

Overcoming Distraction to
Pursue a More Meaningful Life

things
that
matter



UNCORRECTED
PROOF

Joshua Becker

Bestselling author of *The More of Less* and *The Minimalist Home*

THINGS THAT MATTER

*Overcoming Distraction
to Pursue a More Meaningful Life*

JOSHUA BECKER
with Eric Stanford



WATERBROOK

Things That Matter

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For my grandfather Rev. Harold E. Salem

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PART 1

THE OBJECTIVE AND THE OBSTACLES

1

A Life with No Regrets

Beginning with a View to the End

We are not given a short life but we make it short, and
we are not ill-supplied but wasteful of it. . . .

Life is long if you know how to use it.

—Seneca, “On the Shortness of Life”

Bronnie Ware, an Australian nurse who spent several years caring for people during the last weeks of their lives, routinely asked her patients about any regrets they had or anything they would do differently if they could. Later she posted an article called “Regrets of the Dying” about her findings. In it, Ware wrote of the phenomenal clarity of vision that people gained at the end of their lives as well as the common themes that surfaced again and again during these conversations. This article has been shared millions of times online and was turned into a book in 2012.¹

It’s a fascinating premise, isn’t it? What do people most regret about their lives?

I’m not going to include the list here. Instead, I want to ask you: How badly do you want to know what’s on it? How tempted are you to google the article right now so you can see the top regrets that people have at the end of their lives? And more importantly, where does that desire to know the regrets of the dying come from? Isn’t the

strength of your interest proof that you're concerned that *your* life might be wasted?

(Now that I've got you thinking about that, if you still want to know what the list is, you can turn to the first endnote at the back of this book and find the list there.)

Why did a list about other people's dying regrets go viral? It's because we all know that's going to be us nearing death someday and we don't want to have regrets when we get there. And also, I believe, because *we're already starting to have regrets about our life choices*.

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

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inconsequential ahead of the
imperative.

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

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

mortal existence—a life well lived. Presented with the choice, don't we all want a life of fewer regrets and more fulfillment?

One day, not long ago, I was forced to come face to face with something I just *had to do* before I died. And I want to tell you about it now, because it's related to you.

One Thing

In October 2019, I sat with a number of team members from my staff at a conference called Start Finishing, at the K'é Main Street Learning Lab in Mesa, Arizona. Charlie Gilkey, author of a book with the same title as the conference, was our presenter for the day. Charlie told us he wanted us to be specific in applying the principles of the workshop to the most important work in our lives. To help us determine what that work was, he said, "Close your eyes and answer this question: If you were to die today, what is the one project you would be most disappointed that you weren't able to complete?"

After asking ourselves the question, we shared around the table what work we saw as most important. The young woman next to me mentioned an art project she wanted to complete. A mother of two spoke about her desire to prepare her two teenagers for life. For me, without hesitation, I answered Charlie's question this way: "If I were to die today, I would be most disappointed that I never got a chance to write that book I've been thinking about for a long time now."

I bet you can guess what book it was.

It's the one you're reading right now.

For a while, I'd been thinking about writing a book that takes the principles of minimalism I am known for and paints a bigger picture of how distractions keep us from meaning, purpose, and satisfaction. And at that very moment in the Learning Lab, writing *Things That*

Matter became my highest-priority task. Because there is one message that drives me more than any other—and it’s not helping people clean out their closets, as useful as that is. The one message that burns most in my heart is the invitation to live an intentional, meaningful life. Apart from my faith and my family, this message is what I most want to be remembered for after I’m gone.

I’ve been reading and writing and talking about this subject for years, which has given me the opportunity to pick up many viewpoints and stories. Now I’m bringing all the most important insights together in one volume, focusing especially on how to achieve the focus that is required to live according to your priorities. In *Things That Matter*, I want to show you what you need to clear away from your life to transition to more intentional living.

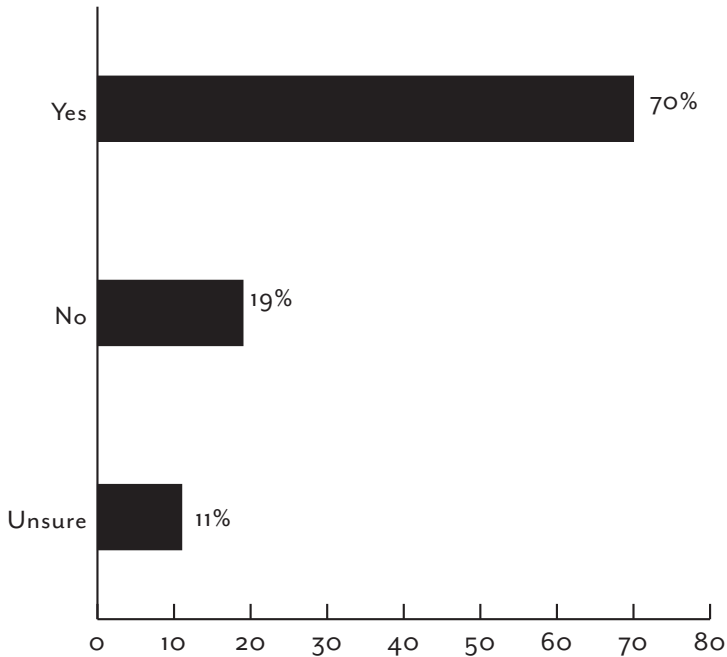
Living a life of purpose is important not just to me or to a few others like me. It’s important to all of us, because we all have at least one thing (probably more) that we feel we just *have to do* before we die. And I’m not talking about bucket-list items like “ride in a hot-air balloon.” I’m talking about living in a way that makes a difference. I’m talking about knowing our lives matter and make an impact on the world in a positive way, that our existences mean something.

This brings me to you. Let me ask you the same question Charlie Gilkey asked me: If you were to die today, what one thing (or few things) would you be most disappointed that you weren’t able to complete? Please don’t just cruise past that question. Stop and think about it. Identify your top-level goals, clearly and specifically.

If you were to die today, what one thing (or few things) would you be most disappointed that you weren’t able to complete?

In preparation for writing this book, I commissioned a nationally representative poll—the Things That Matter Survey—that asked a number of questions related to the themes of this book.² I’ll be referring to the survey findings regularly in the chapters to come, and I believe you’ll find the results fascinating. To start with, one question we asked was “Would you say that you have identified a clear purpose, or purposes, for your life?” I was pleased to see that 70 percent of respondents answered yes. Another 19 percent answered no, while 11 percent were unsure.

Would you say that you have identified a clear purpose, or purposes, for your life?



Do you know your purpose or purposes? If the answer is no or you are unsure (like 30 percent of the poll participants), I invite you to go to the “Discover Your Purposes” exercise at the end of this book. It

will help you methodically think through the desires that land at the intersection of your passions, your abilities, and the needs of the world. You'll see what works of service you're suited for and drawn toward doing.

If you're a part of the 70 percent and you think you know your purpose, that's wonderful. Nevertheless, I encourage you to keep your mind open, because this book most likely will help you refine or redefine the things that matter to you along the way.

Right now, I want you to start believing that it's *not too late* to reorient your life around your purposes. You can do something *now* to live the life you want to live and eventually come to the end with fewer regrets.

You can do something *now* to live
the life you want to live.

The theme of this book isn't a "how to be happy" message, though I believe living a life aligned with your values and passions is the quickest way to happiness in both the short term and the long term. This book is about so much more than how you feel; it's about how you live the one life you have and how to keep it focused on the things that matter. I would go so far as to say the world *needs* you to live for the things that matter to you because you're at your most productive and influential self when you're offering your unique contribution.

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

How to Make Your Life Long Enough

In college, I had a professor who taught, “Make a point to read books from previous centuries, because all living writers are swimming in the same cultural and ideological currents. But a book from centuries ago will come from a different perspective and will challenge your thinking in new ways.”

I’ve tried to live by that advice. In fact, a lot of my ideas about God, minimalism, living with purpose, and other subjects close to my heart have been informed by wise men and women of past ages. They bring a fresh perspective in a way that modern scholars or pundits can’t. And I’ve found themes that have been echoed repeatedly in different eras and in different places are often themes that can still show us the way to a better life.

With that in mind, I want to share with you a quote that has meant a great deal to me for many years now. It’s from Seneca the Younger, a Roman philosopher born about the same time as Jesus of Nazareth.

It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested. But when it is wasted in heedless luxury and spent on no good activity, we are forced at last by death’s final constraint to realize that it has passed away before we knew it was passing. So it is: we are not given a short life but we make it short, and we are not ill-supplied but wasteful of it. . . .

Life is long if you know how to use it.³

There’s a lot in that excerpt. I’d urge you to reread it, and maybe even get out a pen and underline key phrases that stick out to you. Start with “we waste a lot of it.”

Seneca's bold claim is what I'm talking about when I refer to intentional living. It's living on purpose. It's spending our limited time on "the highest achievements" instead of on "heedless luxury" and "no good activity." Because if we do that, then we'll find life is long enough to do what matters most.

How we get to the end of our
lives with minimal regrets: *We
choose well. We set aside lesser
pursuits to seek meaning in our
lives. And we do it every single day.*

Seneca points us to the answer to the conundrum of how we get to the end of our lives with minimal regrets: *We choose well. We set aside lesser pursuits to seek meaning in our lives. And we do it every single day.*

Becoming Meaningful

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

My faith upbringing primed me for thinking about priorities and pursuing the important things in life. It caused me to focus on issues of what matters for eternity and what does not. Then, as a young man, I became a pastor and spent my time helping others find their way in life through biblical teaching. So I've got to give my family and my

faith tradition a lot of credit for attuning me to the issues we're talking about in this book. (By the way, *Things That Matter* is not a religious book, but because my faith has shaped me, I will mention my own religious history from time to time.) Despite the benefits in my background, it wasn't until after I'd become a minimalist in my early thirties that my mental space was freed up, and even forced, to really face questions of priority.

If you've read any of my books or blog posts over the last dozen-plus years, you know how important simple living is to me.⁴ In fact, one of my greatest passions in life is to inspire and help people to own less stuff. Minimalism is one thing that matters greatly to me. Nevertheless, to me, minimalism has always been a means, not an end in itself.

I define *minimalism* as “the intentional promotion of the things we most value by removing anything that distracts us from it.” It isn't negative; it's positive. It isn't primarily about decluttering or organizing; it's about creating freedom. Because when we own fewer possessions, we liberate precious energy, time, and focus that we can direct toward more meaningful pursuits.

I've experienced the benefits of this reality in my own life. Minimalism gave me the ability to really explore the topic of significant living in myself and in what I was seeing in the world. I began thinking, *Accumulating more and more possessions is a foolish pursuit, when you think about it, but it's not the only foolish pursuit in life. So what are some of the other distractions that I see in my life? Or in the lives of people close to me? Is it possible to live life with fewer regrets? And if so, what keeps people from a fulfilled life in ways they aren't even noticing?*

Gradually, I began experimenting with my newfound freedom to see what I could do that helped other people and brought me joy. And in all honesty, since my family discarded the majority of our possessions in 2008, I've accomplished way more with my life than I ever

thought I would. It's not because I'm special. It's because I'm intentional.

May I share a few highlights?

It all started with a blog, *Becoming Minimalist*, that chronicled my journey and thoughts since the first week I started minimizing. That blog has now reached sixty million people with the life-changing message of owning less. I started a Facebook page, also called *Becoming Minimalist*, that now reaches over fifty million people every month. My YouTube channel accounts for millions of minutes watched every month. I've written four books, started two digital magazines, developed a mobile app, and created an online course called Uncluttered that has helped over seventy thousand families declutter their homes. I've traveled the world speaking, have been featured in several documentaries, and have been interviewed or published in major media outlets around the world.

It's been quite a ride. But I don't share those facts with a prideful attitude (although I *am* proud of them). I share those accomplishments to make a point: I believe, beyond the semblance of a doubt, that my accomplishments over the last few years are *directly* related to my pursuit of a life focused on the things that I believe truly matter.

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For example, as an outcome of my success in promoting minimalism, in 2015, I founded and funded a nonprofit organization called the Hope Effect that is working to change how the world cares for

orphans. We work with local and state governments in developing nations to find solutions for orphan care that focus on placing children in loving families rather than institutional care. At the time of this writing, we are working in six cities around the world to better care for orphaned children.

While each of us is gifted with different passions, a different personality, and different capabilities, having a life lived with focus on the things that matter most will *always* result in more accomplishments and fulfillment than we ever thought possible. This has been true for me and it can be true for you, even though the specific accomplishments will vary greatly. And the net result of it all is a life with more quiet satisfaction and less anxious regret.

It *is* possible to live this kind of life. I've experienced it myself—and I've witnessed it in the life of my own personal hero.

A Well-Lived Life

In 2012, my ninety-year-old grandfather, Harold Salem, called me into his office. I knew this office well. Grandpa had pastored the same church in South Dakota for fifty-three years, and the items in his office always stayed the same: the large wooden desk, the typewriter, the bookshelves, even the drawer where he hid his candy. I would stop in to visit every time I was in town.

But being specifically requested to meet Grandpa in his office on a designated day at a designated time was new. I sensed that this conversation would not be filled with laughter and jokes or conversations about his beloved Minnesota Twins baseball team. But I didn't know why he had invited me. And he wouldn't tell me until I sat down across from him at his desk.

He started our conversation like this: "Joshua, I would like you to

read scripture at my funeral. Here is the verse I would like, and this is where it will take place in the service.” He slid a sheet of paper toward me, labeled “Memorial Service for Harold Salem.” The specific passage from the Bible I would read was clearly marked, as were the names of everyone else involved in the service. Even the number of minutes set aside for each element was clearly listed. It was a sobering moment to be previewing the funeral service for a healthy man sitting right in front of me.

The fact that my grandfather had planned his own funeral was not surprising to me. He was that type of guy. As a pastor for more than seventy years, he had participated in countless memorial services, and I’m sure he saw along the way how making specific requests about your service is helpful to those who eventually plan it.

What surprised me most about that moment, to the point that it has stuck with me years later, was the confidence with which my grandfather approached not just his funeral but also the end of his life. With assurance in his eyes, he talked about the life he had lived, the work he had accomplished, and his desire to be reunited with his wife of more than fifty years. My grandfather did not regret, in any visible way, the coming end to his days on earth. And let me tell you, there are few things in life more inspirational than peering into the eyes of a man who does not fear his own death.

Grandpa lived to be ninety-nine, mentally sharp and still working till the very end. In December 2020, he passed away after a brief battle with pneumonia. While accommodating coronavirus restrictions in place at the time, we held his funeral as he’d planned it. And that day, in my eulogy, I told the listeners about Grandpa’s example of living in such a way that you need have few regrets.

His life was long enough, as Seneca declared, because he knew how to use it.

The One Sentence You Need Each Day to Set Your Intention

A former mentor of mine, Robert Thune Sr., was the first person to share the idea with me. He said, “Every morning, before I start my day, I set my intention with a simple sentence that goes like this: ‘Today, I commit myself to _____.’” I follow this advice, and I think you should try it too.

The blank gets to be filled in however you choose. For example:

- Today, I commit myself to *being the best mother I can be.*
- Today, I commit myself to *being a faithful spouse.*
- Today, I commit myself to *healthy eating.*
- Today, I commit myself to *selflessness.*
- Today, I commit myself to *praying whenever I feel anxious.*
- Today, I commit myself to *my work goal.*
- Today, I commit myself to *getting out of debt.*

We approach our important life objectives one day at a time. Start with a commitment just for today and see how it goes. If necessary, you can change it as soon as tomorrow.

Don't Be Left Behind

Often we hear about the regrets of the dying, and we are warned to avoid making their mistakes. But rarely are we offered the alternative. Rarely are we provided with an example of a man or woman who faces death with few regrets. When we do, we are wise to follow their example and make the adjustments that will prepare us to face our own mortality with courage and confidence. My grandfather is such a person for me.

One of the most important things Grandpa did for me was teach me to spend my time on things that meet the needs of others. Certainly there's nothing wrong with spending time enjoying a sunset, getting together for coffee with a friend, or painting a watercolor, just because you want to. In fact, I promote minimalism in part so that people have the margin to relax and appreciate the little moments of joy or beauty in life. But our self-focused pursuits don't need to, and shouldn't, exclude others-focused pursuits. In the end, pursuits that help other people are the most influential, the most enduring, and even—I would say—the most rewarding for us.

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say—the most rewarding for us.

I hope you have a model of meaningful service to others in your life. But even if you don't, you can become a model for others by setting an example of putting aside less important pursuits to go after those things that really matter. This is the way to avoid regret. Now is the time to start.

You were designed to achieve great things! You are unique in your being, your personality, your abilities, and your relationships. And there is no one else on the face of the earth who can live your life and accomplish your good. Please do not forget that.

There is no doubt that *success* and *achievement* are relative words, and your highest achievement is different from someone else's. You may never lead thousands or cure cancer or start a nonprofit. But make no mistake: there is a good that you are designed to bring into this world that only you can accomplish, and there are people in your

life whom you can serve and love better than anyone else can. Read that sentence again. *There are people in your life whom you can serve and love better than anyone else can.*

Your highest achievement will be different from mine, but we both have one. And life is long enough for us to achieve it. Regret is not inevitable.

The Enemy

Now we have to ask a tough question: If pursuing things that matter is so great, why aren't more of us actually going after our dearest goals? Why aren't we focusing on our purposes, which would give us joy and fulfillment day by day, leading to a sense of satisfaction at the end of life?

In a word, because of *distractions*.

Things get in the way.

They might be things that apparently have to be done right away. Or things that we just assume we should do because everybody else is doing them. Or things that we'd like to escape if only we knew how. Or things that are mildly rewarding while being easy and safe. But they aren't things that matter.

The enemy of intentionality and a life well lived is distraction.

Know your enemy.