NOTES FROM: *Essentialism,* by Greg McKeown

SUMMARY: The main thrust of *Essentialism* (both the book and the idea itself) is that *almost everything is completely worthless*.

Discerning the "vital few" from the "trivial many" is going to be one of the most in-demand skills in the economy of the future, and those who can do this well are going to reap the majority of the rewards and experience the highest possible meaning in their lives, while the rest of us are drowning in distraction.

One of the most famous Essentialists in history, Michelangelo, once said that he *"saw the angel in the marble and carved until he set him free."* In a similar way, we are the sculptors of our own lives, the creators of our own meaning.

The perfect form of our lives is hidden inside the marble of all the distractions, detours, and trivialities of the modern world, and we have to be *artists*; we have to be *disciplined* in carving away everything that's stealing our time, focus, and attention away from what we want our one and only lives to be *about.*

“The overwhelming reality is: we live in a world where almost everything is worthless and a very few things are exceptionally valuable."

“Ask the more essential question that will inform every future decision you will ever make: 'If I could be truly excellent at only one thing, what would it be?'"

“Only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your highest contribution towards the things that really matter."

“Essentialism is not about how to get more things done; it's about how to get the *right* things done. It doesn't mean just doing less for the sake of less either. It is about making the wisest possible investment of your time and energy in order to operate at our highest point of contribution by doing only what is essential."

“If you don't prioritize your life, someone else will.”

Lin Yutang: “The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of non-essentials."

Peter F. Drucker: "In a few hundred years, when the history of our time will be written from a long-term perspective, it is likely that the most important event historians will see is not technology, not the internet, not e-commerce. It is an unprecedented change in the human condition. For the first time - literally - substantial and rapidly growing numbers of people have choices. For the first time, they will have to manage themselves. And society is totally unprepared for it."

“Technology has lowered the barrier for others to share their opinion about what we should be focusing on. It is not just information overload; it is opinion overload."

“The idea that we can have it all and do it all is not new. This myth has been peddled for so long, that I believe virtually everyone alive today is infected with it. It is sold in advertising. It is championed in corporations. It is embedded in job descriptions that provide huge lists of required skills and experience as standard. It is embedded in university applications that require dozens of extracurricular activities. What *is* new is how especially damaging this myth is today, in a time when choice and expectations have increased exponentially. It results in stressed people trying to cram yet *more* activities into their already over-scheduled lives. It creates corporate environments that talk about work/life balance but still expect their employees to be on their smartphones 24/7/365. It leads to staff meetings where as many as ten 'top priorities' are discussed with no sense of irony at all."

"The word *priority* came into the English language in the 1400s. It was singular. It meant the very first or prior thing. It stayed singular for the next five hundred years. Only in the 1900s did we pluralize the term and start talking about *priorities*. Illogically, we reasoned that by changing the word we could bend reality. Somehow we would now be able to have multiple 'first' things."

“What if we stopped celebrating being busy as a measurement of importance? What if instead, we celebrated how much time we had spent listening, pondering, meditating, and enjoying time with the most important people in our lives?"

“Make a commitment to make room to enjoy the essential. Do you think for one second you will regret such a decision? Is it at all likely you will wake up one day and say, 'I wish I had been less true to myself and had done all the nonessential things others expected of me?'"

“Essentialism is not a way to do one more thing; it is a different way of doing everything."

Richard Koch: “Most of what exists in the universe - our actions, and all other forces, resources, and ideas - has little value and yields little result; on the other hand, a few things work fantastically well and have tremendous impact."

“Warren decided early in his career it would be impossible for him to make hundreds of right investment decisions, so he decided that he would invest only in the businesses that he was absolutely sure of, and then bet heavily on them. He owes 90% of his wealth to just ten investments. Sometimes what you don't do is just as important as what you do."

“One paradox of Essentialism is that Essentialists actually explore *more* options than their Nonessentialist counterparts. Nonessentialists get excited by virtually everything and thus react to everything. But because they are so busy pursuing every opportunity and idea they actually explore *less.* The way of the Essentialist, on the other hand, is to explore and evaluate a broad set of options before committing to any. Because Essentialists will

commit and 'go big' on only the vital few ideas or activities, they explore more options at first to ensure they pick the right one later."

Pablo Picasso: “Without great solitude, no serious work is possible."

“While there are clearly people who can survive on fewer hours of sleep, I've found that most of them are just so used to being tired they have forgotten what it really feels like to be fully rested. The way of the Nonessentialist is to see sleep as yet another burden on one's already overextended, overcommitted, busy-but-not-always-productive life. Essentialists instead see sleep as necessary for operating at high levels of contribution more of the time. This is why they systematically and deliberately build sleep into their schedules so they can do more, achieve more, and explore more. By 'protecting their asset,' they are able to go about their daily lives with a reserve of energy, creativity, and problem-solving ability to call upon when needed - unlike Nonessentialists, who can never know when and where they'll be hijacked by their own fatigue. Essentialists choose to do one fewer thing right now in order to do more tomorrow."

Charles A. Czeisler: “Pulling an all-nighter (i.e., going twenty-four hours without sleep) or having a week of sleeping just four or five hours a night actually induces an impairment equivalent to a blood alcohol level of 0.1%. Think about this: we would never say, 'This person is a great worker! He's drunk all the time!', yet we continue to celebrate people who sacrifice sleep for work."

“Applying tougher criteria to life's big decisions allows us to better tap into our brain's sophisticated search engine. Think of it as the difference between conducting a Google search for 'good restaurant in New York City' and 'best slice of pizza in downtown Brooklyn.' If we search for 'a good career opportunity,' our brain will serve up scores of pages to explore and work through. Instead, why not conduct an advanced search and ask three questions: 'What am I deeply passionate about?', 'What taps my talent?', and, 'What meets a significant need in the world?' Naturally, there won't be as many pages to view, but that is the point of the exercise. We aren't looking for a plethora of good things to do. We are looking for the *one* where we can make our absolute highest point of contribution."

“If it isn’t a clear yes, then it’s a clear no.”

“Anytime you fail to say 'no' to a nonessential, you are really saying yes by default. So once you have sufficiently explored your options, the question you should be asking yourself is not: 'What, of my list of competing priorities, should I say yes to?' Instead, ask the essential question: 'What will I say *no* to?' This is the question that will uncover your true priorities."

“An essential intent, on the other hand, is both inspirational and concrete, both meaningful and measurable. Done right, an essential intent is one decision that settles one thousand later decisions. It's like deciding you're going to become a doctor instead of a lawyer. One strategic choice eliminates a universe of other options and maps a course for the next five,

ten, or even twenty years of your life. Once the big decision is made, all subsequent decisions come into better focus."

“The very thought of saying no literally brings us physical discomfort. We feel guilty. We don't want to let someone down. We are worried about damaging the relationship. But these emotions muddle our clarity. They distract us from the reality of the fact that either we can say no and regret it for a few minutes, or we can say yes and regret it for days, weeks, months, or even years. The only way out of this trap is to learn to say no firmly, resolutely, and yet gracefully."

"Since becoming an Essentialist I have found it almost universally true that people respect and admire those with the courage of conviction to say no."

“Denying the request is not the same as denying the person.”

“The more we think about what we are giving up when we say yes to someone, the easier it is to say no.”

“A clear 'no' can be more graceful than a vague or noncommittal 'yes.'"

“Saying no is its own leadership capability. It is not just a peripheral skill. As with any ability, we start with limited experience. We are novices at 'no.' Then we learn a couple of basic techniques. We make mistakes. We learn from them. We develop more skills. We keep practicing. After a while, we have a whole repertoire available at our disposal, and in time we have gained mastery of a type of social art form. We can handle almost any request from almost anybody with grace and dignity."

Tom Friel: "We need to learn the slow 'yes' and the quick 'no.'"

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

“There should be no shame in admitting to a mistake; after all, we really are only admitting that we are now wiser than we once were."

“Typically, when accountants allocate a budget, they use last year's budget as the baseline for the next year's projection. But with zero-based budgeting, they use zero as the baseline. In other words, every item in the proposed budget must be justified from scratch. While this takes more effort, it has many advantages: it efficiently allocates resources on the basis of needs rather than history, it detects exaggerated budget requests, it draws attention to obsolete operations, and it encourages people to be clearer in their purpose and how their expenses align to that project. You can apply zero-based budgeting to your own endeavors. Instead of trying to budget your time on the basis of existing commitments, assume that all bets are off. All previous commitments are gone. Then begin from scratch, asking which you would add today. You can do this with everything from the financial obligations you

have to projects you are committed to, even relationships you are in. Every use of time, energy, or resources has to justify itself anew. If it no longer fits, eliminate it altogether."

Michelangelo: “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free."

“A good film editor makes it hard *not* to see what's important because she eliminates everything but the elements that absolutely need to be there."

“In a way, an editor actually *adds.* What I mean is that a good editor is someone who uses *deliberate subtraction* to actually add life to the ideas, setting, plot, and characters. Likewise, in life, disciplined editing can help add to your level of contribution. It increases your ability to focus on and give energy to the things that really matter."

Stephen King: “To write is human, to edit is divine.”

“I must apologize: if I had more time I would have written a shorter letter.”

“Condensing doesn’t mean doing more at once, it simply means less waste. It means lowering the ratio of words to ideas, square feet to usefulness, or effort to results. Thus to apply the principle of condensing to our lives we need to shift the ratio of activity to meaning. We need to eliminate multiple meaningless activities and replace them with one very meaningful activity."

Lao Tzu: “To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, subtract things every day."

“Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work."

“When we start small and reward progress, we end up achieving more than when we set big, lofty, and often impossible goals. And as a bonus, the act of positively reinforcing our successes allows us to reap more enjoyment and satisfaction out of the process."

“After a moment of reflection, I realized that until I knew what was important right now, what was important right now was to figure out what was important right now!"

“There are two ways of thinking about Essentialism. The first is to think of it as something you *do* occasionally. The second is to think of it as something you *are*. In the former, Essentialism is one more thing to add to your already overstuffed life. In the latter, it is a different way - a simpler way - of doing everything. It becomes a lifestyle. It becomes an all-encompassing approach to living and leading. It becomes the essence of who we are."

“Every day it becomes more clear than the day before how the essential things are so much more important than the next most important thing in line."

“When you become the go-to person in your organization, the clarity of purpose that led to your success can increase the demands on your time.”

“If I didn't already commit to doing this, would I have chosen to do it?”

“Almost everything is noise.”

“Because there *are* things that are more important and worthwhile, the time spent figuring out what those things are is worth it.”

“Don't get caught up in the race to nowhere.”

“Essentialism is *not* a way to do ‘one more thing.’”

"I can do anything, but not everything."

“Almost everything is worthless, and a few things are extraordinarily valuable.”

“As you evaluate an option, think about the single most important criterion for that decision, and then simply give the option a score between 0 and 100. If you rate it any lower than 90 percent, then automatically change the rating to 0 and simply reject it. This way you avoid getting caught up in indecision, or worse, getting stuck with the 60s or 70s. Think about how you'd feel if you scored a 65 on some test. Why would you deliberately choose to feel that way about an important choice in your life?"

"By definition, applying highly selective criteria is a trade-off; sometimes you will have to turn down a seemingly very good option and have faith that the perfect option will soon come along. Sometimes it will, and sometimes it won't, but the point is that the very act of applying selective criteria forces *you* to choose which perfect option to wait for, rather than letting other people, or the universe, choose for you. Like any Essentialist skill, it forces you to make decisions by design, rather than default."

“Essentialists see trade-offs as an inherent part of life, not as an inherently negative part of life. Instead of asking, 'What do I have to give up?' they ask, 'What do I want to go big on?' The cumulative impact of this small change in thinking can be profound."

“Discern the vital few from the trivial many.”

“In every set of facts, something essential is hidden.”

“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."

“Protect the asset.”

“Remember what it feels like to be fully rested.”

"Do I absolutely love this?"

“If I didn't already have this opportunity, how much would I be willing to sacrifice in order to obtain it?”

“Done is better than perfect.”

“Routines conserve our limited supply of self-discipline.”

"What's important *right now?"*

“The important thing right now is to figure out what the important thing is right now.”

“What do you need to do to be able to go to sleep peacefully?”

Socrates: “Beware the barrenness of a busy life.”

“A woman named Cynthia once told me a story about the time her father had made plans to take her on a night out in San Francisco. Twelve-year-old Cynthia and her father had been planning the 'date' for months. They had a whole itinerary planned down to the minute: she would attend the last hour of his presentation, and then meet him at the back of the room at about four-thirty and leave quickly before everyone tried to talk to him. They would catch a trolley car to Chinatown, eat Chinese food (their favorite), shop for a souvenir, see the sights for a while and then 'catch a flick,' as her dad liked to say. Then they would grab a taxi back to the hotel, jump in the pool for a quick swim (her dad was famous for sneaking in when the pool was closed), order a hot fudge sundae from room service, and watch the late, late show. They discussed the details over and over before they left. The anticipation was part of the whole experience. This was all going according to plan until, as her father was leaving the convention center, he ran into an old college friend and business associate. It had been years since they had seen each other, and Cynthia watched as they embraced enthusiastically. His friend said, in effect, 'I am so glad you are doing some work with our company now. When Lois and I heard about it we thought it would be perfect. We want to invite you, and of course, Cynthia, to get a spectacular seafood dinner down at the Wharf!' Cynthia's father responded: 'Bob, it's so great to see you. Dinner at the Wharf sounds great!' Cynthia was crestfallen. Her daydreams of trolley rides and ice cream sundaes evaporated in an instant. Plus, she hated seafood and she could just imagine how bored she would be listening to the adults talk all night.
But then her father continued: 'But not tonight. Cynthia and I have a special date planned, don't we?' He winked at Cynthia and grabbed her hand and they ran out of the door and continued with what was an unforgettable night in San Francisco. As it happens, Cynthia's father was the management thinker Stephen R. Covey (author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*), who had passed away only weeks before Cynthia told me this story. So it was with deep emotion she recalled that evening in San Francisco. His simple decision 'bonded him to me forever, because I knew what mattered most to him was me!'

she said. Stephen R. Covey, one of the most respected and widely-read business thinkers of his generation, was an Essentialist. Not only did he routinely teach Essentialist principles - like 'the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing' - to important leaders and heads of state around the world, *he lived them.* And in this moment of living them with his daughter, he made a memory that literally outlasted his lifetime."

“Years from now (hopefully many), when you are at the end of your life, you may still have regrets. But seeing the way of the Essentialist is unlikely to be one of them. What would you trade then to be back here now for one chance - this chance - to be true to yourself? On *that* day, what will you hope you decided to do on *this* one? If you are ready to look inside yourself for the answer to this question, then you are ready to set out on the path of the Essentialist."

"Essentialism is about creating a system for handling the closet of our lives. This is not a process you undertake once a year, once a month, or even once a week, like organizing your closet. It is a *discipline* you apply each and every time you are faced with a decision about whether to say yes or whether to politely decline. It's a method for making the tough tradeoffs between lots of good things and a few really great things. It's about learning how to do less but better so you can achieve the highest possible return on every precious moment of your life."

“If you take one thing away from this book, I hope you will remember this: whatever decision or challenge or crossroads you face in your life, simply ask yourself, 'What is essential?' Eliminate everything else. If you are ready to look inside yourself for the answer to this question, then you are ready to commit to the way of the Essentialist."