focused solely on what would create more value for our creators. (Namely, shipping a better product.) It worked: In 2020 Gumroad sent more than \$140 million to our creators, up 87 percent over the year before, all while remaining profitable.

Companies like mine may not grace the covers of glossy magazines or inspire Hollywood biopics, but they drive real, positive change and empower their founders, customers, and

employees alike. I know that now, but it took me years to decouple my self-worth from my net worth and to realize that I hadn't failed. I had succeeded.

In February 2019, I wrote about my experience in a *Medium* essay, "Reflecting on My Failure to Build a Billion-Dollar Company," that struck a chord with millions. Since then, I've had the chance to connect with entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs who, deep down, would much rather build a sustainable business like Gumroad than chase a unicorn. They just think it's weird and uncool to express that desire when the media and our bigger-is-better culture keeps telling them that a unicorn is the only kind of business worth creating.

While that may be the right path for some companies, for many more it's not. Yet plenty of early-stage startups still end up raising venture capital because they *can't* fund their businesses in a sustainable way through profits. As a result, they're locked into the pursuit of huge, winner-take-all markets where growth is the most important asset of their businesses, not revenues, profits, or sustainability.

To help me reconcile those differences, I asked myself certain questions over and over again: What do I actually care to change? If I could fix one thing about my corner of the world, what would that be? What kind of business do I really want to build, own, and run?

Other founders and future founders have asked themselves similar questions and come to similar realizations. Many of their stories are included in this book. I call these people "minimalist entrepreneurs," and I call their companies "minimalist businesses."

Building a minimalist business does not mean settling for second best. Instead, it's about creating sustainable companies that have the flexibility to take risks to serve the greater good, all while empowering others to do the same. Being profitable, hopefully from the very beginning, means being able to focus and to stay focused on the reason you started a business in the first place: to help others.

Historically, entrepreneurs have played a crucial role in driving technological and social progress. This is even more necessary today, when big corporations are required by law to prioritize shareholder value over, among other things, actual value. In researching this book, I've found countless examples of businesses such as Basecamp, Wistia, Missouri Star Quilt Company, and many other honest-to-goodness, highly scalable companies incredibly focused on solving meaningful problems with beautiful products, services, and software that people love—and making a profit doing it. Each company goes about things their own way depending on the specific community they're building for, but they all focus on problem-solving and not taking themselves too seriously. No matter their differences, we can learn from them all.

Unfortunately, the word "entrepreneur" has a weird taint to it. I remember going to a "Career Fair" at school and not identifying with the "entrepreneurs" at all. They seemed like businessmen (they were always men), and I didn't even like business. I liked making things! Eventually I realized that a business is not an end in and of itself. A business is a tool to make or do stuff, a legal structure; that's it. At first I didn't need a company, but eventually my

creations required a legal structure, a team, and an operation to make the stuff I wanted to make, so I started a business.

When I made my transition from unicorn chaser to minimalist entrepreneur, I had to wrap my head around another new normal. This book is about deconstructing the myths we tell ourselves about the best way to build impactful businesses to change the abstract, singular “world,” and about seeking the truth about how to build the businesses that will make us and our communities wealthier, healthier, and happier.

In the end, my failure to launch Gumroad into the stratosphere was the best thing that ever happened to me, because it taught me the very real consequences behind a “growth at all costs” mindset. Unfortunately, it took me eight years, and a lot of pain, to realize it. I hope this book will help other aspiring entrepreneurs learn the lessons I learned without the painful layoffs and years of soul-searching. The overwhelming response to the viral essay I wrote about my experience is more proof that this promise resonates with many.

This book, part manifesto, part manual, will help you design, build, and successfully grow your own right-size business. Read it again and again, especially when you feel stuck. But keep in mind that you definitely do not need to *finish* this book to *start*. Start as soon as you can. Start before you feel ready. Start today.

You don’t learn, then start. You start, then learn.

Now, let’s get to it!

Chapter 1

The Minimalist Entrepreneur

The beginnings of all things are small.

—Cicero

Atlanta-based web developer Peter Askew loves to get things off the top shelf at the supermarket for people who can't reach the same heights that he can. A six-foot-eight former high school basketball star, Askew sees being helpful as the pillar of his business strategy, but it wasn't always that way. When the dot-com bubble burst in 2001 and he was laid off from eTour, a websurfing guide he helped build and grow, he had to ask himself, "Is this how I want to live? Is this how I can be of service to the world?"

He knew he could get another job thanks to his background in marketing analytics, but he was also disillusioned. Money and prestige were not nearly as important to him as independence and freedom. Eventually he wound up with another role in advertising where he was exposed to a wide range of business models as thousands of new web businesses came online, but in the evening and on weekends, he threw himself into his side projects, learning about web development, domain names, and how to monetize web traffic.

That's how he stumbled on an idea that would change his life. What if instead of buying new domain names, which often took months to rank highly in search engine results, he bought expired domain names, which already had some degree of visibility? Other people were parking ads on expired domains or flipping them, but Askew had something else in mind, the seed of an idea that was driven by the questions he had started to ask himself about his work. Rather than trying to make a quick buck, he would build real businesses around domain names, asking himself with each one, "Do I feel inspired? Is there a real business here?," and, most of all, "Can I be helpful?"

He experimented with randomly created names and ventures that didn't quite work before he realized that "the domain name always comes first, the business idea comes second." In 2009, that domain name was duderanch.com. Askew bought it and launched a directory, traveling to more than fifty dude ranches to meet the owners of the destinations he featured on his site. Eventually he partnered with the owner of guestranches.com, and the two built a curated list of destination ranches around the country. The success of that venture, which he worked on for ten years and sold in 2019, gave him the time and financial freedom to buy more domain names and develop other niche businesses. Some succeeded, others didn't.

In 2014, Askew saw that VidaliaOnions.com was up for auction. Up until then, he had focused on information-based businesses, but something about the domain name appealed to him. So

did the onions, frankly. As a Georgia native, he knew of Vidalias—a sweet, mild variety that some fans eat raw like an apple. The only trouble was that he didn't know anything about the onion business. Or farming in general, for that matter.

Regardless, he put down a \$2,200 bid, confident that someone in the business would come in higher. (If bidding on interesting domain names like this sounds like a neat hobby, you may be a minimalist entrepreneur.) When he won the auction five minutes later, he was pleasantly surprised, but he filed it away for later and went back to work on other projects.

As the days went by, though, he couldn't stop thinking about Vidalias. "[The domain] kept nudging me," he writes in his essay "I Sell Onions on the Internet," and "after a month, I began to understand what it was telling me. That I buy pears from Harry & David every year, and I should mimic that same service for Vidalia onions. Instead of farm-to-door pears, farm-to-door Vidalia onions." He saw a way he could be helpful to others, and a new minimalist business was born.

Askew didn't eat Vidalias himself, but he knew that many people did, both from his own experience and from strong search volume for the phrase on Google Trends. But he still had his doubts. "I'm not a farmer," he worried. "I have no logistics or distribution system setup."

He got started anyway. His first step was to reach out to a trade group that put him in touch with Aries Haygood, the owner of an award-winning Vidalia farm in operation for over two decades that had, crucially, a packing shed. He used his own money to put up a new site on VidaliaOnions.com, and then, "[while] the farm concentrated on the Vidalia, I concentrated on customer service, marketing, branding, web development, & logistics," he recalled. "I didn't have other projects that were this front-facing, customer wise. And I discovered I immensely enjoyed it."

Askew and Haygood estimated fifty orders for their first season. They received more than six hundred.

It would be at this point in the life cycle of a VC-funded business that the investors would start getting frisky. "Six hundred orders when we expected fifty?" they'd exclaim. "Time to quintuple your hiring. Come to think of it, what does the international market for Vidalia onions look like? A few million in ad spending, a viral video, and we'll have Vidalias trending worldwide. We'll probably need people on the ground in London, Tokyo, and Sydney. Time to raise another round." And on it goes. Picture a little kid blowing a balloon up for the first time, until . . .

Askew himself couldn't help but consider trying to accelerate the company's growth, but he stuck to what he had learned over the years and focused instead on profitability. He knew that the previous owners of VidaliaOnions.com had gone belly up trying to sell salad dressings and relishes in addition to the onions themselves. So instead, he slowly built the business in front of him, figuring out how to sell Vidalia onions to the market of potential customers within the range of timely and affordable shipping from that one packing shed.

He made mistakes, of course. At one point, he lost thousands of dollars on faulty shipping boxes, an error that nearly shuttered the operation. But he also made small process improvements year by year, like implementing an automated shipping system rather than manually entering customer orders and printing UPS labels. A few years in, the business was profitable, growing organically at its own pace, and he was having fun.

Six years in, Askew's pet project has become a full-fledged business, which makes his many customers happy and has a positive impact in the local community. He no longer sees it as just another experiment along with all of his other cast-off domain names. VidaliaOnions.com is becoming his mission:

Honestly, my customers would be quite upset if we disappeared. Last season, while I called a gentleman back regarding a phone order, his wife answered. While I introduced myself, she interrupted me mid-sentence and hollered in exaltation to her husband: "THE VIDALIA MAN! THE VIDALIA MAN! PICK UP THE PHONE!"

At that moment, I realized we were doing something right. Something helpful. Something that was making a positive impact. . . . It's immensely gratifying. I feel so fortunate to be associated with this industry.

Maybe it's the onions, but Askew's story brings a tear to my eye. There is something profoundly beautiful in a value-oriented mission and a genuine purpose driven by your own lived experience. This is what being a minimalist entrepreneur is all about: making a difference while making a living.

The Minimalist Entrepreneur

Before I started to write this book, I wouldn't have described myself as a minimalist entrepreneur. I would have said I was a founder committed to a new kind of startup, one that prioritized profitability over growth and positive impact over moving fast and breaking things. Instead of capturing as much value as possible, I was determined to create as much value as possible for our customers and our community.

I'm not the only one. In this book, you'll meet dozens of entrepreneurs like Peter Askew and others who are taking the same approach to building their companies. In the past years, I've exchanged ideas on Twitter or at conferences with all of them, and the more people I talked to, the more I felt we should label this new pathway that uses the advent of software to democratize and normalize business creation for everyone.

Minimalist entrepreneurs are all unique, as is every path to success, but I've tried my best to coalesce my learnings into a single, repeatable playbook.

The steps to becoming a minimalist entrepreneur each map to a function of the minimalist business—and, not coincidentally, to the chapters in this book. Each chapter builds on the previous one—just as addition leads to multiplication leads to algebra leads to calculus—until

finally, at the end of the book, you'll be fully equipped to become a minimalist entrepreneur yourself. You can read it all the way through, but you should also feel free to hop around; everyone is at a different stage in their business-building journey.

1. PUT PROFITABILITY FIRST —Minimalist entrepreneurs create businesses that are profitable at all costs. Many businesses never intend to stick around long enough to be profitable. Instead, the plan is to sell the business before profits become necessary, raising money from investors along the way. Minimalist entrepreneurs aim to be profitable from day one or soon after, because profit is oxygen for businesses. And they do that by selling a product to customers, not by selling their users to advertisers.

2. START WITH COMMUNITY—Minimalist entrepreneurs build on a foundation of community. They don't ask "How can I help?" but are instead observant and cultivate authentic relationships. They spend time and effort to learn and build trust, focusing on the market part of "product-market fit" (a term coined by venture capitalist Marc Andreessen for being in a good market with a product that can satisfy that market)^[x] before they build anything at all.

3. BUILD A MANUAL VALUABLE PROCESS—When they do build, minimalist entrepreneurs build only what they need to, automating or outsourcing the rest. Similarly, minimalist businesses do one thing and do it well. They work side by side with their customers to iterate to a solution, and make sure it's worth paying for, before they take it to customers outside of their community.

4. SELL TO YOUR FIRST HUNDRED CUSTOMERS—Minimalist entrepreneurs don't spend time convincing people, they spend time educating people. Selling is a discovery process, and minimalist entrepreneurs use sales as an opportunity to talk to potential customers one by one about their products while simultaneously educating themselves about the problem they are trying to solve for them. Selling this way is a long game built on relationships and vulnerability, not a one-day, grand opening extravaganza followed by selling to strangers.

5. MARKET BY BEING YOU—Speaking of vulnerability, minimalist entrepreneurs share their stories, from struggle to success. The best marketing shows the world who you—and your product—really are. Minimalist entrepreneurs understand that people care about other people, and educate, inspire, and entertain whenever and wherever they can. Instead of making headlines, they make fans—who turn themselves into customers over time.

6. GROW YOURSELF AND YOUR BUSINESS SUSTAINABLY—Minimalist entrepreneurs own their businesses, they don't let their businesses own them. They don't spend money they don't have, and they don't sacrifice profitability for scale. At this point, it becomes a game to lose . . . and minimalist entrepreneurs don't lose.

7. BUILD THE HOUSE YOU WANT TO LIVE IN—Minimalist entrepreneurs hire other minimalist entrepreneurs. Instead of following the status quo, they build their companies from first principles, alienating almost everyone. And that's okay: The way you do things won't be for everyone, but it will be really great for a few people, and if you define your values early and

often and tell the world who you are, they will find you. Conventional wisdom about how we work, when we work, and where we work is changing fast. Minimalist entrepreneurs understand there are few rules.

Even when you've successfully built your minimalist business, the journey isn't over. Spoiler alert: it never is. Minimalist entrepreneurs know that life is about more than just their companies. The true magic of entrepreneurship is that you and your business can improve the quality of life of many people. And it doesn't have to be millions; "enough" is what you decide it is, not a specific amount.

If you're nodding along, great. If you're still skeptical, well, that's okay too. I have 50,000 words and a few hours to convince you. Just keep reading!

Chase Profitability, Not Unicorns

Building a minimalist business is not a get-rich-quick proposition, but it *is* a get-rich-slowly one if you embrace profitability, not growth, as the key indicator of your company's success. Profitability means sustainability. Instead of treading water until a lifeboat comes along to save you—which is how many founders think about raising their next round of VC funding—it means building your own boat.

And while I do think the minimalist entrepreneur mindset leads to a near-100-percent success rate, I'm willing to concede that it may only happen over the course of many experiments. That's why profitability matters. If you're profitable, you can take *unlimited* shots on goal, virtually guaranteeing your success as long as you keep learning from your customers. Most people don't start. Most people who start don't continue. Most people who continue give up. Many winners are just the last ones standing. Don't give up.

We're moving past an era of gatekeeping, where bosses and universities and venture capitalists decide who gets to try and who doesn't. Information about how to start and scale companies is now available to founders around the world, and it's cheaper too, which means there are fewer and fewer reasons to raise money from venture capitalists. There's nothing inherently wrong with raising money, and not all unicorns are evil. I raised money for Gumroad (and, as you'll read later, have again, but in a very different way), and there are companies like Pinterest, Lyft, Slack, and others that raised venture capital, grew quickly, yet stayed focused on their customers. But much of the venture capital model depends on creating unsustainable growth and destroying successful-by-any-other-metric businesses.

Why does this happen? The venture capital business is a high-risk, high-return investment strategy in which venture funds swap capital for early-stage startup equity, essentially buying a piece of the future value of the companies in which they invest. For the model to work, the rare winners like Uber, Airbnb, and Stripe need to pay for all the losers. Aileen Lee of Cowboy Ventures coined the term "unicorn" to refer to privately held startups valued at more than \$1 billion, which are the lifeblood of venture funds. In fairy tales, people can't help chasing

unicorns—they are nearly irresistible, but they're also rare, elusive, and nearly impossible to catch.

Her mythological metaphor couldn't have been more apt. Almost everyone fails to build billion-dollar businesses, even the founders who raise gobs of venture capital. According to Matt Murphy, managing director and partner of Menlo Ventures, approximately 70 percent of startups fail, which can mean anything from full liquidation to becoming cash flow positive, which despite being good for the company is still bad for the VC. Of the 30 percent still standing, he says, some return three to five times the initial investment, which constitutes only modest success in this setting. The whole system is riding on at least 5 percent of VC-backed companies delivering tenfold to one hundredfold returns to balance out losses and make it all worth it. Without them, the VC model simply doesn't work. That's because the outsized success of the rare billion-dollar startup compensates for all the money thrown against the wall like so much spaghetti on thousands of other ventures.

That's not what minimalist entrepreneurs do. We are laser focused on profitability from day one, in order to get to sustainability soon after, so that we can serve our customers and our communities for as long as we wish.

Don't Call It a Comeback

No matter where you work, how you work, or who you work for right now, you can use the principles in this book to rethink the beliefs and practices that may be holding you back. I really do believe that starting a business should be an option for everyone no matter your background. That's why this book is full of examples of many great businesses that have been built by passionate individuals around the world, many who have flown under the radar until now. For up-and-coming minimalist entrepreneurs, I hope their stories can serve as an example as new online tools make the process of building, marketing, and selling easier and cheaper for everyone—including solopreneurs and independent creators.

Where do you start? Take a good hard look at the people, places, and communities you care about. Where are the pain points? What isn't working, but might, with a little elbow grease? These are all opportunities to make things better through minimalist entrepreneurship. It's ironic to me how often people go around hoping to find a startup idea while simultaneously complaining about all the everyday stuff around them that doesn't work properly. "Sure, I could solve that for people with a little effort, but the potential market just isn't big enough to really scale." That's the kind of thinking that this book seeks to address.

You may already be on your business-building journey, but if you're just getting started, some business models lend themselves more easily to the pathway of minimalist entrepreneurship. These include almost any kind of business-to-consumer or business-to-business enterprise that has fast customer feedback loops and ample opportunities for iteration like software as a service (SaaS), digital and physical products and services, or connecting people for a fee. We'll talk about all of these later in the book.

There are also businesses that aren't necessarily suited for this framework because of the slow pace of customer feedback. For example, any business that requires a heavy investment in research and development or that relies on sales to large, bureaucratized corporations or institutions like Fortune 100 companies, academia, or hospitals might not match up as well with the processes and systems I recommend.

The good news is that what constitutes a "business" is changing faster than ever before and opening up possibilities to a wider range of innovators. Though this shift was in motion before 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated it and drove increased interest in entrepreneurship from people of all backgrounds. Now more than ever before, we don't need to move to a place called Silicon Valley, go to a school called Harvard or Stanford, and raise money from the venture capitalists. The internet lets you learn from anywhere, network with anyone, and raise money directly from customers.

The world desperately needs the solutions that only entrepreneurs can provide. Everyday problems are all around us, but they are often hidden from the view of the Silicon Valley software engineers and Ivy League overachievers who have been anointed as our entrepreneurial class. We need the help of entrepreneurs from every part of the planet and every stratum of society. It's down to individual creators and entrepreneurs to set better goals for ourselves and our businesses. After all, problems don't solve themselves. People do.

Creator First, Entrepreneur Second

On paper, it seems simple enough:

1. Narrow down who your ideal customer is. Narrow until you can narrow no more.
2. Define exactly what pain point you are solving for them, and how much they will pay you to solve it.
3. Set a hard deadline and focus fully on building a solution, then charge for it.
4. Repeat the process until you've found a product that works, then scale a business around it.

In practice, it's not so simple. There are many complications that pop up, and most people don't even know where to start. A "business" of any kind is too scary, too amorphous, or too unattainable. Luckily, there's another way to get started today. Before you become an entrepreneur, become a creator.

That could mean being an artist, but it doesn't have to. Creators make things, charge their audiences for those things, and then use that money to make more things. They use the first dollars they earn as tools to fuel their own creative drive, not the other way around. With time and experience, creators show others how to turn their own creativity into businesses, and the cycle continues. In the end, there isn't much difference between a business like Gumroad and a creator. It's just semantics—one or more people using the tool of a business to make something new. Painters need brushes. Writers need pencils. Creators need businesses. It's key for people

to understand that, because it lowers the cognitive barrier to starting a business, and starting is *really* important. You don't learn, then start. You start, then learn.

My best friend in middle school, obsessed with the computer game *World of Warcraft*, started designing fantasy creatures in Photoshop. I was impressed, but I also remember thinking, "I could do that." So I went through some Photoshop tutorials and got to work. When I started to get the hang of the software, I began submitting logos to online competitions. I didn't win any, but the process of creating a lot of stuff and putting it out there made me a pretty decent designer, and then led to freelance web design work.

Once you're working on other people's projects, you can't help but get ideas of your own, so I began building simple web applications, hiring developers to help with the coding. For example, before Twitter natively supported threads, I created an app called Tweader to see the conversations that happened between people on Twitter. Another app, Ping Me When It's Up, would text me when a website that had gone down was back up again. (It should be clear by now that I've never been very good at naming things.)

When the iPhone App Store opened, I learned to code for it by taking a free course on iOS development from Stanford through iTunes University, called CS193P (I still recommend it!). The App Store handled all the financial aspects of selling what I made to customers around the world, which meant I could focus on creating apps. Perfect.

The first app I built was called Taxi Lah!, which let users call a cab from their phones—before Uber. I put it on the App Store for fellow Singaporeans and made a few thousand dollars. Then I made an app called Color Stream that let designers create and modify color palettes on their phones. I made about \$10,000 from that. Each time, I was trying to solve a problem I had. I wanted to design and build a little bit of software to make my life—and others'—a little bit better.

This experience—shipping real products to real customers—led to my first job at Pinterest, where I designed and built the Pinterest iPhone app. While I was there, I built Gumroad in my spare time to help me sell an icon I designed in Photoshop. When I found a solution that worked, I sold it to other creators, who sold their products to their own community of creators, many of whom eventually became Gumroad customers themselves. Now I'm an honest-to-goodness entrepreneur without ever having really given it much conscious thought along the way.

The App Store cleared the marketing and financial obstacles out of my way so that I could fully embrace my creative side and become a creator. That transition led to me becoming a founder. It's an upward, virtuous cycle. Creation begets more creation. Today, Gumroad does the exact same thing for other would-be creators. It's basically a glorified Sahil-cloning factory. Isn't that beautiful? (My mom thinks it is.)

Max Ulichney is an art director and illustrator based in Los Angeles. He'd always imagined he'd spend his days working at a large company to pay the bills in return for a few hours in the evening to do his own work. He spent fifteen years as an art director at the same creative

agency, eventually using an iPad app called Procreate to draw and paint in between meetings. One day, a couple of years ago, Max decided to sell some of the digital “brushes” he’d designed for his own use to other Procreate users. A few hundred dollars later, he decided it was worth the effort to continue selling the digital tools as a business. Two years in, Max was making a living as an independent creator. Recently, he quit his job at the agency to work on Maxpacks full-time.

There are thousands of creator-first-entrepreneur-second stories like Max’s.

Adam Wathan and Steve Schoger teach people how to build and design web applications. They believe, as I do, that nearly anyone can become a competent front-end engineer and designer with a little help. In December 2018, after just a few years building their online audiences, they released Refactoring UI, an online course, earning over \$800,000 in a single month. Now they get to spend their time doing what they really love: building Tailwind, a free and open-source framework for the rapid creation of custom web designs.

Kristina Garner, mother of two boys, teaches families how to run secular, nature-based homeschooling programs for their kids. What started as a blog in 2015 about her personal passion has become Blossom and Root, a business that employs dozens of people and helps thousands of families every month.

These are just a few of the 28,207 creators who sold something on Gumroad last month. That sounds like a big number today, but I too started somewhere smaller and less lofty, where creation always begins: at the number next to zero. Where there was nothing, now there’s something: digital brushes, online courses, Vidalia onions on your doorstep.

In the next chapter, I’ll show you how to get started.

Key Takeaways

- You don’t learn, then start. You start, then learn.
- Minimalist entrepreneurs focus on getting “profitable at all costs” instead of growing at all costs.
- A business is a way to solve problems for people you care about—and get paid for it.
- Become a creator first, an entrepreneur second.

Learn More

- Follow Peter Askew (@searchbound) on Twitter, where he regularly tweets about business ideas, domain name opportunities, and other interesting stuff.
- Read his article “I Sell Onions on the Internet” at www.deepsouthventures.com/i-sell-onions-on-the-internet/.

- Read the article that inspired this book: “Reflecting on My Failure to Build a Billion-Dollar Company” at sahillavingia.com/reflecting.
- Follow @gumroad on Instagram to see our creators’ stories.
- Join the Minimalist Entrepreneurs club on Clubhouse to meet and learn from other minimalist entrepreneurs in the community.